

‘Empathy in Social work: How do social workers experience empathy within their day-to-day practice?’

A visual, interpretative
phenomenological analysis.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Worcester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Peter Ayling

January 2024

Word count: 87,266

Abstract

This thesis presents research exploring social workers' diverse experiences of empathy in their practice with children and families. Informed by a constructivist ontology, the research combines interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) with a visual research method (Rose, 2016) to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of empathy within their practice. Semi-structured interviews were completed with seventeen participants, representing three distinct cohorts of social work practitioners at different stages in their careers. All participants worked within two English local authority children's services departments.

. The research design is shaped by my experience as a children's social worker and therapist, and in particular, draws influence from my practice as a play therapist and the use of symbols to represent aspects of experience. I also acknowledge my commitment to an interpretivist, and social constructionist epistemology in relation to knowledge creation, and my belief that by using these approaches, I can engage deeply with the subject of the research.

I begin with a literature review in two parts. Firstly, an overview of key theoretical contributions from 4 distinct disciplines – philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, and social work – which inform my understanding and approach to defining empathy as concept. Secondly, a thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of qualitative research which explores the use of empathy within social work practice with children and families. Within the synthesis, I reveal a number of relevant findings including the nature of empathic experience for social workers; the challenges of maintaining empathy within social work practice; and organisational aspects that impact empathic practice.

In keeping with my chosen methodology, my thesis also provides a reflective account of how pre-existing knowledge and beliefs have shaped my interest in the subject of empathy and presents my understanding of key philosophical contributions from interpretative phenomenology that have supported my research activity and analysis.

The thesis seeks to make a unique contribution to knowledge through my focus on the lived experience of practitioners at different stages of their career development and to highlight potential learning which may be relevant for other groups of practitioners.

My findings suggest that participants' practices are shaped by three different elements, including the role of embodied empathy, and managing felt emotions within social work; balancing empathy and authority within statutory social work practice; and the impact of empathic environments and leadership to sustain empathic practitioners. From my analysis, I propose a model of 'balanced empathy' in social work with children and families and highlight implications for social work practice. These include addressing the emotional dimension of practice within social work education and training; embedding discourse on emotion and empathy within formal and informal support structures, and within the professional discourse and practice standards; identifying models of empathic leadership and organisational climate that can help to sustain empathic social work practice.

Acknowledgements.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge all the participants who willingly engaged with my visual research task and talked so movingly about their experiences in practice. Their honesty, humility and authenticity were crucial to the research, and I hope I have done justice to their experiences.

This thesis would not have been completed without the wisdom, insight, humour, and support of my supervisory team who have sustained me during this project. Thank you, Dr Helen Scott, for your leadership and belief in my research and for your clarity and insight when I struggled to think clearly. Thankyou Dr Derek Farrell for your thoughtful observations and questions which pushed me to revisit my thinking and writing and to develop both – much appreciated. Thankyou Dr Theresa Mitchell for your enthusiasm about all things Heidegger and for helping me to think my way through big philosophical ideas over coffee in the students' union - helping me to find relevance for my findings and my own life experience. I will miss the stimulating conversations and swapping cat stories.

Thanks, and love to my partner George, who had faith, supported me, and took care of me during this whole project. Love and thanks also to Julia, who has carefully and patiently proof-read this thesis and helped to improve my overall presentation.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my twin brother, Dave, who shared my belief in the power of empathy. With love.

Table of contents

ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
DEDICATION	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS	5
LIST OF TABLES	11
LIST OF FIGURES	12
ABBREVIATIONS	13
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THESIS	15
Chapter overview	15
My research focus: 'lived experience'	15
My theoretical approach to the research	17
Reflexive considerations within the thesis	17
The context of the research: contemporary social work practice in England	18
Regulatory frameworks for social work training	21
Terminology within the thesis: Defining empathy.	23
A note on compassion	24
Clarifying terms	24
Reflection: my personal rationale for the research topic	25
Structure of the thesis	27
Chapter summary	28
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	29
Chapter Overview	29
CHAPTER 2A: NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW	29

What is empathy?	29
Philosophical perspectives on empathy	30
Psychological perspectives on empathy	34
Psychotherapeutic perspectives on empathy	39
Social work perspectives on empathy	43
Discussion	48
Chapter Summary	54
CHAPTER 2B: THEMATIC SYNTHESIS	55
Chapter Overview	55
Introduction: Thematic synthesis	55
Literature search and selection	56
Quality Appraisal	61
Synthesis of findings	61
Theme 1: Empathy as embodied understanding	62
Embodied awareness	62
Understanding	63
Focus on feelings	65
Theme 2: Managing emotions within empathic practice	66
Developing professional empathy: 'switching off'	67
Empathy affects wellbeing	70
Theme 3: Challenges for empathic practice – authority, divided loyalty, austerity	71
Combining empathy with authority	72
Divided loyalties?	75
The impact of austerity - deserving or undeserving?	77
Theme 4: Organisational aspects of empathy	78
Empathy as emotional labour	79
Organisational context of empathy	82
Discussion	85
Chapter Summary	92
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY	94
Chapter overview	94
Ontological and Epistemological considerations	94

Researcher reflexivity	97
Reflection	98
Insider-researcher positionality	101
Reflection	102
Hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion	103
Reflection	105
Emotional Reflexivity	106
Reflection	107
Chapter summary	109
CHAPTER 4: PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THESIS	110
Chapter Overview	110
Philosophical framework: Interpretative phenomenology	110
Husserl and Phenomenology	111
The natural attitude	113
Phenomenological reduction	114
Heidegger & Interpretative phenomenology	116
‘Being-in-the-world’.	117
Disclosing the world	118
The ‘care structure’	120
Authenticity	121
Reflection	122
Interpretative Phenomenology as Methodology	123
The hermeneutic circle	124
Chapter Summary	128
CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS	129
Chapter Overview	129
Research methods	129
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, with visual research methods	129
Integrating visual research methods with IPA	131
Reflection	134
Interpreting visual data	134
Overview of the Studies	136
Gaining gatekeeper access	139
Identifying participants	139
Recruiting participants for study 1 & 2	141
Recruiting participants for Study 3	142

Pilot study	144
Data collection - Interview considerations	144
Data collection – image-making task	146
Conducting the interviews	147
Reflection	150
Data analysis process	150
Reflection	159
Ethical considerations	160
Informed consent	160
Minimising potential for harm	162
Reflection	164
Preserving confidentiality	164
Quality considerations – Authenticity and Trustworthiness	166
Chapter Summary	171
SECTION 2: FINDINGS	172
CHAPTER 6: STUDY 1- FINDINGS FROM GROUP OF EXPERIENCED CHILDREN’S SOCIAL WORKERS	173
Chapter Overview	173
Introducing the participants	173
Participants	173
Findings	175
Theme 1 - Empathic understanding in practice	176
1.1 Empathic understanding of the child’s experience	176
1.2 Communicating understanding to the child.	179
Reflection	180
1.3 Meaning making – holding the child’s story	181
Theme 2: Empathy in action	184
2.1 Building empathic relationships over time	184
2.2 Embodied empathy - social work on the move	190
2.3 Balancing act – integrating empathy with authoritative practice.	194
Theme 3: Empathy & Emotion	200
3.1 Experiencing empathic distress.	201
Reflection	205
3.2 Emotional regulation strategies	206
3.3 Emotional organisations	209
Reflection	212

Chapter Summary	216
CHAPTER 7: STUDY 2- NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS	218
Chapter Overview	218
Introduction to participants	218
Participants	218
Theme 1: Learning empathy	220
1.1 Feeling empathy	220
1.2 Managing emotional distress	223
Reflection	226
Theme 2: Dilemmas in empathic social work	227
2.1 Empathy within the statutory role	227
2.2 Empathy with parents	230
Theme 3: Organisational influences on empathy	235
3.1 Sustaining empathy	235
3.2 Barriers to empathy	238
Chapter Summary	241
CHAPTER 8: STUDY 3 SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORS	242
Chapter Overview	242
Introduction to participants	242
Theme 1: Supervising empathic practice	244
1.1 Empathy in supervision	245
1.2 Containing workers' emotions	248
1.3 The Limits of empathy	252
Theme 2: Reflecting on self	257
2.1 Managing own emotions	257
2.2 Use of self	260
Theme 3: Managing with empathy	263
3.1 Organisational culture	263
3.2 Support for supervisors	266
Chapter Summary	268
CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	270
Chapter Overview	270
1. Embodied empathy and 'felt' emotion	273
Empathy and bodily perception	273
'Felt' empathy and emotional distress	276

Empathy and time	285
2. Balancing empathy in practice	291
Communicating empathy	292
Balancing empathy and authority	296
Becoming a skilled empathic practitioner	302
3. Empathic Environments and leadership	306
Informal support and organisational moods	306
Sustaining empathy through supervision	311
Empathy and organisational culture	315
Chapter summary	322
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION- SUSTAINING EMPATHY FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE	324
Chapter overview	324
A model of ‘balanced empathy’ in social work with children and families	326
Implications for social work training and practice	330
Facilitating practitioners’ development	331
Organisational responses to sustain empathic practice	333
Embedding empathy and emotion within the professional discourse	338
Reflection	340
Unique contribution of the research	341
Limitations of methodology and research findings	343
Future research opportunities and dissemination	346
Final thoughts	347
REFERENCE LIST	349
APPENDICES	381

List of tables

1	Page 57	Table 1: Inclusion & Exclusion criteria for thematic synthesis
2	Page 61	Table 2: Themes from the thematic synthesis
3	Page 111	Table 3 – Key phenomenological concepts
4	Page 141	Table 4: Inclusion & Exclusion criteria for Studies 1, 2 & 3
5	Page 148	Table 5 - Data collected across 3 studies
6	Page 176	Table 6 - Group experiential themes & sub-themes in Study 1
7	Page 219	Table: 7 Group experiential themes & sub-themes in Study 2
8	Page 243	Table 8: Group experiential themes & sub-themes in Study 3
9	Page 270	Table 9 - Mapping of GETs to Elements of Empathic practices.

(Author's own creation, 2024)

List of figures

1	Page 60	Prisma statement for literature search on empathy, April 2022
2	Page 157	Diagram of data analysis process
3	Page 179	Kirsty – The mess
4	Page 183	Liz – A complicated crowd
5	Page 186	Phil – A positive life
6	Page 191	Maggie – Chaos
7	Page 194	Gillian – Rescuing but not saving
8	Page 196	Keith – Tension
9	Page 203	Bianca – Traumatic & overpowering
10	Page 210	Sally – Organised chaos
11	Page 224	Melissa – Getting over the wall without destroying it
12	Page 227	Susan – The life stream
13	Page 232	Louise – Shining light through chaos
14	Page 249	Amanda – Confusion
15	Page 254	Maxine – How to bully a social worker
16	Page 271	Elements of empathic practice
17	Page 272	Element 1: Embodied empathy & felt emotion
18	Page 292	Element 2: Balancing empathy in practice
19	Page 305	Element 3: Empathic environments and leadership
20	Page 326	A model of balanced empathy in social work practice with children and families

(Author's own creation, 2024)

Abbreviations

ASYE – Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

BASW - British Association of Social Workers

CASP – Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

DfE – Department for Education

DoH – Department of Health

EAI – Empathy Assessment Index (Gerdes, Lietz & Segal, 2011)

ESRC – European Social Research Council

ESSW – Empathy Scale for Social Workers (King, 2012)

HRA – Health Research Authority

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022)

IRI – Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980)

KSS - Knowledge and Skill Statements for child and family social work.

PCF - Professional Capabilities Framework End of last placement/ completion

PRISMA – Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses

(Liberati et al ,2009)

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

SEI – Social Empathy Index (Segal, Wagaman & Gerdes, 2012)

SWE – Social Work England

'Life is not perfect, individuals will always be flawed, but empathy-
the sheer inability to see those around them as anything other than
people too - conquers all, in the end'.

Adrian Tchaikovsky.

('Children of Time' 2016, p. 598. Reproduced with permission)

Chapter 1: Introduction to thesis

Chapter overview

In this chapter I introduce my research on social workers' lived experience of empathy in their practice with children and families. I summarise the origins of my interest in the topic, arising from my experiences as a social worker and therapist working with children in the care system. I provide a brief overview of the contemporary practice context for social work practice with children and families in England and highlight potential challenges for the practice of empathy by social workers. I also introduce my theoretical approach to the research process, including my methodology and research methods, and provide an overview of the structure of the thesis, identifying relevant terminology for my discussion.

My research focus: 'lived experience'.

My research explores practitioners' perceptions and experiences of empathy within their everyday encounters with children, drawing on their own verbal and visual accounts of practice. In keeping with my own constructivist position (outlined in Chapter 3) in relation to knowledge creation, I have attempted to engage with workers' '*lived experience*' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:1) of empathy as a phenomenon, rather than seeking to define or measure empathy objectively. Cuff et al (2016) identify 43 distinct definitions of empathy within existing literature by 2016, while Hall and Schwartz (2019) identify 72 different tools that seek to conceptualise or measure empathy. In this context, I do not intend to duplicate such approaches, but rather my aim is to explore the phenomenon of empathy from the experiences of social workers in their practice with children and families. Such an approach fits comfortably with my own theoretical stance in relation to the nature of knowledge creation and the role of individual interpretation in shaping

understanding of others' experiences. My intention is that this approach serves to support the exploration of potential challenges for, and benefits of, using empathy within social work practice and I hope that this will resonate with, and have relevance for, other practitioners' experiences

Within this context, the research question for my thesis can be expressed as:

How do social workers experience empathy within their day-to-day practice?'

My aim within the thesis is:

To explore the role of empathy within contemporary social work practice, by researching the lived experience of practitioners who work with children and families.

I identify four objectives to help me to achieve this overall aim:

Objectives:

1. To undertake a thematic synthesis of literature regarding the use of empathy in social work practice with children and families.
2. To explore how social workers describe their use of empathy within their practice with children and families.
3. To consider how level of practice experience affects workers' experience of empathy by exploring the different perceptions of 1) experienced workers, 2) newly qualified workers, 3) practice supervisors.
4. To identify implications for the use of empathy within social work practice with children and families.

My theoretical approach to the research

My research design is informed by a 'constructivist' ontological approach (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011) and a belief in the socially constructed nature of knowledge and experience (Pernecky, 2016), and in particular, uses interpretative phenomenology (Van Manen, 2015) as a methodology. I seek to explore the phenomenon of empathy in social work practice through the experiences of a group of children and families' practitioners, to understand their perceptions and learn from their particular experiences. I have combined interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA – Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) as a method with an additional visual research method (Rose, 2016), using a supervisory technique from my own therapeutic practice – Lowenfeld's world technique (Lowenfeld, 2003) - to capture symbolic, non-verbal aspects of the participant's experience. I discuss this further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Reflexive considerations within the thesis

In keeping with my constructivist ontological and epistemological stance in relation to knowledge creation, I recognise the need to reflect on my own '*thrown-ness*' (Heidegger, 1951:131) in relation to how my identity and situatedness within society has shaped my research proposal. I also need to clarify the '*fore-structure*' (Heidegger, 1951:149) of my existing understanding of the research topic and acknowledge how my previous knowledge and beliefs may have shaped my approach to the research I have carried out. I discuss my positionality in relation to the research process in Chapter 3. In addition, throughout the thesis, I have included additional reflections on particular aspects of the research process within

other chapters. These reflections appear in *an italicised blue font*, to clearly distinguish them within the text.

The context of the research: contemporary social work practice in England

My research within two English local authority children's services departments takes place in the wider context of children and families' social work practice in England between 2015, when I started my research and 2023, when it was completed. As such the study is shaped by the political and professional discourses that influence social work practice during this period. I also recognise the impact of the Covid19 pandemic which took place during this period, causing particular challenges for social workers in their ongoing support to families in need (Turner, 2021).

Several commentators (Healy, 2022; Featherstone, White & Wilson, 2014; Garrett, 2009) identify competing models of welfare provision that have shaped the delivery of children's social work services in England. Garrett (2009) discusses how governments from across the political spectrum have been influenced by neo-liberal ideals, involving the reform of children's public welfare and the introduction of '*new public management*' (Munro, 2010;12) approaches to the delivery of social work services. Munro (2011:86) in her review of child protection services identifies a significant shift within children's services to a '*rational – technical*' approach to managing risk, with increased reliance on procedural approaches and performance indicators as key methods of responding to the challenges of safeguarding. Munro (2011:19) argues that one key impact of this '*managerialist*' approach has been a reduction in professional autonomy and expertise as

practitioners increasingly focus on performing tasks and measuring effectiveness, with less attention paid to traditional social work skills.

Significantly, MacAlister's recent independent review of children's social care (2022:6), eleven years after Munro, draws similar conclusions, suggesting a need to develop greater professional expertise for social workers and a move away from bureaucratic processes. In doing so, MacAlister highlights the challenges facing the organisation of public welfare provision for children in the context of social policies of austerity and reduced financial provision. Featherstone, White and Wilson (2014) argue that such managerialist approaches contribute further to the stigmatisation of people using services and a shift away from traditional social work values in relation to person centred practice (Wilson et al, 2011), leading to potentially de-humanising practice with people with lived experiences who access services.

Several commentators (Noble & Ottman, 2018; Ife, 2018; Nazzo & Nothdurfter, 2021) argue that the rise of populist political movements in western societies has reinforced a stigmatised view of welfare services, distinguishing between groups who are considered deserving of social support and others who are viewed more negatively as social problems (Lavee & Strier, 2018). Nazzo and Nothdurfter (2021) suggest that the impact of austerity and reduced funding of social work services has also prompted more judgemental views amongst practitioners, using criteria to exclude marginalised social groups, as social workers themselves struggle with their changing economic and social realities. Such developments clearly have implications for the use of empathy within social work practice.

In contrast to these developments within the public welfare system in England, there has been a renewed emphasis within the professional discourse on the importance of '*relationship-based practice*' for social workers (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010, 2018; Wilson, et al, 2011), integrating psychodynamic and systemic theories of human relationships alongside a recognition of the impact of wider social structures and power relationships which impact individual peoples' experiences. These ideas resonate with my own humanist beliefs in the central role for empathy within such a relationship-based model and I acknowledge my commitment to such an approach within my own practice. However, in keeping with my belief in interpretivist epistemology, I will use an integrative approach to theoretical perspectives within this thesis, drawing on both humanist, psychodynamic, psychological and sociological theory to inform my analysis.

These competing models pose significant dilemmas for practitioners in reconciling apparently contradictory priorities. On one hand the professional discourse emphasises professional reflection, emotional authenticity and use of self to build relationships (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2018) with people using services, in order to support their self-determination and change process. On the other hand, wider managerialist demands for efficiency and achievement of performance indicators (Munro, 2011; MacAlister, 2022) appear to undermine professional autonomy and expertise. It is within this context, that I have developed my interest in how current children and families' practitioners use empathy within their day-to-day interaction, and how the nature of empathy is affected by the wider organisational and professional constraints.

Regulatory frameworks for social work training

Within the context of such competing discourses on practice, the emphasis on empathy within social work training has changed significantly over time. Watson (2021:10) has reviewed the historical relationship between social work practice and empathy, identifying the contributions of early social work pioneers in the United States and the United Kingdom, while suggesting that Roger's (1951) development of the humanistic model of counselling was particularly influential in the development of social work models that emphasise the role of empathy. Contemporary social work writers in the UK (Trevithick 2012, Healey, 2022, Woodcock-Ross, 2011, Rogers et al, 2017) continue to emphasise the role of empathy as a key skill for practice while current researchers explore the role of empathy in supporting reflective practice and emotional intelligence (Morrison, 2007; Howe, 2008; Grant, 2014). These themes are explored in greater depth in Chapter 2.

Within England, contemporary social workers and qualifying students are expected to demonstrate empathic skill as part of their professional training, reflected in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA,2019) Benchmark statement for social work which requires qualifying practitioners to:

*'demonstrate interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence that creates and develops relationships based on openness, transparency and **empathy** [my emphasis] (QAA, 2019, section 5.16v).*

Social Work England's (SWE,2019) Professional Standards also identify an expectation that social workers will:

*'practise in ways that demonstrate **empathy**, perseverance, authority, professional confidence and capability, working with people to enable full*

participation in discussions and decision making [my emphasis]' (SWE, 2019 2.4).

While the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2021) remind practitioners that ethical principles should be applied within the context of:

*'Acting with integrity and treating people with compassion, **empathy** and care [my emphasis]' (BASW, 2021:9).*

Both the Professional Capabilities Framework for Qualifying practice (PCF -BASW, 2018) and the Knowledge and Skills Statements, (KSS, DfE, 2014) for post-qualifying practice use the concept of compassion as an alternative - for example KSS 5 states workers must be able to:

'Build purposeful, effective relationships with children and families, which are both authoritative and compassionate' (KSS,2014: section 5).

As this discussion demonstrates, a number of standards and frameworks have emerged, reflecting the priorities of competing discourses, each with a different emphasis in relation to the balance of practice, skills, and values. Potentially, one result of this range of competing frameworks is to undermine the role of empathy as a central aspect of social work practice and to overlook the challenges for integrating empathy alongside the authority of the social work role. I question whether increasing reliance on brief capability statements such as the PCF (2018) or KSS (2014) understates the skill involved for the practitioner in managing the complexity of exercising their statutory powers with empathy and compassion. A recent systematic review of communication skills training in social work by Reith Hall and Montgomery (2023) highlights the complexity and variety of approaches to the teaching of empathy skills within social work education and

identifies limited effectiveness in this context. They argue that a more systematic approach to empathy training, including consistent use of simulated empathy skills training, might provide an effective model for ongoing training for social work practitioners at both pre and post qualifying level. In this context, my research aims to explore how current practitioners experience and make use of empathy within their daily practice.

Terminology within the thesis: Defining empathy.

As I have discussed, there are multiple definitions of empathy within the literature, many of which focus on the interaction of cognitive and affective aspects of empathy (Davis, 1983) as an experience. Davis (1983:114) proposes that empathy is a '*multi-dimensional*' concept which includes: perspective-taking ability; empathic 'other-oriented' concern for the other person; personal distress which is 'self-oriented' in nature; and fantasy – the ability to imagine oneself in other's situations.

Additionally, Howe (2019) offers this simple, clear definition to capture the core processes involved within empathic practice:

'Successful empathy, therefore, is an understanding of the other from the other's point of view and the communication of that understanding' (Howe, 2019:110).

These two definitions (Davis, 1983; Howe, 2019), combine to capture the multi-dimensional and interactive nature of empathy as a process of understanding and communication, and provide me with an initial point of reference for my discussion of empathy within social work practice.

A note on compassion

Within the empathy literature there is also a lively debate about the relationship between empathy and compassion in the context of social work (See Bilson, 2007; Stickle, 2016; Kinman & Grant, 2021). Gilbert (2009: xiii) defines compassion as:

'a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with a wish and effort to relieve it' (Cited in Crawford, et al, 2013:720).

Both Stickle, (2016) and Ortega-Galan and Ruiz-Fernandez (2020) suggest that empathy forms one element of compassionate social work practice by supporting the worker's ability to understand the emotions of another person. However, these authors argue that empathy may be insufficient to motivate the worker to take action to support the other person. In contrast, attempts to define empathy for social work practice (Gerdes & Segal, 2010; King 2010) suggest that empathy always involves a behavioural element, motivating workers to act on the basis of their perceptions. Within my study, I understand empathy to be a skill which can be learned and developed within practice, and which can in turn inform workers' practice with children and families. I therefore regard empathy as a critical aspect of compassionate social work practice and have focused on participants' experiences of empathy in particular.

Clarifying terms

Two further points of clarification in relation to terminology are needed. Across the literature the terms 'empathic' and 'empathetic' are used inter-changeably, referring to the practice of becoming aware of another person's feelings. In the absence of a definitive answer as to which is correct, I have chosen to use the term 'empathic' throughout this thesis, as my preferred term.

I have had a similar debate about the terms 'interpretive' and 'interpretative' which again are both in common usage within the literature to refer to the role of subjective experience and perception when making sense of a phenomena or concept. In this instance, I have followed the example of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) who use the spelling 'interpretative' for their model of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Since this is the core method for my research, I have adopted this spelling throughout.

Reflection: my personal rationale for the research topic

My personal interest in empathy as a focus for my research is shaped by my early experience as a children and family practitioner. I was fortunate to begin my career within an experienced children and families' team and in retrospect, recognise the influence of colleagues who understood and prioritised the emotional aspects of practice, modelling empathy as a central aspect of social work, even in the most challenging of safeguarding situations. These early experiences were fundamental in my professional development, encouraging me to recognise the centrality of emotions – both those of children and parents, as well as my own – within the social work task. As I grew in understanding and confidence, I also undertook therapeutic training in humanistic models of counselling and systemic family therapy, and subsequently in post qualifying training in integrative psychotherapy and non-directive play therapy. These experiences confirmed my commitment to humanistic, child-centred models of practice and the therapeutic role of empathy in supporting relationships and therapeutic change. Two particular experiences stand out as having influenced my choice of research topic.

Firstly, within my Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) role, I offered consultation to a social worker, who wanted support in talking with a child whose parent had died unexpectedly. During our discussions I was struck by the worker's anxiety and desire to avoid the child's distress, which prevented them from becoming available as a support for the child. I realised this worker was struggling to manage their own emotional response to witnessing this child's grief, which enabled me to empathically acknowledge their fears and distress. This in turn seemed to enable them to begin to think more clearly about the child's needs. This interaction strengthened my own belief in the value of empathy as a key agent of therapeutic change within practice (Rogers, 1951, Axline, 1989).

Secondly, I read a paper by Murphy, Duggan, and Joseph (2013) that questioned the compatibility of person-centred practice in the context of statutory social work, arguing that qualities such as empathy were compromised by the directive, often compulsory nature of social work intervention. I recall feeling somewhat indignant as I read this article, reflecting on my own distinct experience, and my continuing conviction that empathy remains a vital aspect of the social work encounter. I realised that the paper challenged some of my therapeutic assumptions and raised questions for me about my practice. I identify these two experiences as offering an impetus for my growing interest in undertaking research which explores practitioners' perceptions of empathy within their practice.

Structure of the thesis

Following on from this introductory chapter, my thesis consists of nine further chapters :

Chapter 2 is in two parts. In section 2a I have provided a narrative review of relevant literature from 4 disciplines (philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, social work) to illustrate key conceptual debates about empathy and highlight their relevance for social work. In section 2b I completed a thematic synthesis review (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of recent research literature relating to the use of empathy in children and families social work practice, aiming to identify some key issues from current practice which can inform my own findings and discussion.

Chapter 3 presents an account of my own researcher positionality, identifying my underlying ontological and epistemological perspectives and discussing in greater depth how my personal and professional identities have shaped this research project.

In **Chapter 4**, I summarise key theoretical ideas relating to phenomenology and interpretative phenomenology that form the basis of my chosen methodology. I introduce the reader to a range of concepts from Heidegger's (1951) work that I believe have relevance for my research discussion.

Chapter 5 provides an account of how I developed my research method, integrating interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) with a specific visual research method (Rose, 2016). I provide an account of the process of data collection and analysis and include discussion of some of the ethical challenges and quality considerations within the research process.

Chapter 6 presents the findings from Study 1 with experienced social workers (qualified for more than 3 years).

Chapter 7 presents the findings from study 2 with newly qualified workers (qualified for less than 18 months).

Chapter 8 presents the findings from Study 3 with practice supervisors (managers or advanced practitioners with more than 2 years supervisory experience).

Chapter 9 brings together my discussion and analysis of key findings from chapters 6-8, integrating literature and research evidence to highlight issues in relation to workers experiences of empathy; their use of empathic skills; and the role of the wider organisation in supporting empathy.

Chapter 10 draws together my key conclusions and identifies implications for practice. I also outline the potential contribution of the research, and identify limitations of my study, as well as identifying opportunities for further research within the field.

Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of my research thesis, outlining my rationale for the choice of topic, and providing a brief context for the study within contemporary social work practice. I have also clarified terminology and summarised the structure of the thesis. I will now proceed to present a literature review to locate my research within an established body of existing literature.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter Overview

Within this chapter, I will present a review of relevant literature relating to empathy and social work practice. The literature review is in two parts. Firstly, Chapter 2a is a narrative review (Aveyard, 2019) of conceptual literature which aims to summarise key theoretical contributions from four disciplines of relevance to social work practice. Secondly, Chapter 2b presents a focused thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), which explores recent qualitative research findings in relation to the role of empathy within children and families social work practice. The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of the review for my own research.

Chapter 2a: Narrative literature review

In this first section, I present a narrative review of key theoretical contributions on empathy, to provide a clear context for how empathy is defined conceptually by different disciplines. Kitley and Stogdon (2014) suggest that narrative reviews can support the integration of a wide range of theoretical perspectives, Jesson (2011) and McLaughlin (2011) agree that narrative reviews can enable the synthesis of knowledge from a range of disciplines, to enhance overall understanding.

What is empathy?

Empathy as a concept has a complex history across a number of disciplines, creating a debated field of study (Lanzoni, Coplan & Goldie ref). There have been numerous attempts to synthesise the existing literature on empathy (Duan & Hill, 1996; Batson, 2011, Coplan, 2011; Engelen & Rottger- Rossler, 2012; Cuff et al, 2016, Hall & Schwartz, 2019, Eklund & Merianus, 2021) reflecting the growing interest over the last two decades. Eklund and Merianus (2021) note that more than 10,000 scientific papers relating to empathy have been published since 1918,

with more than 50% of these published in the last decade. As discussed in Chapter 1 there are numerous attempts to define empathy conceptually (Cuff et al, 2016) and to develop ways of measuring empathy within interpersonal interaction (Hall & Schwartz, 2019). There has also been a growing interest in empathy within public consciousness, reflected in the range of contemporary popular texts which debate the role of empathy (for example De Waal, 2019; Baron-Cohen, 2012; Krznaric, 2015) including those who challenge the value of empathy within society (Bloom, 2018). Empathy has thus become both a familiar, everyday idea but also an increasingly complex and contested concept. I begin by exploring key theoretical contributions on empathy from philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, and social work disciplines, each of which have informed the contemporary understanding of empathy within social work practice.

Philosophical perspectives on empathy

Philosophers have engaged in debate about the nature of empathy across the centuries. Matravers (2017:4) highlights the contributions of enlightenment philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, who debate the notion of 'sympathy' as a public virtue, through which one person becomes aware of and concerned for the emotional state of another person. Stueber (2010:29) argues that Hume's understanding of sympathy recognises the role of both affect and cognition in managing a response to the feeling of others, shaped by cultural and social practices. For these philosophers, empathy serves to provide a foundation for social organisation within societies and underpinned thinking about public morality and relationships (Magri & Moran, 2017:3).

Vischer is attributed (Howe, 2013, Lanzoni, 2018; Wispe, 1987) with developing the notion of 'Einfühlung' (cited in Howe, 2013:9) - a precursor to empathy - describing the process of responding to the aesthetic content of works of art at a sensory level (Magri & Moran, 2017:3). However, it was Lipps (cited in Coplan & Goldie 2011:11), who applies the concept of 'Einfühlung' to the process of understanding the feelings of other people, recognising the parallel in the process by which an individual resonates with the physiology and emotions of those around them (Stueber, 2010; Wispe, 1987). Halpern (2003) notes that such perception was experiential, an association between the observed characteristics of the person or object, and the sensations evoked within the observer. Lipps suggests that the person then projects their experience of these sensations onto the other person as a form of instinctual, basic empathy (Zahavi 2010; Magri & Moran, 2017:5). This early conceptualisation of empathy lays the foundations for subsequent theorising (Lanzoni, 2018). Titchener, an American psychologist translated the term 'Einfühlung' into the English word 'empathy' in 1909 (Lanzoni, 2018, Watson, 2021).

Phenomenological philosophers extended this exploration of empathy through an emphasis on the inter-subjective sharing of experience (Husserl, 1931; Howe, 2013; Zahavi, 2010), emphasising the role of direct sensory perception through which the empathiser is able to enter the other's subjective experience. From a phenomenological stance, Husserl views empathy as a specific form of 'intentionality'(1931:170) in which the object of conscious awareness is the emotional experience of the other person (Stueber, 2010; Zahavi, 2010). Stein (1989) amplifies Husserl's analysis of empathy, focusing specifically on an embodied inter-subjective, process of perception, in which the individual

experiences the consciousness of another person within their physiological awareness (Jardine & Szanto, 2017) experienced in the moment (Halpern, 2001:105). Stein emphasises that empathy is an experience of another person's emotions, but in a non-primordial way:

'I am experiencing the feeling of the other but not in my primary experience' (Stein, 1989:11).

Stein outlines a three-stage process of empathy (1989:11) beginning with 1) an embodied perception of the other person's emotions, recognising that the physiological awareness belongs to another person, followed by 2) a process of '*explication*' (Svenaeus,2016:220) using imagination to make sense of such perceptions. Gallagher (2017:162) describes this as '*filling in the gaps*' from the horizons of our own experience to make sense of the emotion we have perceived in the other person. Finally, 3) '*comprehensive objectification*' (Stein, 1989:60) in which the individual formulates a more complete, cognitive understanding of the other's emotional state and experience (Svenaeus, 2016:27).

Heidegger (1953:121) does not discuss empathy in any depth within his phenomenological analysis, but rather he focuses on the state of '*being with*' (1953:112) that he proposes all humans shared, providing a pre-reflective unconscious level of mutual understanding between people (King, 2001). Heidegger calls for a '*special hermeneutic*' of empathy on this basis (1953:122,), but never actually fulfils this ambition within his writings. Dreyfus (1991) and Blattner (2006) agree that empathy is a secondary form of experience, grounded in the ontological condition of '*being with others*'. Within this view, empathy arises only when this mutual pre-reflective state is disrupted, bringing one's conscious awareness to

focus on the thoughts and emotions of another person. - '*only on the basis of 'being with' does empathy become possible*' (Dreyfus, 1991:150).

More recently, Agosta (2014) proposes a Heideggerian model of empathy based on phenomenological principles, arguing that empathy has an ontological character within relationships which supports individuals to become more authentic in '*being with*' others (2010:21). In doing so, a person engages with human emotions and moods (affectedness), sharing understanding of others through pre-reflective knowing, and communication of this shared understanding through language and interpretation of others (Agosta, 2010:51). In many ways, this appears to be an issue of definition: Heidegger (1953:121) acknowledges the relevance of empathy as a concept which merited further attention, while Agosta attempts to undertake such an analysis directly (Agosta, 2014).

A further philosophical debate revolves around the theoretical conceptualisation of empathy. Batson (2011) identifies two distinct theoretical models – '*theory theory*' and '*simulation theory*' – each of which seek to explain how to gain access to the perspectives of other people. Spalding (2017) describes '*theory theory*' as relying on existing mental schema to inform our understanding of how others think and feel using a process of 'mentalising'. She characterises this as an '*information-rich inference*' (2017;15) that enables the individual to approximate another's experience. In contrast, '*simulation theory*' describes a process of actively imagining or constructing the experience of the other person, using our own minds to simulate their perspective which is described as an '*information poor*' approach (Spalding 2017:16). Spalding suggests that we are more likely to use simulation theory when we can more closely identify with the other person (Spalding, 2017). However, Zahavi (2010) questions whether either

model captures the true inter-subjective sharing of perception that is at the heart of Stein's model, emphasising that for Stein, the emotion always remains with the object of empathy and is therefore not simulated or imagined by them, although it is experienced. Similarly, Englander and Folkesson (2014) contend that simulation theory could undermine Stein's emphasis on inter-subjective experiencing, by focusing the individual too greatly on simulating their own perceptions of the experience.

Psychological perspectives on empathy

From an evolutionary perspective, Preston and de Waal (2002, de Waal, 2010) argue that a basic, instinctive form of empathy exists within many primates, serving an evolutionary function, in allowing group members to rapidly identify the emotional state of other members and react to protect and support. They propose a '*perception-action model*' (2002:6) in which an individual who observes the feeling state of another group member automatically experiences the activation of similar emotional cues, allowing them to share the affective experience of the other member.

From a developmental perspective, Hoffman (2000, 2011) and Eisenberg (1987, 2011) have both explored automatic forms of empathy within the developing child. Hoffman (2000, 2011) proposes a stage-model of empathy which reflects the developing cognitive and social understanding of the growing child, beginning with motor-mimicry, the automatic imitation of emotional cues from others through physiological responses which shape the infant's experience. Hoffman (2000) highlights the child's developing sense of self as key to this process - due to limited cognitive development, younger infants struggle to differentiate the other's

emotions from their own and focus their efforts on self-soothing (Nakao & Itakura, 2009). However, as they develop cognitively, they gradually gain skills in self-other differentiation which support the development of empathic concern for the other person, enhanced by language and abstract thinking skills, leading to the ability to take another's perspective (Hoffman, 2011).

Eisenberg (1987, 1998, 2003, 2011) explores the role of empathy development in supporting a range of pro-social characteristics within children. She suggests that children's early experience of motor mimicry leads to emotional contagion, whereby the child begins to experience the feelings of the other child for themselves (Eisenberg, 1987, 1998, 2011). Hatfield and colleagues (Hatfield, Rapson & Yen Chi, 2011) argue that such contagion is a building block of development and plays a foundational role in all forms of empathy. The child's response to the experience of contagion is significant, leading either to personal distress and aversive behaviour to minimise their distress or, as their cognitive ability grows, to forms of sympathetic concern for the other person, supporting pro social behaviour and reducing aggression (Eisenberg, 2003). Eisenberg also identifies the significance of factors such as gender, age, temperament, and parenting styles for the development of children's empathy (2003).

Eisenberg highlights the importance for children to develop emotional regulatory capacities during their development (1998, 2011) to be able to manage their own distress and shift focus to the distress of the other person. She thus identifies self-regulation as a key process in empathy, particularly in support of pro-social or altruistic behaviour towards others (2011).

An ongoing debate within psychological literature has focused on whether empathy is primarily an affective or a cognitive process (Davis, 1980, 2017; Goldman, 2011). Early measures of empathy tended to emphasise either the cognitive aspect (Hogan, 1969) or the affective aspect (Mehrabian 1972) exclusively (Davis, 1980, Lanzoni, 2018). While the literature on motor mimicry and primitive empathy emphasises the affective character of empathy, other theorists have explored the accompanying cognitive processes which take place, potentially supporting self-regulation (Pfeiffer & Dapretto, 2011 Laurent & Myers, 2011). For empathy to move beyond emotional contagion, there needs to be an awareness by the observer that the emotion they are sensing is not their own but belongs to the person they are observing – the process of self-other differentiation as described by Eisenberg (1987). The impact of self-other overlap is significant here, with researchers suggesting that we find it easier to empathise with those with whom we are most similar and who share our cultural perspectives (Eisenberg, & Eggum, 2011, Stietz et al, 2019). In addition, the skill of perspective-taking (Laurent & Myers, 2011; Stietz et al, 2019) requires the cognitive ability to identify how another person might be experiencing a situation rather than how one might experience it oneself. Decety and Lamm (2006, 2011) highlight the development of '*theory of mind*' in this context, developing from around 4 years of age. They emphasise the capacity to maintain an 'other orientation' in the face of potential personal distress reactions and the need to exercise self-regulation, supporting Eisenberg's (2011) suggestion of the benefits of some disengagement to maintain a truly empathic stance.

Subsequent attempts to measure empathy have therefore tried to address both aspects, for example in Davis's multi-dimensional measure, the Interpersonal

Reactivity index (1980), which appears to have become the most widely used measure of empathy within the literature (Schwartz & Hall, 2019) and explicitly includes scales for perspective-taking and fantasy (capacity for imagination) alongside measures for empathic concern and personal distress (Davis, 1980). Significantly, this measure acknowledges that an individual will experience both concern and distress through empathic identification for the other person but emphasises the role of perspective taking in supporting the self-other differentiation necessary to protect the individual from emotional contagion.

Several influential papers (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006, Singer & Lamm, 2009, Singer & De Vignemont, 2006) have highlighted the relevance of the discovery of the mirror neuron system and its implications for human neurological development in terms of understanding empathy as a process. Decety and Lamm (2006) suggest that the discovery of the mirror neuron system supported Preston and De Waal's (2002) '*perception-action coupling*' model as the basis for empathic responses, suggesting that the automatic matching of affect observed in another person by the observer, was represented in shared neural activity within both participants. Decety and Lamm (2006) characterise this as a '*bottom up*' aspect of neurological brain functioning within empathy. Goldman (2011) proposes that the mirror neuron system supports the accuracy of basic empathy due to the shared neural activity within target and observer, creating similar physiological experience within both. He describes this as a faster, more consistently reliable route to empathy describing it as '*mindreading*' on an ordinary everyday basis (Goldman, 2011). However, Singer and Vignemont (2006) suggest that such automatic responses are always mediated by factors including the intensity of the perceived affect, the level of

identification between the observer and target, characteristics of the observer such as gender and age and the situational context in which the empathic response arises -concluding that even intuitive, basic empathy is shaped somewhat by the context (2006).

Neuroscience has also supported the role of cognitive and regulatory mechanisms which underpin empathic responding – including self-regulatory abilities, self-other differentiation and perspective taking (Decety & Lamm, 2009, 2011; Decety & Meyer, 2007) characterising these as ‘*top down*’ aspects of empathy in which developing executive functioning abilities within the brain interact to regulate and mediate instinctive affective responses. Decety and Lamm (2009) identify how these more complex cognitive functions develop as the brain grows in neural complexity, particularly associated with the frontal cortex, and that these cognitive abilities support the inhibition and regulation of one’s own emotional responses during empathy and enhance the ability to differentiate self and other (Singer & Lamm, 2009). Debate continues between theorists as to the exact mechanisms by which these affective and cognitive processes interact at a neurological level. Engellen and Rottger-Rossler, (2012) argue that different neural mechanisms are in operation for empathic understanding and theory of mind related activities such as perspective taking. Stietz and colleagues (2019) have suggested that while perspective-taking functions decline somewhat as people age, empathic understanding remains the same, suggesting that different neural mechanisms are in operation. Preckel, Kanske and Singer (2018) concur and suggest that neurological networks will coordinate together at times to support effective empathy. While understanding of neurological mechanisms involved in

empathy has developed significantly, there continue to be ideological differences which sustain the debate around the precise nature of empathy.

Psychotherapeutic perspectives on empathy

Theories of empathy have also been highly influential within the field of psychotherapy and have been applied directly to professional practice within a range of contexts. Freud paid limited attention to empathy as a construct, viewing it mainly as a tool to help the therapist evaluate the patient's psychological state (Wispe, 1987; Lanzoni, 2018). Other psychoanalytic theorists including Rank and Ferenczi (Rachman, 1988; Hayner & Falzeder, 1993; Lanzoni, 2018) emerged as early proponents of empathy as a central element of the therapy relationship, emphasising the importance of attending to the patient's emotions as well as awareness of the therapists own emotional responses (Lanzoni, 2018). Bower (2005:7) discusses Freud's conceptualisation of 'transference' as particularly significant here, defined as a process by which the client transfers emotions and thoughts about their caregivers onto the therapist, emerging within the therapeutic relationship, and enabling the therapist to gain insight into the emotions of the client. Melanie Klein later identified the process of 'counter-transference' (cited in Bower, 2005:11) by which the therapist becomes aware of their own feelings and responses within the therapeutic relationship, using them to develop insight into clients' experiences. Arguably both processes serve to support the development of therapists' empathic understanding within the psychotherapeutic relationship (Norton, 2011).

However, it was mainly during the 1940s and 50s, that empathy became a focus of therapeutic interest (Howe, 2013, Lanzoni, 2018). Informed by humanist theory

(Lanzoni, ,2018) Carl Rogers began to explore the role of empathy when developing his model of 'client centred therapy' (Rogers, 1951) in which he discusses the basis for effective therapeutic relationships, emphasising the therapist's ability to perceive the world from the client's perspective. Rogers stresses the role of '*empathic identification*' (ibid, p29) in which the therapist recognises the client's emotions without experiencing them directly. By 1957, in his seminal paper on sufficient therapeutic conditions, Rogers names empathy directly, citing it as one of the central processes for effective therapeutic change (1957:241). In the context of psychotherapy, Rogers highlights the process of communicating one's understanding of the client's emotions directly, extending the conceptualisation of empathy to involve direct communication about the perceived emotion. Rogers publishes his most influential definition of empathy in 1959:

'to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition' (1959:210-11).

Shlien (1997) underlines the significance of this additional 'as if' condition, emphasising the importance for the therapist to maintain a clear sense of what is being perceived from the client's frame of reference and separating it from their own emotional responses – this definition can be seen to link to psychological theorising on empathy, theory of mind and self -other differentiation (Eisenberg,2011).

Other therapeutic writers (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997; Haugh & Merry, 2001) emphasise the centrality of empathy as an attitude here, as a state of mind rather than a simple skill. Rogers himself sought to describe empathy as a '*a way of being*' (Rogers, 1980: 142) and develops his thinking to consider empathy as a

process of relating rather than a simple skill. Bohart (1997) reminds us that empathy was presented as one of several qualities of an effective therapist – alongside unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1957) and argues that it is the combination of these qualities that form the core of effective person-centred therapy practice (Shlien, 1997, Axline, 1989).

Barrett-Lennard (1981,1993) outlines a 3-phase process of empathy, emphasising the interactive process of empathy by identifying the active role of the client in perceiving and responding to the therapist's empathic responding. Main et al (2017) support this point, suggesting the empathy is always interpersonal rather than simply intra-personal, and dynamic in character, altering through time, based on reciprocal feedback and adjustment. Goldberg applies the Heideggerian concept of 'fore-conception' here (Goldberg, 2011:292) suggesting that within a therapeutic relationship, the therapist will draw on previous experience of empathic encounters and previous knowledge to make sense of the client's emotions and to put them into contexts of understanding including the developing therapeutic understanding which support their empathy over time. Goldberg terms this 'sustained empathy' (2011:291), connecting with Agosta's (2011) proposed model of a hermeneutic circle of empathy.

Kohut developed this thinking further in his conceptualisation of empathy within psychoanalytic forms of therapy (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997), viewing empathy mainly as a tool to support the therapist's investigation of the client's experiences and history (Maclsaac, 1997). However, Kohut differentiated between in-the-moment awareness and identification of the individual's emotions within therapy to convey understanding, which he viewed as a basic form of empathy, and more complex forms of empathy which involved helping the

individual make sense of their emotional responses over time, by interpreting them in the light of the therapist's understanding of their circumstances and life history, as shared within therapy (Maclsaac, 1997). This has parallels with earlier discussions around the affective and cognitive aspects of empathy as psychological and neurological processes and Kohut can be seen to privilege cognitive aspects of empathic responding.

Within therapy research, a general consensus emerges as to the value of empathy as a key mechanism for therapeutic change (Castonguay & Beutler, 2006; Bohart & Greenberg, 1997, Elliott et al 2018; Norcross, 2011; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967) regardless of theoretical orientation of the therapist. However, Hojat (2016) suggests that within medicine, practitioners need to focus mainly on cognitive aspects of empathy, to support their cognitive awareness of what the patient might be experiencing, while limiting any emotional aspects of their response – which he terms sympathy, to optimise their ability to assess, evaluate and intervene in the patient's best interests. Both Hojat (2016) and Halpern (2014) acknowledge that the affective aspects of empathy can be powerful and potentially overwhelm practitioners at times. However, their suggested responses to such emotion differ significantly. Hojat (2016) suggests that medical professionals should minimise their emotional response to the patient, avoiding any expression of emotion to support self-regulation. Halpern (2001) challenges this model of '*detached concern*' which she argues has been the dominant model of professional relationship within the medical profession, suggesting that the medical profession has overlooked the value of an emotional component in supporting patients to heal (2001, 2012). Halpern argues convincingly that an over emphasis on cognitive processes causes professionals to pay less attention to their own emotional

responses, increasing vulnerability to burn-out as a result (2001). Halpern proposes a model of '*clinical empathy*' (Halpern,2012, Ekman & Halpern,2015) which recognises the value of an experiential as well as a cognitive aspect of empathy, including attunement to the emotions of the patient and a genuine curiosity about the role of their emotions within their overall diagnosis.

Social work perspectives on empathy.

Several authors explore the relevance of empathy to social work (Keefe, 1976; Raines, 1990; Howe, 2013; Gibbons, 2011; Clark, 2020). Raines (1990), in an early review suggests that empathy was foundational within early models of social work informing the work of social work pioneers such as Jane Addams (Malekoff & Papell, 2012) and Octavia Hill (Doel, 2015, Bramford, 2018) at the start of the twentieth century. Watson et al (2022) identify the notion of '*imaginative sympathy*' proposed by Mary Richmond, within her early model of 'social diagnosis' (1917) as reflecting core aspects of empathy from a psychoanalytic perspective. However, Gerdes Segal and Lietz (2011) argue that while empathy can be inferred as a basis for much social work activity, it is rarely mentioned explicitly within the early literature.

As humanistic theory gained influence in North America during the 1950s, this was reflected in a shift to models of 'social casework' (Perlman, 1957, Biestek, 1957) in which the role of empathy was more readily acknowledged. Rogers' (1957) influence is evident in Biestek's (1957) discussion of the casework relationship in which he suggests that empathy, rather than sympathy, offers a more '*realistic sharing*' in the emotions of the client, appropriate to the '*democratic*' (1957:9) values of social work. Among his seven core principles of casework, he

outlines both the purposeful expression of feelings (principle 2) and maintaining a controlled emotional involvement (principle 3) as key aspects of empathic practice. Similarly, Perlman (1957) emphasises the role of emotional sharing in the social work relationship with clients, responding to their expressed emotion with acceptance and without judgement to strengthen the trust in the relationship '*The worker demonstrates that he is at one with the client, that he is feeling not like him, but with him*' (Perlman, 1957:71). Kadushin and Kadushin (1997) also map Roger's core conditions (2007) systematically to aspects of the social work interview, emphasising that the effective worker will display empathic understanding by responding to both the manifest content of the communication as well as the less conscious, non-verbal aspects - '*empathy is entering imaginatively into the inner life of someone else*' (1997:108).

Contemporary social work writers (Trevithick 2012, Healey, 2011, Woodcock-Ross, 2011, Rogers et al, 2017) continue to emphasise the role of empathy within current practice contexts and it has achieved a central place within the professional literature. Howe (2008:173) considers the ability to convey empathy is a key to successful social work practice while Rogers et al (2017:45) describe empathy as '*intrinsic to good social work practice*' and Trevithick (2012:195) states it is '*one of the most important skills in social work*'. Payne (2011) emphasises that for empathy to be effective, it needs to move beyond cognitive aspects of recognising and naming feelings, to involve an affective, 'felt' aspect that provides depth and authenticity to the shared experience with the client - '*you have to feel empathy to be helpful*' (Payne, 2011: 91). Shulman (2015) extends this further, arguing that workers must develop an understanding of how to express their own emotions to develop their empathic abilities. Shulman

describes how the worker '*reaches for feelings*' (2015:190) summoning up within themselves the feelings they identify within the service user, before conveying their emotional understanding through both verbal and nonverbal means.

Perlman (1979) acknowledges the constraints of the professional role, highlighting the importance of moving rapidly back and forth between empathic identification with the service user and an awareness of the worker's professional responsibility and objectivity. Lishman (2012) also recognises the importance of maintaining a separateness between the emotional experience of the service user, stressing the need to manage the other person's emotions without being overwhelmed oneself. Hennessey (2011) draws on concepts of self-other differentiation:

'this simultaneous awareness of self and other is crucial if workers are to retain the objectivity required for critical tasks such as risk assessment while at the same time, engaging inter-subjectively with their client' (2011:82).

This echoes Biestek's (1957) principle of '*controlled emotional involvement*'. Harris and White (2018) also remind us that social workers can convey understanding of the service user's emotion without approving or agreeing with those perceived emotions. Sedden (2005) agrees, describing empathy as '*value-free*' (2005:74) in this context; the worker offers acceptance of the perceptions and emotions of the service user, whilst remaining clear about their own and their agency viewpoint.

Grant and Kinman (2014a:28; 2014b) use Rogers' concept of '*accurate*' empathy (2007:243) to propose a distinction between '*accurate*' empathic practice, which includes empathic concern and perspective-taking abilities and '*inaccurate*'

empathy within which the experience of emotional distress potentially increases the workers vulnerability. They use Davis's multi-dimensional model of empathy (Davis,1983) to argue that social workers need training in understanding the potential emotional impact of empathic practice, in order to preserve their professional identity and reduce the potential for burnout. Kinman and Grant suggest that accurate or '*bounded empathy*' (Kinman & Grant, 2017;1982) may serve as a protective factor for social workers, supporting resilience through the maintenance of a clear boundary between the service users' experience and the worker's perception. Additionally, both Morrison (2007) and Howe (2008) identify the central role of empathy within models of emotional intelligence, suggesting the ability to understand and regulate one's own emotions and those of others is a critical skill for social workers.

There have been two attempts to develop a distinct definition of empathy for social work practice. Drawing on Decety and Jackson's (2004) neuroscientific account of empathy, Gerdes and Segal, (2009) propose a model which includes an affective awareness of the other persons' emotions, a cognitive response that recognises and differentiates one's own emotions and identifies and communicates understanding to the other person, along with a decision making, action -oriented stage to address the concerns of the other person. Their definition assumes a progression from the affective and cognitive aspects of empathy present in the literature to include a focus on action:

'as social workers to be empathic is to experience the affect, process it and then take appropriate, effective, empathy-driven action' (Gerdes & Segal, 2009:122).

In subsequent papers they develop a tool for measuring empathy in practice (Gerdes, Leitz & Segal, 2010) as well as extending their model to consider sources of potential social and economic inequality (SEI, Segal, Wagaman & Gerdes, 2012).

King (2011) also proposes a model for empathy, drawing on the work of Davis (1980), introducing an emphasis on altruistic action:

'Empathy by its interpersonal and dynamic nature, is something we think, feel, and do' (King & Holosko, 2012:176).

His model includes three dimensions: an affective dimension, including caring concern and congruence / authenticity; a cognitive dimension, which includes perspective-taking and interpersonal sensitivity and a behavioural dimension which includes developing a working relationship and altruistic behaviour towards the service user. King (2012) also proposed a specific tool – the Empathy Scale for Social Workers (ESSW) for measuring empathy in social work practice. Both social work specific models of empathy are distinctive in extending their models beyond the affective and cognitive aspects identified in the psychology and psychotherapy literature and arguing empathy naturally leads to social workers engaging in actions which support or empower their services users.

This emphasis on action resonates with several authors (Stickle, 2016, Bilson, 2006; Grant & Kinman, 2021) who advocate for compassion as a preferred quality for social work. Stickle (2016:121) defines compassion as awareness of another's distress, accompanied by a desire to alleviate that distress. She argues that such compassion is equivalent to Davis's (1980) model of '*empathic concern*' and suggests that compassion is more likely to lead to the motivation to help

others, while helping to avoid the impacts of emotional distress. Tsang (2017) highlights that empathy can be conceived as emotionally neutral and does not always lead to action to relieve distress, suggesting that workers need to be taught about the ethical value of compassionate helping to compensate for this. In a series of studies with social work students, Gair (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) explores the impact of socialisation on the experience of identity, proposing that social workers tend to empathise most with people from similar cultural and social backgrounds and struggle to experience empathy for people with significantly different identities or life experiences. Gair (2010:43) identifies several limitations to empathy, including comparative empathy, in which workers used their own experiences as a key reference point for understanding others, and conditional empathy, in which workers controlled their empathic reactions in the light of their perceived professional judgements of the other person. Gair (2013:145) draws on Stein's theory of inter-subjective, direct perception at an embodied level, (Stein, 1989; Svenaeus, 2016) to argue that authentic empathy will enable workers to recognise their 'shared humanity' with service users and support their empathic responding across a range of identity differences.

Discussion

While I recognise the literature on empathy is considerable, I have chosen to review four related disciplines which I suggest offer context for my own research. Several aspects are relevant for my own study on empathy.

Firstly, despite the abundance of definitions of and tools to measure empathy (Cuff et al, 2016, Hall & Schwartz, 2019), empathy remains a contested, complex concept that resists simple definition. My own understanding from the

literature is that empathy is a dynamic, inter-personal experience, involving both physiological perception and inter-subjective sharing of affect, alongside cognitive appraisal which supports self-other differentiation and leads to a verbal response which seeks to convey understanding of another person. I find Stein's (1989:10) emphasis on '*primordial*' 'in-the-moment', directly perceived experience of another's emotions to be insightful, connecting with the neuroscience literature on the function of mirror neurons in the automatic, unconscious activation of empathic responding (Decety & Lamm, 2006:1147) as a '*bottom up*' response. I consider this emphasis on the 'felt' experience of another's emotion at a pre-conscious level to be a vital, if overlooked, aspect of empathy, suggesting that social workers need to pay attention to their physiological cues within practice, to be aware of how their instinctive embodied responses might be shaping their cognitive, affective, and verbal responses.

The review also indicates an ongoing debate about the interaction of cognitive and affective elements (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006, Davis, 1980) within the process of empathy. Decety and Lamm identify the role of '*top-down*' (Decety & Lamm, 2006:1147) neurological mechanisms that highlight the role of cognitive skills such as perspective taking and emotional regulation in supporting empathic experience. Developmental perspectives (Hoffman, 2000, 2011; Eisenberg, 1987, 2011) support the idea that regulatory abilities will develop within individuals, mediated through their experience of development and interaction with their environment. This has implications for individual social workers' capacity for empathy and emotional regulation. In proposing a multi-dimensional model of empathy, Davis (1983:17) argues that perspective-taking

ability enhances capacity for empathic concern, while decreasing the likelihood of emotional distress through the process of self-other differentiation.

Rauvola, Vega and Lavigne (2019:298) have proposed the term 'empathy-based stress' to include the related phenomena of compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. While a full exploration of these terms is beyond the scope of this review, readers are directed to several helpful papers which explore their significance for social work practice. Figley (1995) uses the terms secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue to describe the potential emotional impact of supporting individuals who have experienced trauma in their lives, while McCann and Pearlman (1990) introduced the term 'vicarious trauma' to capture the impact of exposure to others' experiences in shaping the individual helper's perspective both personally and professionally. Newell and MacNeil (2010) stress the importance of differentiating such terms clearly, emphasising that vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue relate to the secondary processing of someone else's traumatic experience, while professional burnout can be regarded as a more general process which can arise within a range of professional organisations and practice contexts.

Subsequent research into compassion fatigue within social work (Adams, Boscarino & Figley, 2008; Bourassa, 2009; Thomas, 2013, Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2014) has repeatedly found a positive association between high levels of emotional distress and compassion fatigue, although other authors have also suggested a link between empathy and compassion satisfaction (Stamm, 1995, Conrad and Kellar Guenther, 2006). Several recent papers also explore the impact of vicarious trauma on social work practice, identifying potential strategies for individuals as well as implications for organisations – for example, Lewis and King

(2019) advocate for the integration of self-care skills within social work curriculums and post qualifying programmes, while Singer et al (2020) propose supporting workers' sense of purpose and strengthening their beliefs and motivation for their role as a key protective factor.

Similarly, McFadden and colleagues (2015, 2018) have explored the relationship between burnout and resilience in social work practice, emphasising the importance of supportive relationships with peers and supervisors as a key organisational protective factor, along with a sense of satisfaction from building effective positive relationships with children and families at an individual level' .

Arguably, the potential for experiencing emotional distress associated with 'felt emotion', as described by Stein (1989), has led to a greater emphasis on the cognitive aspects of empathy within the professional literature and a stigmatising of emotion within professional life. For example, Kohut (1995) emphasises his '*experience-near observation*' as a form of detached therapeutic concern, while Hojat (2002) promotes the importance of professional distance for medical practitioners while demonstrating empathy. Within social work, Grant and Kinman's conceptualisation of '*accurate empathy*' (2014:28) echoes this approach, identifying the dangers of '*spilling over into empathic distress*' and urging practitioners to maintain '*clear professional boundaries*'(ibid) to protect themselves from emotional overload.

This contrasts significantly with earlier social work discourse on empathy (Biestek, 1957, Perlman 1957, Kadushin & Kadushin, 1979) which appears to focus more specifically on the experience of sharing emotions with the service user - '*feeling with*' them (Perlman, 1957:71). This theme is also picked up in some

contemporary sources - Payne (2011) emphasises the emotional aspect of empathy as central to humanistic practice, a view echoed by Shulman (2016:190) in his exhortation that workers '*reach for feelings*'. I am mindful that Rogers (2007) proposed empathy as one of several necessary conditions for therapeutic change, albeit using the 'as if' as a reminder of self -other differentiation: '*To sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own [my emphasis], yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up in it*' (Rogers, 2007:243).

There is an inherent tension for practitioners in how to balance these cognitive and affective aspects of practice. I acknowledge a degree of consensus within the literature about the constraints to empathy within social work practice, due to the statutory, often involuntary nature of involvement with families within social work practice (Lishman, 2012, Perlman, 1979; Biestek, 1957, Kinman & Grant, 2016). Indeed, Murphy and colleagues (Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013:703) argue that the application of Rogers' therapeutic principles are untenable for social workers. However, the literature (Howe, 2008, 2012; Grant & Kinman, 2014; Wilson et al, 2011; Trevithick, 2012) also repeatedly identifies empathy as a key aspect of practice (Ingram, 2015:69) necessary for building effective relationships with service users in distress and emphasising the importance for the worker to be fully present in the emotional connection with the service user. Hennessey (2011:83) summarises this tension for a worker between making: '*deeper contact with the emotional state of the client, while avoiding over-immersion and the risk of losing objectivity*'.

Rogers' (1951, 2007) discussion of necessary therapeutic conditions is relevant, reminding us that empathy is only one of several qualities including genuineness and unconditional acceptance which are essential for building

effective working relationships. This suggestion of genuineness alongside empathy offers a potential strategy for social workers to pay more attention to the emotional aspects of their experience in practice. Wilson et al (2011) propose the term 'authenticity' as an equivalent quality for social work practice commenting:

'to be able to be empathic you need to be authentic. Authenticity is the congruence between what the worker says, what they feel and what they do' (Wilson et al, 2011:303).

Halpern's (2001, 2012) emphasis on the experiential, embodied aspect in her model of 'clinical empathy' has relevance here and provides a possible model for more embodied forms of empathic social work professional practice.

The literature on emotional intelligence is also relevant (Goleman 1998, Mayer & Salovey, 1997, Morrison, 2007), highlighting the importance for workers of integrating intra-personal skills such as embodied emotional awareness and self-regulatory skills with inter-personal skills including empathy and managing relationships (Morrison, 2007: 251). Stickle (2016) justifies her preference for compassion rather than empathy by suggesting that focussing on helping others will reduce the potential for workers to experience emotional distress themselves. Again, I understand this as a matter of self–other differentiation, underpinned by an ability to separate out the emotions of another person from one's own, to limit the impact of emotional contagion.

These findings offer a lens for my research findings, providing a focus on how workers balance their perspective taking, cognitive abilities alongside their emotional experiences within social work practice and how social work organisations support them within their practice. I will return to these themes within my discussion of the thematic synthesis.

Chapter Summary

This first section has presented a narrative review of disciplinary contributions from philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, and social work in the development of empathy as a construct, highlighting the complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of empathy.

This review has implications for my research study in several ways. The discussion of the origins of empathy and the contested nature of empathic phenomenon raises further questions about how empathy is actually experienced within social work practice. The literature highlights the relationship between workers' felt emotions and the cognitive regulatory processes that support them to manage emotions and offer empathic responses to children and families. This tension between affective and cognitive functions has relevance for my exploration of workers' lived experience. Additionally, the debate highlighted empathy as both a potential risk and protective factor, which raises important questions for my own research as to how workers balance these factors within their professional lives. I anticipate that my research aims and objectives (page 16) will contribute to the exploration of these issues within social work practice.

I will now present findings from my thematic synthesis which will focus more explicitly on the practice of empathy within children and families social work contexts

Chapter 2b: Thematic synthesis.

Chapter Overview

Within this section, I will present the methodology and discussion of themes from a thematic synthesis of research, focusing on the use of empathy within social work practice with children and families over the last two decades. My intention is to move beyond the general conceptual discussion in Chapter 2a and to focus down on the role of empathy within contemporary social work practice contexts in order to explore the extent of current knowledge and theorising on empathy within this specific practice context. This discussion will inform my analysis of my own findings in due course.

Introduction: Thematic synthesis

I now present a thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of literature focusing specifically on the role of empathy within children and family social work, seeking to inform my own research question (page 16) which asks:

‘How do social workers experience empathy within their day-to-day practice?’

The synthesis was completed over an eighteen-month period from 2021-2022. During the completion of my initial narrative review in 2018-2019 and following discussions with my supervisory team, I agreed to undertake a thematic synthesis, to inform the development of my own research focus within my studies. This task was added to the research aims for my thesis (page 16).

In order to prepare for the task, I needed to undertake some specialist external training on qualitative meta synthesis. On completion of this training, my study was interrupted by a period of temporary withdrawal for 9 months, from April 2020 returning to study in February 2021. There was therefore a significant delay between completing the initial narrative review and the subsequent thematic

synthesis. However, through a process of iterative analysis, I was able to draw on themes from both reviews to inform and strengthen my developing analysis of findings.

Booth et al (2022) and Aveyard, Payne and Preston (2021) identify the expectation that all literature reviews should be undertaken systematically, with transparency around how literature was identified and appraised. Noblit and Hare (1988) identify the difference between methods of aggregation most frequently used within quantitative reviews and methods of interpretation usually used within qualitative work. However, as Thomas and Harden (2008) highlight, there are also challenges for qualitative synthesis, which can arguably de-contextualise findings from their original setting, potentially altering their meaning.

The aim of qualitative synthesis is to create higher order constructs (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017) which go beyond the existing primary data. I have opted to use Thomas and Harden's (2008) model of thematic synthesis as the approach for this review. As a researcher employing an interpretive phenomenological methodology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) for my own research, I experienced a strong fit between the two models in relation to their shared emphasis on iterative analysis and the role of the researcher as actively engaged in interpretation alongside the research participants.

Literature search and selection.

Thomas and Harden's (2008) model has several steps, beginning with the literature search itself which is purposive in character (Thomas & Harden, 2008:3), aiming to be representative rather than comprehensive (Booth et al, 2022; Aveyard, Payne & Preston, 2021, Thomas & Harden, 2008). Booth et al (2022)

suggest, the researcher should seek to achieve a representative sample of relevant qualitative literature by working systematically, regardless of theoretical orientation, to produce an ‘*unbiased sample*’ (Finfgeld-Connett, 2018:18) of the available qualitative literature. Within this context, I aimed to conduct a literature search that was representative on the topic of empathy in children and families’ social work, while not making claims of comprehensiveness for the study.

Gough, Oliver and Roberts (2017) highlight the role of effective exclusion and inclusion criteria to shape the nature of any literature search while Ludvigsen et al (2016) suggest criteria enable you to target your chosen phenomenon more accurately. For my review, I identified the following criteria:

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the paper include an empirical qualitative research method or mixed methods that include qualitative research? • Does the paper focus on social work practice generally or social work practice with children and families? • Does the paper contain findings relating to the use of empathy or emotion within social work practice? • Has the study been published since January 2000? • Is the study published in the English language? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the paper contain empirical quantitative research methods? ▪ Is the paper a theoretical or opinion paper or an existing literature review? ▪ Does the paper contain qualitative research relating to another specialist area of social work practice – for example palliative care or mental health? ▪ Does the study involve the experiences of social work students? ▪ Has the paper been published prior to January 2000? ▪ Is the paper published in a language other than English?

Table 1 - Inclusion and Exclusion criteria for thematic synthesis (Author’s own creation, 2024)

In devising these criteria, I used both the concept of ‘empathy’ and the more general term of ‘emotion’ to identify as wide a range of potentially relevant literature as possible. Similarly, I also decided to initially include papers regarding general

social work practice alongside the specific practice context of children and families' practice, subsequently excluding many of these through application of the exclusion criteria. I included only research with qualified social workers, excluding research relating to social work students.

Booth et al (2022) suggest identifying a timescale for the literature search as one strategy to manage the volume of potentially eligible studies. I chose the timescale of January 2000 – December 2021, reflecting a period of significant upheaval within the social work professional landscape; for example, with the establishment of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in 2001 and protection of 'social work' as a professional title in the UK (Care Standards, Act, 2000); the work of the Social Work Task Force (2009) and the Social Work Reform Board (2010); the Munro review of Child Protection (2011) the establishment of a new regulatory body, Social Work England (2018). This 20-year period therefore offered an interesting context for my own study, which was undertaken between 2016 and 2023. I have only included papers submitted in English as this is my own limitation as a researcher (Aveyard, 2019), but the review includes papers from a range of countries with similar social welfare systems, enabling a level of international analysis.

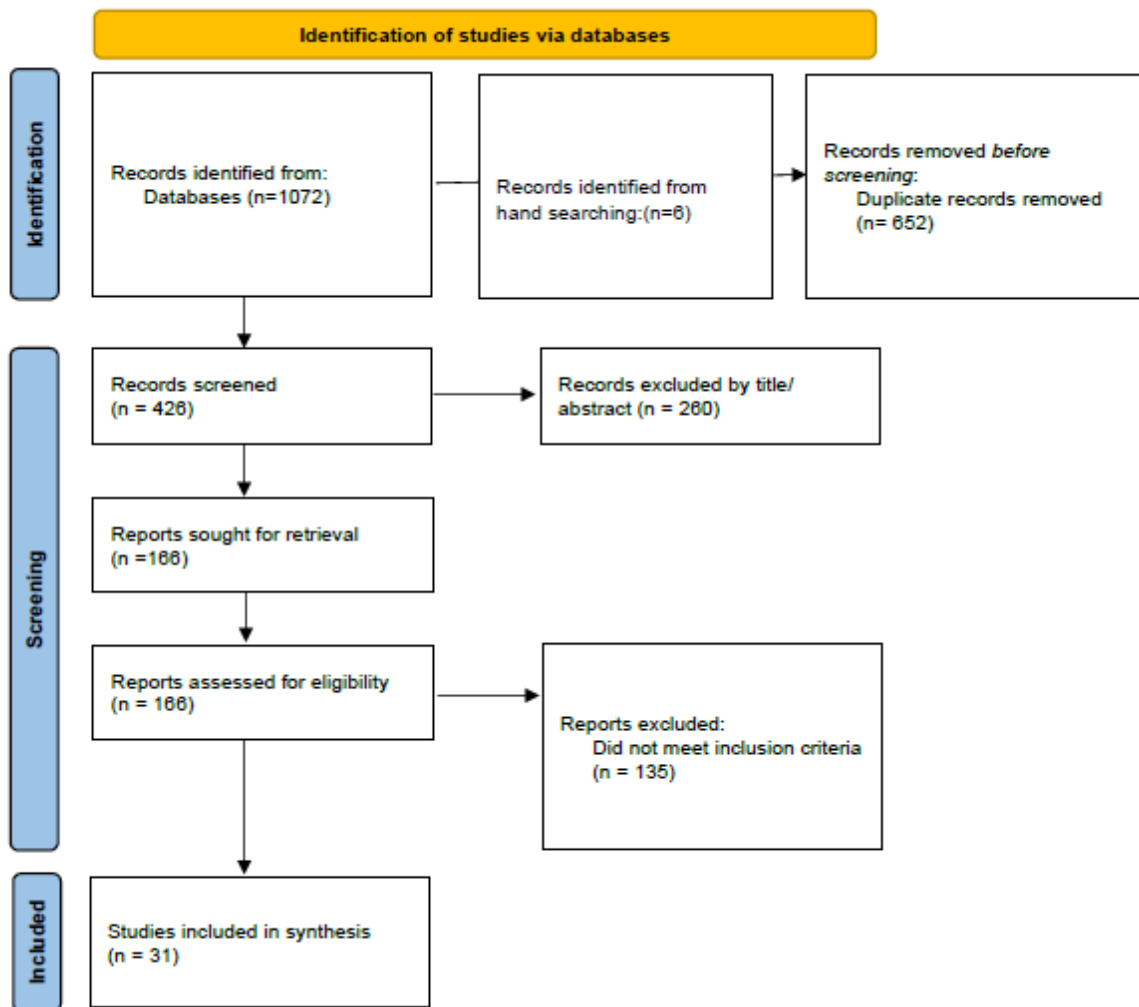
I used a search strategy suggested by Aveyard, Payne, and Preston (2021) and employed the PICO search tool (Population of interest – Intervention – Comparison – Outcome; Methley et al 2014) to support a search string reflecting my search parameters (Booth et al, 2022;133). In two studies, (Cooke, Smith & Booth, 2012, Methley et al, 2014) PICO has demonstrated capacity to generate more comprehensive search results, when compared to other available tools. I selected 5 databases that Booth et al (2022) identify as relevant for health and

social care professionals including CINAHL; PsychINFO; Scopus; Academic Search Complete and the Social Care Online. I used the following search terms for my searches:

- 'Empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring'
- OR 'emotion'
- AND 'social work or social workers or social work practice or social services'
- AND 'experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views or feelings'
- AND 'qualitative research or qualitative study or qualitative methods or interview'
- AND 'children or adolescents or youth or child or teenager'

I undertook a series of searches in Mid-January 2022 using variations of these terms, as summarised in the box in appendix 1. In addition to the use of electronic databases, I also undertook some supplemental hand searching as recommended by Booth et al (2022), using citation searches to identify potential papers and reviewing doctoral theses via ETHOS (2022) to identify potentially relevant papers. I added these hand searched papers to the total for review. However, only one additional paper was included in the final group of papers that make up this thematic synthesis. In line with conventions for reporting thematic syntheses I have included a Prisma statement (Liberati et al 2009) to summarise my search process for relevant literature. A process of screening article abstracts to eliminate irrelevant studies and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria reduced the final number of articles to 31 papers, which form the basis of this synthesis (Appendix 2).

Figure 1. Prisma Statement for literature search on empathy, April 2022



The selected literature is drawn from 15 different peer-reviewed journals from a range of industrialised nations including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Israel, Germany, Czech Republic, Spain, Scotland, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Canada, and the United States. A small number of studies focused explicitly on empathy as a phenomenon within social work practice (Eriksson & Englander, 2017; Ortega-Galan, Ruiz-Fernandez & Ortiz-Amo, 2020, Lynch et al, 2019; Tempel,2007), with the remaining articles covering empathy as one aspect of their findings. I am confident that this provides a representative sample of qualitative research studies from the identified chosen period that informs this synthesis.

Quality Appraisal

Thomas and Harden (2008) advocate a flexible approach to quality appraisal in thematic synthesis, emphasising the diverse range of qualitative research methods and the consequent diversity in reporting findings. I used the CASP (2018) Checklist for Qualitative research as an appraisal tool (Appendix 3). This enabled me to review key aspects of each article in terms of research strategy and design, data collection and analysis, ethical approval, and relevance of findings (CASP, 2018). Each article was scored from 1 (poor) to 4 (very good) helping me to identify limitations and strengths of each study. None of the selected articles rated lower than 2 (satisfactory) using this tool.

Synthesis of findings

Within the synthesis, I identify 4 themes relating to the experience of empathy within children and families' practice. These are:

Theme:	Sub theme:
1. Empathy as embodied understanding of emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embodied awareness• Understanding• Focus on feelings
2. Managing emotions within empathic practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing professional empathy - 'switching off'• Empathy can affect wellbeing
3. Challenges for empathic practice – Empathic dilemmas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exercising authority• Divided loyalty – parent or child?• Impact of austerity.
4. Organisational aspects of empathy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empathy as emotional labour• Organisational contexts

Table 2 – Themes from the thematic synthesis (Author's own creation, 2024)

Within my discussion, in keeping with a suggestion by Thomas and Harden (2008) I use brief quotations from secondary sources identified within the synthesis

to illustrate my proposed themes, for the purpose of supporting the trustworthiness and relevance of my analysis.

Theme 1: Empathy as embodied understanding

Several papers emphasise the experience of empathy as a form of embodied understanding of the other's emotions, with several clear characteristics.

Embodied awareness

Eriksson and Englander (2017:614), in a small-scale phenomenological study, describe an '*empathic presence*' which involves an embodied attendance and conscious availability to the person, opening to their story and experiences:

'I listen. I am present. I am available in the meeting. I am in the meeting. I think that enables me to convey a feeling of "I am here," (P3, Eriksson & Englander, 2017:614).

Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen's (2015:696) also focus on the experience of physical presence as an aspect of empathetic practice: '*I dare to be in the present*' (Social worker 15 cited in Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015:696).

Eriksson and Englander (2017:617) emphasise such physiological awareness as a crucial aspect of the experience of empathy. Other literature considers the challenging physicality of embodied practice. Cook (2020;10) explores the experience of undertaking initial home visits for social workers and the sense of '*going into the unknown*' when physically entering the home, causing anxiety and defensiveness for some workers. Ahern et al (2017), identify a similar style of embodied practice by workers within the context of child sexual exploitation, meeting young people within their own physical environments, often in the community, demonstrating awareness of the young persons' safe spaces

and a willingness to meet them on their terms. Tempel (2007) extends this idea by suggesting that workers should consciously tune into their physiological and unconscious embodied responses within an environment, to enhance their empathic understanding of the experience of the other person. She explores examples from threatening, inner-city environments in the USA to inform workers' understanding of a parent's responses, arguing:

'the worker needs to be inside the pulse of the neighbourhood and have a direct window into the mother's experiences' (Tempel, 2007:262).

These authors emphasise the role of embodied perception, paying attention to the workers' physiological cues to help sense the experience of the other person, while staying alive to their own responses to changing practice environments.

Both Lynch and Garrett (2010) and Ruch (2008), highlight the role of touch within social work practice, particularly in relation to expressing empathy with children:

'Where words fail to show that you know where a person is 'coming from', that you are there for them, a touch may be all that is needed. A touch can often offer more than words' (Kay, cited in Lynch & Garrett, 2010:392).

However, while some workers identified touch with children as a central aspect of their empathic practice, others carefully avoided it (Ruch, 2008). Such touch may also be regulatory for the workers here and support their unconscious processing of their own emotions within difficult situations, expressing their protective impulses and potentially providing some self-soothing for the worker.

Understanding

Eriksson and Englander (2017:614) identify understanding the others' perspective as a '*universal*' aspect of empathy, comprehending '*the other as other*' (*ibid*). Ortega-Galan and colleagues (2020:5) suggest this is related to the practitioner's ability to enter the frame of reference of the other person:

'it's knowing how to interpret [their] reality, their experiences, understanding their situation' (FG2 cited, *ibid*).

Lynch, Newlands and Forrester (2019:142) use the term '*curiosity*' to capture this aspect, emphasising workers' active interest in the service users' experiences:

'the more opportunities the worker created for the parent to share their perspective, thoughts, and views, the more opportunities there were for the worker to demonstrate their understanding of what the parent had to say' (Lynch, Newlands, & Forester, 2019:144).

Reimer (2013:465) captures the experience of feeling understood from the perspective of a parent, accused of neglect, who felt their worker addressed both their practical and emotional needs, clearing conveying their understanding: '*It's like she understands how you're feeling*' (Parent 2 cited Reimer, 2013:465). Within Maiter and colleagues' study (2006), 31% of parents rated empathy as important, emphasising workers' understanding of their wider life situation and family history as part of this quality, suggesting that while empathy is important, parents also valued other qualities including honesty and reliability in their workers.

Ruch's participants describe '*getting under the layers*' (Ruch, 2008:2156) of the child's experience, helping the child to make sense of events and experiences that are affecting them. In this sense, empathic understanding also involves '*meaning-making*' (Thrana & Fauske, 2014:233), putting the person's emotions into the wider context of their history and past involvement. For example,

participants in Ahern's study of practitioners working with child sexual exploitation commented:

'I could see why she ended up with this man ... you could see that she's so lost and she's so desperate' (Practitioner 11, cited Ahern et al 2017:85).

Tempel (2007) argues that searching for meaning in the parents' behaviour may also provide a '*pathway to empathy*' (Tempel, 2007:261) by looking beyond presenting behaviour and exploring one's own counter-transference reactions to the situation.

Focus on feelings

Both Ortega-Galan and colleagues (2020:4) and Lynch, Newlands and Forrester (2019:144) identify a '*focus on feeling*' as a further element of empathy, while acknowledging the complexity of working with emotions in social work. Lynch and colleagues (2019:145) suggest the use of open questions and thoughtful reflections as the key mechanisms to gain understanding of the service user's emotions while Cook (2020:22) advises that workers attend to the emotional nuances of service users body language, tone of voice and facial expressions to help inform their empathy. Glumbikova and Milulec's participant (2021:265) suggests such cues can act as emotional signals for the worker: '*Those emotions are like a beacon for me that directs me to what is important.*'

However, two papers (Pinkney, 2011; Leeson, 2010) suggest that some workers may find the emotions of young children particularly difficult to manage, with Leeson (2010) suggesting that workers avoid discussing emotive topics with young children, preferring older young people who can engage verbally and cognitively. Stabler, Wilkins and Carro (2020) in their qualitative study with twenty-

two children in care, focused on empathy as one of several qualities, identifying a range of somewhat contradictory views from the young people. While some appreciated workers who they perceived as caring and emotionally available, others emphasised qualities such as delivering on promises and being transparent about their responsibilities and the limits of their power to help. The researchers concluded that empathy needed to be exercised flexibly by workers, adapting to particular children and young people, while remaining authentic in their practice and relationships (Stabler, Wilkins and Carro, 2020:125).

However, Thrana and Fauske, drawing on a significantly larger sample of interviews with 365 parents using child welfare services, argue that professionals need to prioritise the '*emotional encounter*' (Thrana & Fauske, 2014:222) within those services, acknowledging the ambivalent feelings of both parent and worker. They identify the potential for parents, particularly, to feel '*invisible*' (Thrana & Fauske, 2014:230) and emphasise the importance of qualities such as caring, compassion and understanding (Thrana & Fauske, 2014:228) as essential skills for social work practice.

Theme 2: Managing emotions within empathic practice.

Rose and Palattiyil (2019:31) discuss the '*tricky balance*' for workers of managing emotions which arise within their practice, while Ortega and colleagues (2020:5) suggest that empathy is a '*moral obligation*' for practitioners who must also try to protect themselves from potential emotional distress within complex family situations. Cook (2020:23) notes that focusing on other's emotions involves exposure to strong and often unpleasant feelings of '*pain, distress, disgust*', which often remain with the worker after the visit itself. I identify two sub-themes here –

firstly, developing a professional style of empathy, secondly empathy and well-being.

Developing professional empathy: 'switching off'

There is a clear sense within the literature of the importance of emotional distancing by workers as part of professionalism (Grootegoed & Smith, 2019; Gulmbikova & Mikulec, 2021; Cook, 2020; Ruch *et al*, 2020; Albaek, Binder, Milde, 2020) Eriksson and Englander (2017:615) propose this as a '*professional stance*' setting aside one's own identity and emotions and taking on a professional character as described by one of their participants:

'you walk in through the door you stop existing as a person and you become a professional member of the staff...'(P2 cited, Eriksson & Englander, 2017:615).

Rose and Palattiyil (2020) also suggest that empathy can act as a potential threat to workers' resilience, citing a participant:

'I think you need to be emotionally involved and empathetic but to be able to do it for any length of time you have to be able to switch off.' (Will, cited in Rose & Palattiyil, 2020:32).

This image of '*switching off*' (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020:32) is echoed through a range of metaphors within the literature - for example, one participant describes the emotional task as '*a small button, you switch off and you switch on*' (P2 cited Eriksson & Englander 2017:615) while another states '*you kind of lock it away in a box*' (SW8 cited in Cook, 2020:23) and another '*shutting a door into yourself*' (SW11 in Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, 2015:696). The similarity of these metaphors suggests that workers view their emotional responses as something that can be managed without impact, turned on or off, potentially under-estimating

the embodied nature of empathic experience. It is evident that participants experienced a need to limit the emotional impact within their professional role. Rose and Palattiyil (2019) and Eriksson and Englander (2017) both connect this with the worker's need to maintain self–other differentiation in order not to become overwhelmed by empathic distress, protecting themselves '*from non-empathic phenomena such as emotional contagion and emotional sharing*' (Eriksson & Englander, 2017:615).

Glumbikova and Mikulec (2021:266), characterise this as assuming an '*effective persona*' which is '*mostly related to self-regulation of emotions*' (*ibid*), which they suggest supports the worker to function effectively within a range of challenging situations. The sense is that such distance is essential to the social work relationship, limiting the worker's exposure to emotional distress and the hazards of compassion fatigue. For example, one of the participants in Eriksson and Englander's study (2017) emphasises the limitations of empathy in this context:

'You shall feel, you shall understand, you shall know but you shall not take theirs and make it into yours...' (P2 cited in Eriksson & Englander, 2017:615).

A participant in Grootegoed and Smith's study describes this as '*a sort of professional detachment*' (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018:1935) while participants in Cook's study express the belief that such distance promotes workers safety: '*that might be part of why I practice in the way that I do. It's a safe thing*'. (FGSW4 cited in Cook, 2020:23).

There is a perception that too close an identification with the service-users' emotions could limit the effectiveness of the helping relationship and reduce

professionalism. One of Ruch's (2014) participants reflects on the range of competing feelings that need to be managed within practice:

'I can't really show you that I'm upset, that I'm angry at your Mum or that you know when you break down actually, I'm trying to hold back the tears' (participant cited in Ruch, 2014: 2157).

Ruch and colleagues (2014; 2019, 2020) suggest that such distancing may function to enable workers to avoid the painful impact of children's distress. For example:

'we don't have to think about it and in a way, we're probably protecting ourselves as the social worker because actually having to go back and tell those children that they're not going to have contact [with parents] is quite painful for us' (participant, cited Ruch, 2014:2156).

Leeson (2010:490) from her study of practice with looked after children, comes to a similar conclusion, suggesting that workers '*retreat to an emotional place of safety*' that reduces their availability and understanding of the child's experience.

This theme is picked up in subsequent studies in which Ruch and colleagues propose that workers engage in avoidant strategies including the use of '*hedging*' (Ruch *et al* ,2020:433) terminology that understate the emotional significance of events or decision making, opting for verbal forms of interacting and questioning which might limit the child's understanding (Ruch *et al*, 2020:434) Pinkney (2011:42) identifies a similar theme of '*talking in code*' which she argues enables workers to distance themselves from the emotional distress of their intervention with children and to protect themselves from the power of the social work role within families lives. It seems that there is a balance needed in managing a professional distance while remaining open to authentic emotional connection

with children and families, to prevent avoidant strategies dominating social workers' practice.

Empathy affects wellbeing

The risk of emotional burnout as a consequence of empathy was highlighted by several studies (Lavee & Strier, 2018; Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2020; Leeson, 2010) as a rationale for maintaining professional distance. Rose and Palattiyil (2019) identify two experienced workers, who expressed a view that their boundaries had resulted in '*an unprofessional level of detachment*' (Rose & Palattiyil, 2019:32) while Lavee and Strier (2018:508) identify a related concept of '*numbness*' in some workers, due to prolonged exposure to complex emotional situations involving poverty in families.

However, while a level of emotional distancing seems necessary for the role, some studies also identified the potentially positive impact for workers of acknowledging their emotional responses. For example, within Cook's study of home visits, one worker clearly identifies how her sadness for a child acted as a strong motivator for action:

'I felt sad ... It's a highly emotive situation ... I had a great deal of sympathy for them, wanting to help (SW3 cited in Cook, 2020:23).

Likewise, Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015) cite one of their participants who accepts that emotions will be an everyday aspect of the work:

'I do not take the professional line either of not being able to relate to their grief, but I have never actually shed a tear' (Social worker 15, Cited Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015:696).

Albaek, Binder and Milde, in the context of workers supporting children who disclose sexual abuse, stress the importance of professionals remaining open to the emotional distress of the children:

'We must be able to feel the pain too, to feel some of what these children endure. [. . .] We must cope, but we must convey to the child that we're affected so that we don't cope with it so well that nothing affects us anymore' (participant, cited in Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2019:1216).

Some of the parent studies (Thrana & Fauske, 2014; Palmer, Maiter & Manji, 2006) emphasise the importance of the worker recognising and acknowledging the emotions of the parents and of offering them genuine understanding through use of self. Reimer (2013) also identifies workers' abilities to share aspects of themselves as central to building trusting relationships with parents and children:

'the parents in this study were clear that an integral aspect of trust development involved workers themselves providing some level of personal disclosure' (Reimer, 2013:466).

Arguably, practitioners need to strike a balance between authenticity in their responses to children and families while maintaining a sufficiently professional approach to enable them to carry out their statutory responsibilities.

Theme 3: Challenges for empathic practice – authority, divided loyalty, austerity

Social workers experienced competing demands that potentially challenged their capacity for empathy within their statutory role with children and families. Three distinct aspects were identified within the review:

Combining empathy with authority

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the research suggested that many workers struggled to integrate empathy within their understanding of statutory social work practice. Two papers use mixed methods studies to evaluate the use of empathy by social workers within their practice (Forrester et al, 2008; Lynch, Newlands & Forrester 2019). Forrester et al.'s (2008) small scale study with 24 participants, used simulated role-play scenarios, scoring workers' performance using a validated empathy rating scale (Nerdrum & Lindquist, 1995). They found that workers generally rated low for empathy skills, scoring more highly for articulating concerns and clarifying safeguarding processes. However, where empathy was present, the authors identified it as key in reducing service user resistance and supporting disclosure by the interviewee:

'Our findings suggest that empathic social workers may manage complex and potentially fraught social work interviews better than non-empathic workers' (Forrester et al, 2008:48).

Lynch, Newlands, and Forrester (2019) undertook a similar mixed-methods study with a larger sample of 73 social workers, observing interviews with families and analysing them for empathic responding. From the quantitative data, the study found that almost 80% of workers were again rated low (1-2) in demonstrating empathic skills, with only 5% of practitioners rating as high (4-5) (Lynch, Newlands & Forrester, 2019:141). Within the qualitative data, the researchers identified behaviours associated with low empathic responses – these included workers '*bombarding*' families with questions (ibid:143) rather than enabling them to share their views, and '*dominating*' the conversation with their agenda and assessment processes (ibid:143), presenting a monologue rather than engaging in mutual

discussion. The consistency of these findings from two studies across an eleven-year period, supports their credibility, suggesting that social workers are struggling to integrate empathy within their statutory role with families.

This suggestion is reinforced by data from several parent studies – for example, participants of Maiter, Palmer and Manji’s study (2006:179) of parents involved with child protection processes, described some workers as being judgemental (46%), cold and uncaring (44%) and not listening to their concerns (38%). They cite one participant:

“Every emotion is getting torn apart and I’m going crazy and she’s asking for my address. So – “unfeeling” is what I felt.’ (Melinda cited in Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006:179).

Other parent studies (Reimer, 2013; Palmer, Maiter & Mani, 2006; Thrana & Fauske, 2014) also acknowledged this tension, with Thrana and Fauske (2014:229) describing a potential ‘*duality*’ in the role as to whether the worker would be regarded as ‘*friend or foe*’. This tension appears to constrain workers’ use of empathy within their practice.

Several papers (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018; Ruch, 2014; Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015) discuss the dilemma surrounding the use of authority. Within a large action-research study involving 110 observations of social workers’ practice, Wilkins and Whittaker (2018:2013) identified that many workers expressed a preference for ‘*being directive and emotionally distant*’ from families, fearful that showing interest in the parent’s agenda or emotions might undermine the clarity of their investigative role. In this context, workers perceived empathy as ‘*disingenuous*’ or ‘*collusive*’ (ibid). Wilkins and Whittaker (2018) conclude that:

'The demonstration of empathy was a particular difficulty for many workers, some of whom rightly identified that, by being empathic, parents were likely to share more information with them' (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018:2013).

Thus, while empathy was seen to be effective in building relationships, the workers did not feel it was appropriate to use within statutory intervention. Winter et al (2019) suggest that this emphasis on the authoritative approach leads to a focus on task-completion and bureaucratic process - a '*checklist*' approach (Winter et al, 2019:7), defending the workers from the emotional complexity of social work. Ferguson and colleagues (2021:6) highlight that maintaining empathy for parents is '*hugely challenging,*' requiring practitioners to understand their own defence mechanisms and how they may respond emotionally under pressure. Ruch (2014) argues that workers need to be able to recognise and accept the role of their own emotions within statutory social work intervention. She proposes the concept of '*confrontational empathy*' defined as:

'the need for social workers to be attentive to the emotionally distressing nature of the family situations they encounter, whilst ensuring their professional purpose—to focus on the well-being of the child—and the authority that is imbued within it, are not compromised' (Ruch, 2014:2159).

This is a complex and challenging task. Ruch (2014) suggests that workers need to acknowledge their feelings of empathy and emotion for families, regarding this as evidence of self-awareness and professional integrity rather than potential weakness or lack of professionalism, but also balancing this empathic emotion with their professional task.

Divided loyalties?

A related sub-theme highlighted the dilemma for workers balancing potentially competing needs of children with those of parents, leading to conflicting emotions for the worker. Wilkins and Whittaker describe it as a '*trade-off*' commenting:

'the more you sought to work collaboratively with parents, the less focused you would be on the child and vice versa' (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018:2010).

Cook (2020) in her exploration of initial home visits, identifies workers' strongly ambivalent feelings about parents, anticipating both antagonism, hostility, and anger about potential harm to children which can create powerful tension within the initial interview. She describes how one worker felt the need to '*humanise*' (Cook,2020:21) themselves to parents, by offering reassurance and acknowledging their distress, while simultaneously being concerned for the well-being of the children present during the visit. Ferguson et al (2021), in the context of hostile and resistant relationships between parents and workers, describe a potential outcome as workers engaging in psychological '*splitting*' (Ferguson et al, 2021:27), unable to see anything positive in the parents' care of their children and potentially idealising aspects of the child's vulnerability commenting that:

'In working with on-going hostility...the danger is that they unconsciously return the hate service users have projected into them and become punitive but are not aware of it' (Ferguson et al, 2021:23).

This theme of close identification by the worker with the child raises significant challenges for social workers' empathic practice with the family. Albaek, Binder and Milde, within their study of professionals working with disclosure of sexual abuse, identified a similar experience for staff:

'Listening to accounts of how trusted adults caused the children's suffering induced strong emotions of fear, disgust, sadness, distress, guilt, shame and anger, both during the interview and afterward' (Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2014:1215).

The dilemma for these workers arises from their role as they seek to question children about their parents and in so doing, recognise the potential harm committed by some parents (Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2014:1216). Forsberg and Vagli (2006) within their study of emotions within child protection practice identify similar feelings within the worker, leading to *'anger and indignation'* towards the mother and concern for the child:

'There are so many kinds of feelings connected with this situation, worry about the kids, but it sort of feels that their situation is forgotten in all this mess...' (Participant A cited in Forsberg & Vagli, 2006:18).

Cook (2020) suggests that workers' emotions often influence their practice in such situations:

'... What is that child feeling? And as soon as you start putting yourself in that child's shoes you think I do not care, I'll knock on that door no matter what' (FGSW4 cited in Cook, 2020:24).

Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015:698) use the metaphor of *'getting under your skin'* to describe how workers can become emotionally involved with the experience of the child and suggest that this can start to shape their practice and planning for the child. While such close emotional connection with the child may have some advantages for the child, there is also a danger that workers' empathy can develop into emotional distress for the child and thus interfere with their professional relationship with parents. Forsberg and Vagli (2006) and Ferguson

et al (2021) both identify the significant role of empathic and emotionally intelligent supervision to enable practitioners to balance these competing demands.

In contrast, Ruch (2014) suggests that the needs of children can also be overlooked due to the worker's genuine desire to support parents and to facilitate successful resolution of concerns within the family, citing one participant:

'You want to give these parents chance after chance after chance after chance, and now these poor kids are in a situation where they can't be adopted' (Ruch, 2014:2154).

Balancing the competing demands of family members is complex work.

The impact of austerity - deserving or undeserving?

Several papers (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018; Grootegoed & Smith, 2019; Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020; Lavee & Strier, 2018) identify a further conflict for workers, arguing that successive policies of financial austerity in the western world have affected the practice environment within which empathy occurs. On one hand, Lohvansuu and Emond (2020) suggest that workers in their comparative study of Scottish and Finnish workers, viewed austerity as a motivator for empathic practice, urging practitioners on to seek resources for hard-pressed families and engaging more in local social justice initiatives:

So, my response perhaps, as a result of austerity, is to be more responsive than inactive in so far as being conscious that people perhaps ... are put in a position, where they have little choice and [I] want to be someone who can help them to establish more choice' (Scottish Practitioner2 cited in Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020:581).

Both Grootegoed and Smith (2018) and Ortega-Galan, Ruiz-Fernandez and Ortiz-Amo (2020) support this view, suggesting that workers viewed the poverty experienced by service users as a motivating factor, enabling them to feel more

empathy within their practice. On the other hand, Lavee and Strier (2018) within the context of austerity policies in Israel, suggest that workers engage defence mechanisms such as '*emotional othering*' and '*splitting*' (Lavee & Strier, 2018:508) to protect themselves emotionally from the experience of poverty they observe within their daily practice. These authors propose the concept of '*ambiguous empathy*' (Lavee & Strier, 2018:508) by which service users are categorised either as deserving, due to personal qualities and / or identity characteristics and therefore worthy subjects of empathic understanding, or undeserving and subject to professional indignation and anger due to their perceived helplessness and dependency on welfare services. For example:

'on the one hand, I have empathy and compassion, particularly for those who work and who can't make it in the present situation in this country, with life's complications, or those who are handicapped in some way and who can't increase their incomes. On the other hand, I'm angry and frustrated at those who can make it, yet don't.' (respondent cited in Lavee & Strier, 2018:509).

Lavee and Strier contend that such ambiguous empathy reflects the dominant neo-liberal political ideology within many western industrial societies and poses a significant challenge to the ethics and values of traditional social work practice. They advocate for workers to engage in compassionate practice which acknowledges the material circumstances of service users and engages with political structures to challenge inequality, alongside individual casework.

Theme 4: Organisational aspects of empathy

A final theme concerns how the organisational context affects empathic practice in social work. There are two sub-themes: the first explores empathy as a form of

emotional labour; the second discusses how organisational practices within social welfare agencies affect the practice of empathy in social work.

Empathy as emotional labour

A significant theme was identified in reference to Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour, in which workers are understood to manage their emotional responses in face-to-face interactions with service users, to support the agency's goals and purpose. Several papers focus on emotional labour explicitly (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015; Messmer, 2020; Lavee & Strier, 2018; Winter et al, 2019; Engstrom, 2019, Leeson, 2010) suggesting a growing interest in this topic for social work practice. Winter et al (2019:12) highlight the potential impact of emotional dissonance for workers, where there is a mismatch between what the worker is presenting and what they are really feeling, which Hochschild describes as '*surface acting*' (Hochschild, 1983:33). They discuss an example where a worker presents their agency plans to the child, without acknowledging their own feelings about this:

'It keeps clear for the social worker the distinction between 'what the organisation expects of me' and 'what I really feel'. (cited in Winter et al, 2019:8).

For Winter and colleagues, surface acting can thus also have protective functions for the worker in allowing them to complete tasks without engaging emotionally. Glumbikova and Mikulec use the term '*self-tuning*' to describe a similar process:

'The worker internally realises which emotions the client provokes in him but externally expresses only emotions which the worker considers 'desirable' (Glumbikova & Mikulec, 2021:266).

Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015:697) discuss the informal '*feeling rules*' of Danish children's welfare organisations. They identify workers' attempt to offer service users empathic understanding, but in a way that constrained the emotional intensity of the interaction:

'neither the professionals nor the service user finds it appropriate, or to be expected, that a social worker cries with them. This is precisely because she must, on the one hand, acknowledge and relate empathetically to the service user's emotions, but on the other hand not to the degree that she actually sits and weeps' (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015:697).

Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, suggest both workers and service users share in this expectation of professional detachment. Leeson (2010:484) also identified a tension for workers between '*the displayed emotion, the deeply felt emotion and the feeling rules of the organization*'.

Cook (2020), identifies a range of potential emotions arising from initial meetings, including fear of the unknown and for one's safety, anxiety for the child within the family, as well as managing one's own often intense emotional reactions. She suggests that workers will often suppress their authentic emotions within such contexts, to focus on their child protection task (Cook, 2020:23). Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015:697) identify this strategy of '*deferring emotions*' as a core aspect of emotional labour by social workers, setting their emotions aside to address after the family interview. For example:

'the social worker could reflect on the emotions that the situation had induced. I had a lump in my throat, and I found it really, really difficult. I actually think I cried, at home, with my husband. I was very touched by this case. (Social worker 19 cited Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015:697)

Ferguson et al (2021:29) use the term '*suspended self-preservation*' in this context, suggesting that workers frequently need to set aside their strong emotional reactions within the context of encountering hostility from service users to cope with the intensity of the interview. However, as they point out:

"it only really works as a healthy long-term strategy if the attention to the emotional impact of the work that is being postponed is provided as soon as possible" (Ferguson et al, 2021:30).

Pinkney (2011) and Ruch (2014) argue that these issues are particularly challenging for workers responding to the emotional distress of children:

'What became evident during this research was the range, complexity and depth of anxieties experienced by welfare professionals in listening to children and hearing what they have to say' (Pinkney, 2011:40).

However, Messmer (2019), using a case study approach to analyse two child protection conferences in some depth, proposes that social workers may use their emotional awareness '*in a somewhat more instrumental and other-related way*' (Messmer, 2019:415) intentionally using positive affect to '*support the client's compliance with institutional needs*' (Messmer, 2019:415). Messmer suggests that empathic practice therefore becomes a deliberately employed technique, used strategically to serve the goals of the organisation, and thus conforming to definitions of emotional labour. In so doing there is a danger that empathy becomes less authentic, potentially reducing the effectiveness of empathic responses in building trust and reducing resistance.

In contrast, Winter et al (2019) argue that in some situations workers may also engage in '*deep acting*' (Hochschild, 1983:38) gradually adjusting their

emotional responses until they are more in tune with the requirements of their role. They discuss an example of a social worker who clearly acknowledges their genuine affection for a child in their care and their commitment to their wellbeing:

'The social worker is not having to feign or work on feeling connected and being sincere—she has become them' (Winter et al, 2019:10).

Within this context, empathy might sit more comfortably alongside such deep acting, due to the use of authentic emotional responses within such responses.

Organisational context of empathy

The literature also identifies some significant ways in which organisational culture might impact empathic practice. Several papers (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020. Ruch, 2014, Ferguson et al, 2021) discuss a problematic organisational culture, describing a '*stress competition*' within agencies (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020:30) in which workers are drawn into negative comparisons of their colleagues' workloads in order to highlight their own emotional needs. Both Rose and Palattiyil (2020:33) and Ruch (2014:2157) suggest that within such a culture, expressions of emotional concern or distress may be viewed as incompetence or weakness. Ferguson et al (2021) highlight that the organisational culture within their study failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of worker's emotional responses amidst the demands of high caseloads, deadlines, and targets:

*'Social work practitioners and managers walk a very delicate line between acknowledging how emotionally demanding and sometimes deeply distressing the work is and not showing that distress and the effects it has on them. They protect one another from the painful realities of the work even whilst deeply immersed in enduring it – **feeling it yet not showing it*** (Ferguson et al 2021:33 *my emphasis*).

Such organisational culture can be regarded as highly problematic for the practice of empathy, as it restricts the willingness of staff to acknowledge and share their emotional concerns or distress for fear of being regarded as unprofessional. Engstrom (2019) highlights a sense of disconnection for her participants from the senior management of the organisation:

'There was also a perception that upper management did not understand the work the social workers were performing, they were removed from it' (Engstrom, 2019:45).

Several authors (Ferguson et al, 2021; Ruch et al, 2020, Winter et al, 2019, Pinkney, 2011) identify the impact of an increasingly managerialist culture within social welfare organisations, leading to more procedural, less personalised forms of intervention. Engstrom (2019:16) also notes that a small number of her participants described a culture of *'bullying'* within the organisation and occasionally by managers themselves. Leeson (2010:487), makes a similar point, suggesting that workers were mistrustful of their agencies and managers, questioning their commitment to social work practice and describing a *'techno-bureaucratic ideology'* within agencies. One participant comments:

'Corporate decision-making is money-led ... The authority are not interested in the children. They just want the paperwork done and the budgets balanced' (Interviewees A & B cited in Leeson, 2010:487).

In comparison to these apparent inadequacies within the formal support mechanisms within the organisations, several papers (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020; Glumbikova & Mikulec, 2021; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015; Engstrom, 2019) highlight the vital role of peer relationships in supporting workers' emotional needs.

Glumbikova and Mikulec (2021) identify this as a key informal strategy for emotional self- management by workers:

'if someone comes from the field and needs support, they get it . . . that's an unwritten rule here that we listen to each other and discuss . . . nothing formal, it just works like that' (KP28 cited in Glumbikova & Mikulec, 2021: 266).

The informal aspect of this support is highlighted by several authors. Cook (2020:24) describes how following initial home visits workers might seek emotional release by talking through any concerns informally with colleagues, while Rose and Palattiyil (2020) highlight the role of informal peer support in enhancing worker resilience and sustaining them within practice. Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015) note that emotions are processed through both informal discussion with peers and on occasions through formal group supervision and that both serve to support workers through difficult experienced with families, while Engstrom (2019) highlights the role of the supervisor in setting the tone for the team through use of techniques such as sharing examples of work and being open in their approach and recognition. Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015) emphasise the importance of collegial support in particular:

'We have spent a lot of energy on this, and we have been very aware of how important it is to have confidence in each other. It is so important in this particular line of work, which can be so tough to cope with' (Social worker 2 cited in Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015:699).

Engstrom (2019) concluded that informal peer relationships were the single '*most significant component*' (Engstrom, 2019:47) in sustaining workers within practice, providing everything from humour, banter and comic relief to camaraderie and mentoring (Engstrom, 2019:46). As a result, Engstrom concludes that peer

interaction and support is key to enabling workers to develop skills in emotion management, learning from one another how to self-regulate and how to use their emotions effectively within practice:

‘Colleagues can help each other gain insight into individual patterns of emotion management and ways of interacting in practice as they spend time together and are able to see how each other perform under stress. (Engstrom, 2019:49).

Discussion

My thematic synthesis of the literature identifies key dilemmas for empathic social work practice with children and families. I focus on several key themes within this discussion.

The theme of empathy as ‘embodied understanding’ connects with my earlier discussion of Stein’s (1989) model of empathic experience, in which individuals respond first to their direct sensory perception of the other person, before using their cognitive skills to make meaning of their perceptions. From a phenomenological perspective, Eriksson and Englander (2017:614) emphasise this aspect of ‘direct perception’, within social work, but it is also discussed by several other authors (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015; Tempel, 2007; Ahern et al, 2017) from a range of perspectives.

The discussion of the active, embodied nature of social work practice (Cook, 2020; Tempel, 2007) and the use of touch by some practitioners with children in particular (Lynch & Garrett, 2010), highlights the importance for social workers to be aware of their bodies and their movement during empathic practice. I made connections with previous research by Ferguson (2008, 2009, 2010) who

uses the sociological concept of '*reverberation*' (Ferguson, 2008: 571) to describe the emotional sensation of moving through environments in which safeguarding concerns occur, identifying the potentially visceral impact on social workers who are assessing neglect and abuse. Ferguson (2010:1110) argues that strong unconscious emotions, such as disgust and fear may often occur within embodied safeguarding practice, influencing workers' responses to children and parents. Both Cook (2020) and Tempel (2007) echo this idea within the synthesis.

This also links with the identification of avoidant strategies used by professionals such as Pinkney's '*talking in code*' (2011:42) or Ruch's '*hedging*' language (Ruch *et al* ,2020:433, which both serve to help social workers distance themselves from unconscious emotions such as anxiety or disgust, but which undermine their empathic ability.

My understanding of these dynamics is also informed by recent theoretical work on empathy by van Rhyn, Barwick and Donnelly (2021) who draw on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2013) to emphasise the embodied nature of empathic experience. Van Rhyn describes the body as '*the essential ontological lens*' (van Ryn, Barwick & Donnelly, 2021: 153), suggesting that physiological responses can provide workers with a more immediate form of empathy from which to develop their empathic responding. Gibbons (2011) and Clark and Butler (2020) also suggest that physiological cues can support the experience of inter-subjective sharing between worker and service user, strengthening their shared humanity and enhancing empathic awareness. It is apparent that workers will be experiencing a range of emotions within a dynamic, fluid environment, so paying attention to their physiological cues becomes more significant in such contexts, to

support workers to maintain an empathic stance and enhance their awareness of their own defensive emotions.

A significant theme in the review was the finding from two linked studies (Forrester et al, 2008; Lynch, Newlands, and Forrester, 2019) that while empathy was regarded as supporting effectiveness of social work practice, most social workers scored low for empathy skills within their practice (Lynch, Newlands & Forrester, 2019:141). Potential explanations for this within my analysis focus on the challenges that workers experience when combining empathic practice with statutory responsibilities. There was a degree of consensus within the literature that social workers perceived the use of empathy to be '*disingenuous*' (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018:2013), or inappropriate within the context of statutory practice, preferring to focus on directive interventions and staying task focused (Winter, 2019).

The synthesis also suggested other reasons for the avoidance of empathy within practice, including workers' conflicting allegiances to particular children or parents, (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2019; Ferguson et al, 2021; Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2014) or workers' de-sensitisation to service user's experiences of poverty, trauma, or neglect (Grootegoed & Smith, 2019; Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020; Lavee & Strier, 2018) which potentially further complicate empathic responses. I note that several papers (Leeson, 2010, Pinkney, 2011, Ruch, 2014) identify a tendency for some workers to protect themselves from the emotional distress of children, either avoiding talking with them, or keeping to task-oriented interactions which minimise discussion of the child's feelings.

I also made connection with the strategies used by workers to present a professional social work '*persona*' (Glumbikova & Mikulec, 2021:266), limiting the level of emotionality within their practice. Several studies identified workers' strategies of deliberately distancing themselves from the children and families' emotions - '*switching off*' (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020:32) to support their own wellbeing or to demonstrate professionalism (Eriksson & Englander, 2017. Ruch, 2014). Several papers (Cook, 2020; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015; Ferguson et al, 2021) describe workers using strategies to delay the emotional impact of practice, putting feelings on hold until the situation is resolved, or they are away from the family.

Arguably, this creates tension for practitioners between an emphasis on their direct perception of physiological responses as a key to empathic practice on the one hand (Eriksson & Englander, 2017), and the need to suppress or defer emotions in order to present professionally on the other (Cook, 2020, Ferguson et al 2021), potentially creating uncertainty and anxiety about the role of empathy within practice. As Ferguson et al (2021) highlight, such a strategy also implies that there are mechanisms in place to help workers to process such emotions after the events. However, the literature also suggests that social work organisations struggle to provide emotionally open and permissive environments where workers are able to acknowledge their felt emotion (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020. Ruch, 2014, Ferguson et al, 2021), captured in Ferguson's evocative description of organisations '*feeling it yet not showing it*' (Ferguson et al 2021:33).

This creates further dilemmas for practitioners who are unable to safely reflect on and share their emotional distress, increasing the likelihood of compassion fatigue or burnout (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2014; McFadden, 2015).

I identify some confusion among practitioners, as to what constitutes professional practice regarding empathy, with most workers unsure of the legitimacy of sharing their authentic emotion or concerned with protecting themselves from the possible impact. In addition, social work organisations are often failing to anticipate the emotional impact of social work practice on their workers or to have mechanisms in place to support their emotional wellbeing.

One further significant finding was the debate within the literature on empathy as a form of emotional labour within social work (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015; Messmer, 2020; Lavee & Strier, 2018; Winter et al, 2019; Engstrom, 2019, Leeson, 2010). This discussion seems to support the earlier discussion of professional distance, particularly in the emphasis within the literature on display rules within social work organisations, which Winter (2019:12) suggests can lead to surface acting for some workers. Notably, Messmer (2019:415) extends this further, suggesting that some workers may use empathy in an intentionally strategic way to support service users' compliance, but without any authentic sharing of emotion. A potential consequence of such an approach was identified by Rose and Palattiyil's (2019:32) study in which workers described feeling a concerning level of detachment from the emotions of their service users, while Lavee and Strier (2018:508) used the term '*numbness*' to suggest a similar level of disconnection, motivated by self-protection within the worker. I would argue that such responses are highly problematic for authentic empathic practice and serve to further limit the emotional availability of the worker. It is a concern that organisational culture within social work organisations is often failing to provide appropriate supervision to enable workers to process their work-related emotions in order to reduce this feeling of detachment.

While I find Hochschild's concept of emotional labour (1983) helpful in drawing attention to the emotional nature of social work, it also has some limitations. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993:89) argue that Hochschild's categories of deep and surface acting overlook the possibility that workers might have authentic, emotional responses of their own, while Theodosius (2006), draws attention to the role of unconscious emotional processes in such exchanges, suggesting that the complex emotional dynamics between individuals cannot be reduced to observable behaviours for commercial gain. Bolton and Boyd (2003) differentiate between workers who are motivated primarily by financial reward and those who work within professional codes of ethics or to personal ideologies that support the use of authentic emotions within their practice.

I would contend that when social workers are responding authentically to the emotions of children and families, they are less likely to be engaging in either 'surface' or 'deep acting' but rather drawing on their ethical beliefs and values about the role and function of social work practice. Hochschild's original conceptualisation of emotional labour does not acknowledge the possibility of active commitment to authentic emotion within professional work contexts. McDonald (2009) suggests that many social work practitioners have a strong ideological motivation for their practice and regard empathy as a core aspect of their work. Several authors (Lopez, 2006; Ericson & Stacey, 2012; Brotheridge & Lee, 2011; Grandey & Brotheridge, 2002) have also explored the relationship between emotional labour, professional identity, and emotional regulation skills, suggesting that due to their training, professionals are likely to be more skilled in emotion regulation which supports their more intentional use of empathic skills, rather than surface acting.

Grandey and colleagues (2017, 2023) have significantly revised traditional models of emotional labour on this basis, recognising the interaction between organisational expectations and individual worker characteristics such as professional identity and beliefs, personality, and emotional regulatory ability. This implies that social workers may be less subject to the risks associated with surface acting. However, both Leeson (2010) and Winter et al (2019) suggest that the increasingly managerialist and de-personalised culture of social work organisations, reflecting successive neo liberal government policies, have led to reduced professional autonomy and potentially increased the risk of empathy being experienced as emotional labour. There are potentially significant dilemmas then for practitioners committed to using empathy within their practice.

Overall, my analysis suggests that workers experience a range of obstacles which undermine their empathic ability in practice with children and families. While I recognise the importance of acknowledging the authority of the social work role, I also argue that Ruch's (2014:2159) proposal of '*confrontational empathy*' potentially underestimates the role of authentic emotion within the exchange between workers and children or parents. Within the synthesis, research from both parents' (Reimer, 2013; Palmer, Maiter & Mani, 2006; Thrana & Fauske, 2014) and children's (Stabler, Wilkins & Carro, 2020) perspectives highlight the effectiveness of workers who show emotional openness and authenticity in their responses to service users as a key aspect of building a trusting relationship. There is a clear tension for practitioners – while the research supports the effectiveness of using empathy within social work practice (Forrester et al, 2008; Ortega-Galan, Ruiz-Fernandez & Ortiz-Amo, 2020; Thrana & Fauske, 2014), it is also apparent that most workers avoid doing so (Lynch, Newland & Forrester,

2019). Arguably, workers who can sustain an authentic emotionality within their practice, either through deep acting or through genuine emotional responding, may be in a better position to manage the complexity of the empathic task within their practice.

Chapter Summary.

This second part of the chapter has presented a thematic synthesis of contemporary research regarding the use of empathy in social work practice with children and families, making connections with the themes from my previous conceptual review of empathy. In completing the synthesis, I have aimed to address my first research objective (Page 16) by identifying how current research literature portrays the experience of empathy within social work practice with children and families.

I have also highlighted additional issues of relevance for my research. Firstly, the synthesis emphasises the embodied aspects of empathy as an experience, and this offers an additional lens with which to explore my participants' experiences within the analysis of my findings. Similarly, I identified particular tensions and challenges for social workers when integrating empathy within their statutory social work roles and I anticipate that this theme will be relevant when considering my own findings. The synthesis also extended the discussion of empathy to consider the relevance of organisational aspects for empathic social work practice, including the accumulative impact of empathy for compassion fatigue and for the experience of emotional labour. Again, these themes will serve to inform my analysis of finding in chapters 6 – 8. In the next chapter, I

will outline my positionality as a researcher and provide a reflexive account of my involvement in developing this research.

Chapter 3: Researcher positionality

Chapter overview

Within this chapter, I outline my positionality as a researcher in relation to my ontological and epistemological positions. I also provide a reflexive account of my own identity and situatedness within the lifeworld, making links with relevant literature to support my ongoing reflexivity.

Ontological and Epistemological considerations

In presenting my thesis, I recognise the expectation (Flick, 2018,) that I articulate my own theoretical 'worldview' (Yin, 2016:15). Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3) describe successive 'moments' in the development of research paradigms which have shaped the discourse around qualitative research, while Pernecky (2016) notes the potential for confusion and lack of conceptual clarity amid the growing number of alternative theoretical positions. Crotty (1998) identifies the centrality of epistemological and ontological frameworks in guiding the researcher's choice of methodology and methods. I am mindful that by choosing an ontological position, I am also declaring a stance in relation to the nature of objective reality (Pernecky,2016:26), and the role of the mind in mediating experience.

My research takes a 'constructivist' theoretical position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Lincoln Lynham & Guba, 2011) that illuminates both ontological and epistemological concerns. Hruby (2001:48) suggests that constructivist theory operates at both levels, highlighting how cognitive structures interact with an individual's environment to shape their personal experience of reality, while also identifying social processes and interactions that create shared meaning and knowledge at a societal level. While recognising some debate around definitions

(Schwandt, 2003, Hruby, 2001, Young & Collins, 2004), I regard 'constructivism' and 'interpretivism' as sharing core ontological claims about the nature of experience (Tracy, 2019, Flick, 2018, Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011) and will use the term constructivism to represent this position.

At an ontological level, the research reflects my belief in the inter-subjective, shared nature of experience, in which individuals develop their understanding of being, through social, cultural and linguistic practices (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011:102). Tracy (2019:51) supports the role of social interaction and relationships in shaping the individuals' experience of reality and social awareness. Both Schwandt (2003) and Tracy (2019) highlight the centrality of interpretation as a key aspect of a constructivist position, acknowledging the possibility of multiple perspectives and challenging the notion of universal experience in relation to social encounters and understanding. As a social worker and therapist, I am conscious that my professional training and therapeutic practice have strengthened my commitment to a constructivist ontology, encouraging my curiosity about individuals' diverse accounts of experience and personal perspectives. While Heidegger (1953:34) regarded phenomenology as a distinct ontology in its own right, I understand phenomenological research to sit within a broadly constructivist paradigm and to share fundamental assumptions about the constructed nature of understanding and experience.

At the level of epistemology, (Carey, 2012; Yin, 2016) I consider knowledge creation to occur through a process of 'social construction' (Teater, 2010, Pernecky, 2016), extending the constructivist emphasis beyond the individual mind, to consider how knowledge comes into existence through language use and social practices that are not neutral, but reflect existing power relationships within

society (Tracy, 2019, Schwandt, 2003). Schwandt (2003:240) emphasises the dynamic and evolving nature of this process, while Pernecky (2016:141) highlights the reciprocal character of social constructionism, by which individuals both acquire their social understanding from their interaction with communities and cultures, whilst also shaping these through language and shared practices. While social constructionism is not anti-realist (Pernecky, 2016:159, Schwandt, 2003:241) it does privilege the socially constructed nature of experience, over an objective sense of physical reality, proposing that knowledge is always mediated through the mind. As a theoretical lens, social constructionism also supports exploration of the historical and cultural context in which knowledge practices develop, promoting an interpretative, critical lens (Teater 2010; Schwandt, 2003). Young and Collins (2004:377) argue that social constructionist epistemology will locate knowledge claims within the dominant historical and cultural discourse in which they arise, encouraging researchers to take a reflexive and critical stance in relation to their own epistemological claims. My personal experience of identity is relevant, acknowledging how aspects of my identity - my gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Fook, 2016; Thompson,2020) – will reflect discourses of privilege and power within my social setting, shaping both my everyday experience and my research proposal. I explore these aspects further in the reflexive discussion below. My epistemological position also acknowledges the role of identity, language, social interaction, and organisational culture as key to understanding participants' experiences of empathy within social work practice and leads to an interest in workers' subjective and potentially unique experiences (Teater, 2010, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022).

Tracey (2019) argues that such a lens will generate multiple accounts of experiences, combining both rich detailed descriptions to capture the unique perspectives of a specific group, with an empathic but questioning engagement that seeks to explore what assumptions and beliefs have shaped their understanding (Tracey 2019;52). In adopting this epistemological position, I acknowledge my own role in the co-construction (Carey, 2012, Patton, 2016) of knowledge, requiring a level of reflexivity by me around my own explicit beliefs as a researcher. Van Manen reminds us that such intersubjective exploration will always be incomplete, as participants and researcher strive to construct an understanding of experience together (2015:10).

Researcher reflexivity

Clancy (2013) advises that phenomenological researchers provide a reflexive statement, outlining their positionality in relation to the research, while Chammas (2020:538) notes that positionality refers to both the researcher's world view and identity, but also their theoretical stance towards the phenomena of study. Finlay (2002) differentiates models of reflexivity in which the researcher is '*introspective*' (ibid:215) reflecting on their own character and beliefs or focused on their emotional responses to the research participants, with more '*emancipatory*' forms of reflexivity (ibid, 215) which seek to address power inequalities within the research relationship or to promote ideological perspectives. D'Cruz and colleagues (2007:75) also propose distinct models of reflexivity, focusing on self-examination in relation to individual aspects of identity and potential sources of inter-personal power, as well as self-awareness about one's emotional responses to the circumstances in which they are found. Within my reflexive discussion, I have reflected predominantly on how my own personal experiences and influences

have shaped the development of my understanding and interpretations relating to empathic practice, while also seeking to acknowledge some structural and social influences that shape my world view.

Berndtsson et al (2007:259) emphasise the importance of reflecting on the experience of one's own lifeworld and of locating one's historical and geographical context clearly. In Heideggerian terms, this involves a recognition of my own 'thrownness' (Heidegger, 1962:131) and how this shapes my choices, exercising 'situated freedom' in relation to my research (Lopez & Willis, 2004:728), by acknowledging the limitations of my context. Finlay (2014:124) emphasises that the aim of reflexivity is not neutralising one's own perspectives, but rather acknowledging the horizons of our own experience openly and recognising how they might interact with the horizons of participants within the research.

Reflection

Several aspects have significance for shaping my world view. My sense of self as an identical twin, a particular form of 'being with' (Heidegger, 1953) sharing my early experiences of reciprocity and shared identity with my twin brother, has been a significant aspect of my psychological development. I experienced a close identification with my brother, and we shared what I now understand as a strong inter-subjective understanding of one another's emotions and experiences in our early development together. Additionally, I grew up within the context of a devoutly religious Protestant family, living in Belfast during the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, which I now recognise provided a level of protection and privilege for me as a child. During my childhood I was immersed in a strongly religious environment which significantly shaped my ethical values and

beliefs. I also recognise my good fortune in growing up in a loving, emotionally expressive family with an ethos of supporting others and serving the community. While I have gradually moved away from my parents' religious beliefs, I can identify how their values formed a foundation for all of us as a sibling group in terms of our adult identities – all of whom went on to work in social welfare roles, secular or religious. I also experienced conflict due to my developing identity as a gay man within this context and worked to integrate a positive sense of self against the backdrop of my family's religious beliefs. I believe the origin of my interest in empathy can be found within these foundational experiences, working to accept my own 'thrownness' while also beginning to challenge some of the perspectives and values learned from my parents.

My early socialisation and development also informed my subsequent university and career choices, opting to study sociology at university and working with homeless young people for two years, before training as a social worker in the mid-1980s. During this period, I learned to critically question many of my early values and beliefs and developed a new understanding of the inequality and disadvantage within society, becoming aware of aspects of privilege within my own identity in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion and beginning to understand structural sources of injustice within a society, which served to reinforce my commitment to a social work role. I began my career as a child and family's social worker in 1989 and have remained in this field throughout my professional life. As I gained experience, I became aware of the power associated with the social work role and the importance of self-reflection and awareness of my own emotional responses within this potentially authoritative role. I came to understand the centrality of people's emotions in shaping their behaviour and relationships and

felt drawn to theories of practice that acknowledged the importance of working with emotions. I completed training in different therapeutic modalities – including person centred counselling and systemic family therapy, before finally undertaking Master’s level training, first in integrative psychotherapy and then in child centred play therapy.

During this training, I was inspired by the work of Axline (1989) and Rogers (1951) who identify a significant role for empathy within professional relationships with adults and children. I also gained an appreciation for the value of nonverbal and symbolic forms of communication, in supporting children to represent aspects of their experience and process emotions, and these ideas became an important foundation to my therapeutic work, as well as my love for the arts. Within my role as a Senior Social Work practitioner, I was able to specialise in therapeutic interventions with children in the care system, and to witness the benefits of empathic relationships for supporting children’s emotional and social development. During this time, I also grew in my commitment to supporting participation by children and ensuring children’s voices are heard at all levels of decision making in relation to social work practice.

In this context, I experience a convergence of my personal values, therapeutic practice and academic interests which have shaped the development of this research. I identify congruence between my research methods and my professional practice, integrating the use of symbolic, non-verbal, and spoken forms of communication, whilst privileging the individual perspectives of the participants, and focusing on the experience of the child. I also acknowledge my own commitment to and belief in the role of empathy in supporting effective helping relationships as being at the heart of this research.

Insider-researcher positionality

In terms of positionality within the research, Horrigan-Kelly, Millar and Dowling (2016:3) use Heidegger's ontological concept of '*being with*' (Heidegger, 1951:114) to argue that as professionals we are likely to surround ourselves with people who share our world view. McManus Holroyd (2007:4) highlights that professionals will inevitably absorb dominant professional narratives which shape their own assumptions and professional identities, requiring self-examination. Horrigan-Kelly and colleagues (2016) propose that given the inductive nature of phenomenology, practice-based research is likely to be from an 'insider' perspective. Clancy (2013) and Ross (2017) highlight the potential benefits that an insider-researcher can experience in terms of familiarity and being able to build rapport quickly with participants due to shared professional language, terminology, and values. Indeed, Chammas (2020:541) argues that within social work contexts, being a researcher-practitioner can promote acceptance and enhance openness and trust by participants. Clancy (2013:13) however warns that such familiarity can be '*double-edged*' causing inflexibility and narrowing of vision during data analysis, or over identification with the professional role, blurring one's responsibilities as a researcher. Ross (2017:327) also highlights potential power dynamics which can emerge when insider researchers may have considerable knowledge and practice expertise around the phenomenon of study. Smith (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009:66) advises researchers to be cautious about self-disclosure in this context, to ensure that the focus remains on the lifeworld experience of the participant. Throughout the interviews I needed to be aware of my own identity as an 'insider-researcher' with significant practice experience as a child and family social worker (Carey, 2013:158) which shaped my perceptions and played a part in my

responses to participants within interviews. At times, I became conscious of the dangers of slipping into an expert role and used the interview schedule to ensure that I maintained my attention on the participants' perspectives and experience. However, Lopez and Willis (2004) highlight that the interpretative phenomenological project is always a co-construction, fusing the horizons of participant and researcher together and reminding the researcher to ground their interpretation within the participant's data. Clancy (2013:14) proposes that the researcher needs to occupy a '*middle ground*,' acknowledging their shared identity with participants and conveying respect for their experience, whilst maintaining an '*analytic distance*' that supports a self-reflexive stance.

Reflection

Throughout the research, I needed to manage the ambiguity of my researcher identity. Having been a child and family social worker for 30 years and feeling familiar with my practice knowledge, I was also aware of my status as an academic who has been out of frontline practice for 14 years. I experienced a tension between my insider-outsider identities and how these affected my interaction with participants. During the initial stages of data collection, I experienced significant frustration as participants failed to keep interview appointments or arrived an hour late while I waited in office reception rooms – literally on the outside of practice. This reinforced my outsider status and made me aware of the relative powerlessness implied in my researcher identity. Following discussions with my supervisory team, I developed strategies for managing interview practicalities, making use of electronic calendar invites to send reminders and booking several interviews on the same day, so that journeys were not wasted if someone failed to attend.

During the interviews with newly qualified workers, I was particularly mindful of potential power dynamics, arising from their relative in-experience and I felt concern for these participants as they described challenging practice situations with limited sources of organisational support. I was conscious of wanting to encourage these participants at the start of their careers, whilst also needing to accept the realities of their experiences and perceptions. During these interviews, I needed to manage my responses to ensure that each participant's concerns were fully expressed. At the same time, I was mindful that each interview is a collaborative process and at times I allowed myself to offer my own perspective while consciously seeking to avoid falling into a supervisor role with these participants, I provide specific examples in Chapter 8.

Hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion

In reflecting on this research, I am conscious of how, as a social work researcher, I am embedded within a specific historical and political context that inevitably shapes my engagement with the world – in my case contemporary social work practice within the UK in the twenty first century. Social work in the UK has evolved over time, from an early history of liberal and charitable ideals (Bamford, 2015; Dole, 2022) to the impact of more recent neo liberal and new public management principles (Garrett, 2019, Healy, 2022; Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). I am conscious of how my own responses to these changes has been key in shaping the focus of my research.

When reflecting on my own positionality within the research, I found Payne's (2020:43) model of theoretical paradigms in social work to be helpful, presenting three philosophical perspectives which serve as reference points for

understanding practitioners' beliefs and values in relation to their practice. Payne distinguishes between:

1. liberal / neo liberal ideologies which emphasise social cohesion and problem solving to support individual functioning.
2. social democratic and humanist philosophies that promote strengths based, empowerment strategies for individuals.
3. collective or socialist ideologies that support group emancipation and social transformation.

I identify myself closely with the humanistic, empowerment approach to social work practice, which acknowledges the role of individual working relationships and self-determination by people using services, while also acknowledging my commitment to values of citizenship and social cohesion that sit at the heart of the social work role. I recognise that these two strands have been most influential in shaping my own professional identity and reflect the theoretical discourse that I privilege in my therapeutic and social work practice. In this context, while I hold strong personal political beliefs about social welfare and social policy, I am aware these are less influential on my personal model of practice.

Both Eatough and Smith (2006:463) and Willig (2001:84) describe IPA as a '*light constructionist*' method, acknowledging the socially constructed nature of experience but paying less attention to the critical aspects of analysis. Smith (2004:46) cites Ricoeur's (1970) conceptual distinction between styles of enquiry – a '*hermeneutic of empathy*', in which the researcher seeks to primarily capture the integrity of the participants' individual perspectives, (Smith, Flowers & Larkin,

2022:30), and a '*hermeneutics of suspicion*', in which the researcher integrates critical or emancipatory theory to shed light on participants' experiences (Charalambous, Papadopoulos & Beadsmoore, 2008:638). Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022:30) argue that IPA occupies a centre ground between these two positions, suggesting that IPA researchers begin from an empathic, interpretative stance, focused on the meaning presented by participants, then progressing to a '*hermeneutic of questioning*' (ibid:31) in which the researcher's direct analysis of the textual data supports the making of links with external bodies of knowledge which might illuminate their interpretation further. Both Smith (2022:30) and Pringle et al (2011;21) suggest that in this sense, IPA would stop short of hermeneutics of suspicion. I consider this to fit well with my own theoretical stance and have employed an empathic, questioning approach to data analysis, linking to relevant bodies of theory and research, primarily from a humanistic perspective, but including a critical lens when this is relevant.

However, I am mindful of Finlay's (2002) suggestion that reflexivity should also include reflection on how characteristics of my identity may have shaped my research activity. In discussing my identity, I recognise that each individual's identity is an intersection of various aspects of self (Thompson,2022:22) which interact uniquely to shape the nature of experience.

Reflection

Several aspects of my identity have relevance for my research. Growing up as a white British male and a Protestant within the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland afforded me aspects of privilege and access to power through my identification with the values and customs of a majority culture. Similarly. I

recognise that my gender, ethnicity, and religious practices have shaped my experience of the world, creating my world view and self-perception, enabling me to move confidently within the world of education, professional practice, as both a male social worker and therapist and eventually into academic life. In contrast, my sexual identity as a gay man, conflicting with the religious practices of my family, provided me with experience of being an outsider and I believe enhanced my own empathy and understanding of difference, supporting my interest in others' experience. My decisions to train as both a social worker and then as a play therapist interacted with my growing commitment to principles of equality and diversity and to developing anti oppressive practice within social work, including finding ways of supporting children to participate in decision making and to express themselves creatively through play and symbols. It is the intersection of these diverse aspects of my own identity that have shaped the character and distinctiveness of my research.

Emotional Reflexivity

D'Cruz, Gilligham and Melendez (2007:81) highlight the potential impact of emotion on the process of knowledge creation, suggesting that practitioners need to develop a reflexive awareness of how their emotions impact their practice and decision making. Todres (2007:10) refers to Heidegger's concept of 'mood' to emphasise how individual emotional responses are located within the context of pre-reflective, shared emotional understanding at a background level, shaping our perceptions and experiences – for example of the '*feeling rules*' (Hochschild, 1979) within practice, or organisational norms and expectations. Within my research practice, I therefore seek to maintain an awareness of how my own emotions have shaped my research practice, while attending to the range of emotions from

participants within the interviews. Doyle (2013:249) cites Bion's psychodynamic concept of '*containment*' in the infant-parent relationship, to explore the researcher's role in helping participants manage their emotional responses during interviews, proposing that at times, the researcher will need to engage in intersubjective '*moment-by-moment*' sharing of the affective states of participants in order to support their emotional regulation. In this context, I recognise my use of empathy within the research process itself, supporting Finlay's (2005:278) argument that researchers should address their own embodied, empathic responses within interviews as a key source of information and reflection. Spence (2017:839) extends the argument further, suggesting that the researchers' emotional responses can also serve to alert them to their own emotional preferences and biases, by paying attention to contributions with which they feel particular resonance or to which they react negatively. Within my research, these ideas inform my own reflexive process both during interviews and within my reflective diary following interviews, enabling me to consider my emotions and to explore my responses with my supervisory team to reflect together on potential influences (Clancy, 2013).

Reflection

In developing my research, I am aware that my experience of therapeutic practice with children has strengthened my interest in the role of emotion within development and how empathy supports the development of emotional regulation skills and emotional intelligence in children and young people. Previous postgraduate study has enabled me to consider the role of empathy as a vehicle for therapeutic change and to consider how empathy can be expressed within

creative, symbolic forms of communication. These ideas have been fundamental within the development of my research proposal.

I am conscious of experiencing a range of emotions throughout the period of my doctoral study. For example, within my reflective diary between May and July 2018, I reflect on visits to several children and family social work teams for the purpose of recruiting research participants, noting the different emotional tone of each visit; one team appeared emotionally open, sharing both sadness and anger alongside joy and pride about their practice, while another team appeared depleted, fatigued, and chaotic. I needed to manage my own emotional responses within each of these contexts, adapting my delivery for each team and using my own empathic awareness to respond to the emotional mood of each team, whilst also seeking to model emotional open-ness and encourage workers to consider taking part in my research.

Similarly, in my diary during the summer of 2019, I reflected on the experience of presenting initial findings as papers first at a postgraduate research conference, and then at a national social work education conference. While presenting my paper at the first conference, I felt myself unexpectedly connecting with the emotional impact of the data and the power of the visual images, which I had not anticipated. In retrospect, I recognised this as a process of emotional contagion, in which the audience also responded to the expressed emotions of the participants. I needed to manage my own emotions carefully and to recognise with the audience the emotional impact of the material. I reflected afterwards on my emotional responses when reading participants' quotes in relation to their descriptions of empathy and realised that I had potentially distanced myself from the emotional content of the data. I needed to acknowledge the emotionality of the

data and how it resonated with my own emotional experiences in practice. As a result, at the second conference, I was able to prepare the audience for the emotional impact in advance by acknowledging the emotional nature of the material and expressing my own emotional responses to the data more openly, which supported my own emotional regulation. In reflecting on this with my supervisory team, I realised that I needed to re-visit the interview data, to ensure that I did justice to the emotional themes within the data, and this formed a significant aspect of my iterative analysis process, refining my research themes to capture the felt emotion of different participants. De Witt and Ploeg (2006:226) suggest that experience of emotional resonance by the reader in response to the interview data of participants, is one indicator of authenticity within phenomenological research. Within the thesis I will include additional reflections on my own emotional responses to specific participants as appropriate.

Chapter summary

Within this chapter, I have presented my positionality as a researcher in relation to my ontological and epistemological stance in relation to knowledge production. In addition, I have explored key aspects of my reflexivity as a researcher in relation to my own identity and personal biography, my experience as an insider-researcher, my ideological stance and value base as a social work practitioner and my experience of emotion within the research process. I will now present the underlying philosophical theory which underpins my research methodology.

Chapter 4: Philosophical framework for thesis.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I outline my understanding of the philosophical framework which underpins my thesis, focusing on the writings of Husserl and Heidegger in particular as fundamental to my understanding of interpretative phenomenology. I highlight some key ideas which are relevant to my analysis and consider the role of interpretative phenomenology as a specific research methodology for my study.

Philosophical framework: Interpretative phenomenology

My research design has been shaped by my interest in interpretative phenomenology as a research methodology. Phenomenological research comprises a *'family of approaches'* (Langdrige, 2007:4) informed by phenomenological philosophy, united through an emphasis on the role of consciousness in mediating one's understanding of the world. The origins of phenomenological philosophy are attributed to Husserl (Moran, 2000; Spinelli, 2005; Dahlberg, 2008) although the term originated with Brentano (Moran, 2000:7). Table 3 highlights my understanding of key differences between phenomenological concepts proposed by Husserl and Heidegger, used throughout this chapter.

Husserl (1931) <i>Ideas: general introduction of pure phenomenology.</i>	Heidegger (1951) <i>Being and Time.</i>
<i>'back to the thing itself'</i> – Husserl was interested in understanding the nature of everyday experience and how objects, emotions and relationships are experienced subjectively, rather than seeking to define objectively.	Dasein – <i>'being there'</i> . Heidegger emphasised that human beings have the capacity to reflect on their experiences of existing within the world, shaped by pre-existing social structures and norms. In this way they think about the nature of their own 'being'.
<i>'Intentionality'</i> – Husserl proposed that conscious awareness of an experience or object is always directed towards something (the object) by someone or something (the subject). This implies that intentionality is unique and individual, with experience of an object being altered by the subjective qualities of each individual.	<i>'Being in the world' / 'being with'</i> - Heidegger develops the role of intentionality by arguing that human experience of the world is always shaped by the social structures and norms of the world into which we are born and by the other humans who inhabit that environment with us. The world

	is always a relational experience even when we separate ourselves from it.
'Lifeworld / natural attitude' – Husserl argued that humans encountered the world through the unexamined experience of everyday life, usually outside of awareness and formed by shared, take for granted norms about how communities live and interact.	'The they' - Heidegger emphasises the role of other humans within the environment to exercise a restraining influence, limiting the expectations and choices of individual through a social pressure to conform to shared norms, reducing the potential for individual action and experience.
	'Authenticity' – the capacity of the individual to integrate an acceptance of their death into their way of life, making choices which support the achievement of their own goals and ambitions and reduce the influence of 'the they' which might otherwise constrain them.
'Phenomenological reduction' – Husserl identified a process which seeks to suspend the influence of unconscious assumptions and patterns of behaviour to support more accurate examination of the actual nature of phenomena. Epoché/ 'bracketing' – the first process within phenomenological reduction; involves the identification and conscious setting aside of existing theories, explanations, and beliefs about a phenomenon, in order to become open to alternative views and explanations.	'Care structure' – In contrast to the idea of epoché, Heidegger proposed the care structure as a unifying idea which helps the individual make sense of their lived experience across the passage of time, from birth to death, integrating an understanding of our past, present and future. All of these aspects influence our understanding of experience in any given moment; therefore, bracketing is not possible.
Eidetic reduction – the second process within phenomenological reduction. Identifying typical or exceptional examples of an object or experience to discern the essential shared characteristics of that phenomenon, gathered through rich, 'thick' description to reveal an underlying shared structure of the experience.	'Hermeneutic circle' – in order to understand how a phenomenon is experienced, Heidegger proposed that the researcher needs to make sense of the language and social norms of the individuals, through iterative process of analysis, to consider how these shape their interpretations of experiences through prior knowledge and practices.
Descriptive phenomenology – branch of phenomenology influenced by Husserl's ideas which seeks to research experience through phenomenological reduction process. Claims to be able to identify the essential nature of a phenomenon through rich description	Interpretative phenomenology – branch of phenomenology which follows Heideggerian emphasis on interpretation -the understanding of experience will always be filtered through one's social structures and norms and will always therefore involve interpretation from an existing position. As such, they argue that it is impossible to set aside one's preconceptions in order to see the essence of a phenomena objectively

Table 3 -Key phenomenological concepts (Author's own creation, 2024).

Husserl and Phenomenology

Phenomenological philosophy can be understood as a response to the positivist scientific traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which sought to understand the world through the identification of objective knowledge and

scientific laws (Moran, 2000, Spinelli, 2005). Dahlberg comments that in contrast, phenomenology seeks to re-focus scientific interest on the nature of ordinary interaction and experience - *'to do full justice to the everyday'* (Dahlberg, 2008:32) while Finlay (2011:15) suggests an emphasis on clarifying the nature of *'taken-for-granted'* aspects of human experience. Husserl (2001:168) famously proposed that phenomenology involved going *'back to the 'things themselves'*, which I understand to mean an interest in how individuals directly experience phenomena, rather than attempts to objectively define such phenomena. Van Manen (2015:7) therefore helpfully summarises phenomenology as an interest in the uniqueness of individual *'lived experience'*.

I regard Husserl's focus on subjective experience as insightful, emphasising the inter-relationship between the subject and object of experience, and therefore the dynamic and changeable nature of that experience. Husserl (1931:67) draws attention to the role of *'intentionality'* in conscious awareness, in that consciousness is always focused on an object, but that the experience of this focus will inevitably be shaped by the individual's perspective. Moran (2000:19) concludes that phenomenology aims to identify and articulate the intentional structures between consciousness and objects of experience. Husserl extended his analysis by recognising that all experience is partial, occurring within a context, or background, and used the term *'horizons'* (Husserl:1931:52) to refer to aspects such as time and space, which influence all conscious awareness of experience. Dahlberg (2008:50) proposes that each perception will have several horizons that help to give meaning and context to the primary experience in the foreground, while Moran (2000:162) explains that such horizons support the individual by

drawing on previous experience to complete *'those aspects of the thing that are not given in perception'*.

Through these constructs, phenomenology acknowledges the plurality of views and perspectives that may exist in relation to an experience, and the role of shared, contextual understanding in shaping knowledge (Spinelli, 2005, Moran & Mooney, 2002). In this sense Moran (2000:15) argues that subjective experience is a fundamental aspect of all scientific endeavour. I identify a strong theoretical coherence between phenomenology and constructivist approaches to ontology and the nature of experience.

The natural attitude

Husserl discusses the significance of the *'natural standpoint'* (Husserl, 1931:51) or *'attitude'* (Dahlberg, 2008:34) for phenomenology, highlighting the immersion of the individual within a specific experience of reality in relation to the historical, cultural, and social context in which they find themselves, shaping subsequent perception and understanding. Moran (2000:12) reminds us that this experience of the *'lifeworld'*, as Husserl termed it, is generally outside of individual awareness, residing largely in the unconscious of the individual and the social group and as such is largely unexamined. Dahlberg (2008:49) suggests that phenomenology therefore seeks to examine this *'hidden'* lifeworld experience, to illuminate specific phenomena so that they are more clearly understood. Van Manen (2015:7) supports this view, proposing that an individual's understanding can only be understood within the context of a shared, pre-reflective experience of the lifeworld.

This resonates with the aims of my research, in exploring how social workers understand their use of empathy within their everyday practice contexts and in considering how their professional and personal contexts have shaped their understanding. However, despite broad agreement amongst phenomenologists about the role of the lifeworld in shaping individuals' consciousness and understanding (Spinelli, 2005, Moran, 2000, Dahlberg, 2008, Langdrige, 2007) subsequent phenomenological philosophy has developed along distinct paths, with different emphases and implications for researchers.

Phenomenological reduction

Husserl's response to the natural attitude is to propose a process of '*phenomenological reduction*' (Husserl, 1931:3) in which one's immersion in the lifeworld is suspended through a process of self-examination and identification of unconscious influences and beliefs. Moran argues that Husserl was seeking a '*pre-supposition-less*' understanding of phenomena (Moran, 2000: 9), which would enable the underlying structure of each phenomenon to be revealed. Subsequently, researchers proposed the research methodology of '*descriptive phenomenology*' (Giorgi, 2009; Dowling, 2007) which seeks to implement Husserl's principles within research practice. This process of reduction consists of two distinct parts (Langdrige, 2007, Giorgi, 2009). Firstly, Husserl proposed a period of '*epoché*' (Husserl, 1931:56, Giorgi, 2009:10) in which he described a '*radical*' alteration of awareness through the '*bracketing*' (Husserl, 1931:56) of existing forms of knowledge about a phenomenon. Finlay (2011:48) emphasises that such bracketing involves setting aside existing scientific and theoretical understanding of the phenomena, to bring the individuals' subjective experiences into clearer focus. Spinelli (2005:20) characterises this as an '*unknowing*',

becoming open to the potential diversity of others' experiences, while Langdrige (2007:17) emphasises developing a sceptical, questioning approach to one's existing understanding.

Husserl (1931:137) also describes a second process of '*eidetic reduction*' in which the researcher seeks to identify the '*essence*' of the phenomena within the descriptions of individuals' lifeworld experience. Dahlberg (2008:54) suggests this second reduction seeks striking and vivid examples of the phenomena which serve to identify the underlying structure. Moran (2000: 2) notes the descriptive nature of this approach, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding through an emphasis on thickness and richness of data. In this way Husserl aimed to capture the '*invariant structures*' of an experience (Finlay, 2011:48; Spinelli, 2005:48) that were shared by different perspectives.

There are several underlying philosophical concepts which are common to all forms of phenomenological research, including an interest in subjective experience as a method of understanding, captured through rich, detailed accounts of experience. However, given my ontological and epistemological perspectives, (discussed in Chapter 3) I question the idea that individuals can fully bracket their pre-existing understanding of their social world and existing knowledge. Indeed, Moran (2000:161) highlights that many of Husserl's own students questioned the validity of his proposed reduction. However, Gearing (2004:1435) suggests that bracketing has become an established aspect of most qualitative research. Dahlberg (2008:53) endorses Husserl's concept, suggesting that bracketing is a key method for revealing the underlying intentional structure of experience, during the period of the study, rather than being a permanently achievable state for the researcher. However, Finlay (2011:23) states that modern

phenomenologists are less concerned with achieving objectivity through bracketing, than with maintaining an open, self -reflexive stance that examines their own subjective experience within the lifeworld, and this fits more comfortably with my own understanding.

Heidegger and Interpretative phenomenology.

Interpretative phenomenology (Van Manen, 2015, Finlay 2011, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) provides an alternative philosophical perspective for exploring subjective experience, whilst also proposing a means to explore contextual forms of understanding, by acknowledging the roles of interpretation and language. My choice of interpretative phenomenology is informed by my growing understanding of Heidegger's model of phenomenology (1975) and his classic work '*Being and Time*' (1951) in particular. I will present my understanding of some of his key concepts to illustrate their relevance for my research.

Heidegger addresses the '*a priori*' nature of being (Heidegger, 1951:3) in that all exploration of experience is situated within a pre-existing context that shapes the nature of such experience. In this context, Heidegger challenges Husserl's view of subjective experience, highlighting that all experience is already subject to interpretation and has '*familiarity*' (Blattner, 2006:48) that shapes perception. Moran (2000:192) portrays Heidegger as an 'anti-subjectivist' on this basis, arguing for a fundamental layer of understanding that lies beneath individual models of perception.

Finlay (2011:49) highlights that Heidegger focused instead on the experience of '*being*' itself, viewing human social structures and culture as a primary horizon which mediates all experience. Heidegger (1951:2) describes this

as examining *'the being of Beings'*, using interpretative phenomenology to understand the experience of existing as individuals, within a particular historical context. Heidegger (1951: 11) uses the German term *'Dasein'* to capture the pre-disposition of human beings to reflect on their own existence, from a position of immersed involvement with the world, rather than a position of objective detachment. Spinelli (2005:107) translates Dasein as the experience of *'being there'* while Dreyfus (1991:13) explains that Heidegger is proposing a level of experience which frames Dasein's awareness of their world and relationships, outside of consciousness. Dasein can therefore have experience of being a *'human being'* as an individual, as well as a wider experience of *'being human'* as a shared experience. (Dreyfus, 1991:14).

'Being-in-the-world'

Heidegger amends Husserl's concept of the 'lifeworld' by highlighting two aspects of being which he proposes have ontological implications; *'being-in-the-world'* (Heidegger, 1951:53) and *'being with'* others (ibid:114) – emphasising the existential nature of human understanding, always situated within a framework of social structures and human inter-connectedness as a fundamental aspect of existence (Dreyfus,1991:18). Van Manen (2015:37) describes this state of 'being-in-the-world' as *'non-thematic, non-reflective consciousness'* in everyday life, emphasising that such experience is outside awareness. Dreyfus (1991:83) characterises this as *'absorbed coping,'* emphasising the contextual nature of understanding as shaped by socialisation and cultural practices. In this way, Heidegger challenges Husserl's model of intentionality (Husserl, 1931; Wrathall, 1998) as the primary form of experience, proposing a fundamental *'fore-structure'* to interpretation and understanding (Heidegger, 1951:198), which precedes

conscious awareness, reflecting an individual's immersion within their social context.

At the same time, Heidegger (1951:114) proposes that the experience of '*being with*' others also profoundly shapes understanding and perceptions of the world, in that Dasein can recognise the mutuality of their experience with other Dasein and acknowledge their own being as like those around them. Finlay (2011:50) highlights the reciprocity and identification that is implicit within a '*with world*', sharing social and cultural practices. However, Heidegger views the influence of others as a constraining force on Dasein, and presents it in largely negative terms, describing it as '*the inconspicuous domination by others*' (Heidegger, 1951:123). He proposes the term '*the they*' (ibid:123) to describe a process by which Dasein exists within the context of the expectations and values of those around, leading to increasing '*averageness*' (ibid:123) or '*everyday indifference*' (ibid:43) which potentially dilutes the experience of being for the individual, standardising their everyday life. Heidegger (1951:165) highlights how Dasein's interactions with others through everyday speech and observation of others reinforces a sense of comparison with those around them. In this way the experience of '*being-with*' others has an existential impact, shaping Dasein's lived experience and understanding (Wrathall,2005:52).

Disclosing the world

Heidegger (1951:155) also focuses on the role of '*language*' and '*discourse*' in shaping human experience as one key aspect of 'existential' awareness, arguing that through language the nature of experience is disclosed to and between individuals (King, 2001:85; Heidegger, 1951:156). In this way language makes

shared experience more understandable (Langridge, 2007:161) and supports collective, inter-subjective meanings within the world (Van Manen, 2015:111). Van Manen (2015:39) suggests that such shared understanding is the key process through which experience of being develops, within a specific historical and cultural context.

Alongside discourse, Heidegger (1953:130) emphasises two other forms of 'existential' awareness that come together to make sense of and '*disclose*' (Heidegger, 1953:143) the nature of experiences to Dasein at a specific place and time. These include '*understanding*' (ibid:139), meaning the forms of pre-reflective existential awareness described above and '*attunement*' (ibid:131), or shared emotional and affective states. Particularly relevant for my study of empathy, is Heidegger's emphasis on the collective, unconscious nature of emotions or '*moods*' (Heidegger, 1953:131) to which he argues Dasein is always '*delivered over*', unconsciously sharing in the emotional textures of wider society. Dreyfus (1991:170) emphasises that the emotional tone of a society influences individual's motivation and ambitions, shaping Dasein's interests or pursuits within their life. Blattner (2006:81) suggests that moods are '*atmospheric*', disclosing our experience of the world, both in terms of relationships with others and evaluating our own achievements and development. Heidegger (1953:131) acknowledges that individuals can move beyond such background influences, to experience individual emotional reactions and cognitive processes within their specific context. However, both Blattner (2006:81) and Dreyfus (1991:168) stress that such individual manifestations of emotion, take place against a background of collective mood which shapes the individual's perception. The implications of these ideas for empathy will be explored in greater depth within my discussion of findings.

Heidegger also uses the term '*comportment*' (1975:260) to characterise how Dasein is involved with the world through a pre-reflective familiarity with materials and equipment, frequently in an unconscious, conditioned way (Heidegger, 1975:16). Nulty (2006:441) terms this '*embodied knowhow*'. Dreyfus (1991:51) notes that such involvement can be developed through skilled repetition by expert practitioners. Blattner (2006:38) emphasises Heidegger's intention here, that comportment is an existential state of being that reflects the directedness and purpose of the individual's life - '*our self-understanding is embodied in the way we live rather than in how we think or talk about our lives*'. However, Heidegger again acknowledges that at other times, Dasein will shift to more conscious, cognitive forms of behaviour. (Heidegger, 1975:275). Potentially, comportment is a helpful concept for my study when exploring how consciously or unconsciously participants use empathy within their social work practice.

The 'care structure'

Importantly, Heidegger (1951:185-6) proposed the idea of '*care*' as an organising concept for Dasein. Dreyfus (1991;239) suggests the care structure provides a unitary structure for human experience across past-present-future, enabling us to understand specific experiences within a temporal context. The care structure comprises three connected aspects (Heidegger, 1951:186). Heidegger (1951:131) uses the term '*thrownness*' to capture the sense of historical, social, and environmental situatedness of each individual's experience. Alongside this, he describes the experience of living in the present as an experience of '*falling prey*' (Heidegger,1951:169) or '*fallen-ness*' (King,2001:37; Blattner, 2006:128) through which an individual's experience is shaped by their interaction with and expectations of those around them – '*the they*' (Heidegger, 1951:123). Finally, the

future orientation is expressed by Dasein's '*being ahead of itself*' (Heidegger, 1951:185), projecting future actions by seeking to achieve plans and goals which provide a sense of purpose for their being. Heidegger (1951:83) uses the term '*for-the-sake-of-which*' to capture the idea that Dasein will have guiding hopes or ambitions for the way they intend to live. Dreyfus (1991:189) helpfully terms this '*pressing into possibilities*' to capture the aspirational nature of this aspect of care, providing an underlying sense of identity for the individual throughout their life-course which potentially distinguishes those from others around them. I understand the care structure to have significance for my exploration of the role of empathy within social work practice and will use this concept to support my analysis of findings.

Authenticity

Heidegger argues that Dasein's awareness of their own being and the temporal nature of their existence is heightened by their developing awareness of death (Heidegger, 1951:249) as an inevitable aspect of their experience. It is how Dasein responds to this '*being-towards-death*' (ibid:242) in everyday life that is at the heart of Heidegger's thesis within Being and Time, proposing that Dasein has two potential responses – living either '*authentically*' or '*inauthentically*' (ibid:42). Dreyfus (2001:228) explains authenticity as Dasein rejecting the averageness of '*the they*' and choosing to consciously reflect on the anxiety of existence and one's impending death, in order to identify ways of living that bring meaning and a sense of self-acceptance. King (2001: 193) describes this as Dasein '*owning*' their sense of self, accepting their own context, and choosing to seek their own purposes, outside of the expectations of everyday society. Heidegger (1951:175) suggests that for the most part, Dasein will live '*inauthentically*', conforming with social

structures and cultural practices of those around them. He proposes that such practices can provide comfort and reassurance for individual Dasein, offering a defence against potential anxiety from the realisation that death is inevitable. However, Dreyfus (1991:192) emphasises that some individuals will rather '*take a stand*' on the nature of existence by exercising care about their life-choices and pursuing goals which provide meaning and significance for their life, '*pressing into possibilities*' (Dreyfus, 1991:192), within the wider social and historical context in which they find themselves. This theme of authenticity also has implications for the experiences of my participants, and I will explore further within my discussion chapters.

Reflection

As I reflect on my own engagement with Heidegger's philosophy, I recall my struggles with this material. I initially resisted the importance of reading the original sources due to the complexity of the language and acknowledged this with my supervisory team who encouraged me to persist. I was directed by a colleague to Dreyfus's series of Harvard lectures available online (Dreyfus, 2007 Online lecture) which allowed me to become immersed in the language and ideas through repeated listening during Covid lockdowns of 2020-21. I used my reflective diary during this period to explore my reactions to the complexity of the ideas and language and began to identify concepts that might be helpful for my research, meeting with one of my supervisors regularly to discuss these ideas in more depth. This was transformational for me, enabling me to begin to make connections with some key ideas. This process has been iterative, moving from specific pages of original text, back to the lectures and to a range of commentaries to support my understanding of the larger body of theory, and to grasp some of Heidegger's

greater intentions. This process has continued throughout my Doctoral studies and consolidated during the period of writing up.

During this period, I also became aware of Heidegger's allegiance to national socialism during the 1930s (Sharpe, 2018, Smythe & Spence, 2020) and struggled with the implications of this for my own understanding. I identified conflicting positions in the literature, between commentators who rejected all of Heidegger's work (for example Sharpe, 2018) and others who offered complex apologies for this aspect of his writing (for example Thomson, 2021). Agosta (2011) stresses the importance of critically holding an awareness of Heidegger's beliefs in mind, when examining his ideas, to recognise the potential impact of his wider political views on these philosophical ideas and I have tried to do this within my own evaluation of his work. I find myself agreeing with Smythe and Spence (2020) who suggest it is possible to value Heidegger's contribution to phenomenological thought while rejecting his wider political views. Thomson (2021:32) terms this a 'troubling juxtaposition' but in choosing to use Heidegger's ideas, I have attempted to hold this tension creatively, maintaining a critical stance towards each concept, while continuing to engage with these ideas to inform my research.

Interpretative Phenomenology as Methodology

I have presented my understanding of key concepts from Heidegger's philosophy to signpost their relevance for my subsequent discussion, while also acknowledging my partial, evolving understanding even as I write this chapter. In developing a new set of theoretical constructs, Heidegger can be seen to be challenging the existing norms of language-use to encourage new understanding

(Dreyfus, 1991:8) while also outlining a new form of research methodology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). I identify congruence with my social constructionist epistemology, which recognises the role of language in shaping all existing knowledge, reflecting dominant perspectives and ideologies (Pernecky, 2016) and which supports my own developing understanding of experience.

In this context, I share Heidegger's view (1951:146) that a '*pre-supposition-less*' understanding of experience is not achievable, but rather my understanding of others' experiences will be a co-construction, which includes my own pre-reflective understanding of the phenomena (Dreyfus, 1991; Blattner, 2006). Heidegger argues that an individual's interpretation of a phenomena, will inevitably include their existing awareness of the topic – their 'fore-having' (Heidegger, 1951:149) which supports their choice of focus, alongside their 'fore-conception' (ibid, 1951:149), some sense of what they expect to find. In recognising the relevance of hermeneutic, interpretative phenomenology, I am also acknowledging the historical and contextual nature of my own knowledge claims and my own interpretation of experience in relation to social work practice.

The hermeneutic circle

Drawing on his understanding of the pre-reflective experience of being, Heidegger (1951:149) proposes a hermeneutic approach to phenomena (Dahlberg, 2008:73), arguing that language and discourse will always be ambiguous, reflecting the particular social practices in which they develop (Langdrige, 2007:161). Moran (2000:20) thus asserts that all description involves interpretation and will require a hermeneutical approach to explore meaning within a historical and temporal

context. Dahlberg agrees, stating that the hermeneutic process seeks to reveal what is 'hidden' (Dahlberg, 2008:74) through the act of interpretation.

On this basis Heidegger rejects Husserl's notion of '*phenomenological reduction*' (1951:52) and proposes the relevance of the '*hermeneutic circle*' (Heidegger, 1951:148; Dreyfus, 1991:202) which represents an iterative relationship between individuals' conscious awareness, their fore-structure, and their pre-reflective shared understanding (Crotty, 1998). Such a process recognises the circular nature of interpretation (Heidegger, 1951:148) that each part of a text interacts with the larger whole, so that meaning is always understood within a wider context. Heidegger proposes that the phenomenologist will move repeatedly between an account of the phenomena as experienced by individuals, back to the 'fore-structures' within which experiences take place (Heidegger, 1951), to explore the connections between individual understanding, existing bodies of knowledge and the perceptions and beliefs of the researcher. The hermeneutic circle thus forms an integral aspect of an interpretative phenomenological research methodology.

My developing understanding of interpretive phenomenology has been supported by additional contributions by two other phenomenological authors, Gadamer (1975) and Merleau-Ponty (2013). Although a summary of their respective ideas is beyond my remit, I have noted some relevant concepts which help to illuminate Heidegger's own discussion. Gadamer (1975:180) differentiates the nature of written and spoken language, emphasising the role of conversation or 'dialogue' in helping to construct a shared understanding of experience, whereas the impact of written language often becomes detached from its original context and use (Langdrige, 2007:42). In Gadamer's view, an emphasis on a

process of 'dialogue' between elements of knowledge – the current and historical context, the individual and shared meanings – forms a key device for hermeneutical analysis by the researcher (Lawn,2006:3). As such, Gadamer (1975:386) suggests that interpretative phenomenology needs to consider the original context of the language, while also recognising the impact of current forms of understanding in shaping one's understanding of the text.

Gadamer (1975: 301) extends the term 'horizons' to capture how understanding evolves from a 'fusion' of perspectives (ibid: 305) in which current theories and beliefs interact with historical perspectives to inform the perception of a phenomena, albeit one that is always partial and changing through time (Lawn, 2006:48). Van Manen (2015:102) highlights four key horizons which shape human experience in this way – including temporality, spatiality, corporeality, and relationality, emphasising the temporal structure of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 2015:36) in that individuals will always be describing and reflecting on past experiences from their unique perspective in the present. By using this idea within the hermeneutic circle, I seek to locate the individual words and phrases used by participants within the larger text, understanding how the development of ideas moves back and forth to shape both elements, presenting both the participant's specific understanding and interacting with my own developing insight into the phenomenon (Lawn, 2006:48).

Gadamer (1975) and van Manen (2015) also highlight the significance of historical context and temporal situatedness as a horizon which fuses with the individual's perception of experience. As such I recognise the relevance of the political and historical context in which participants are experiencing their practice – specifically working within local authority safeguarding services in England in the

early twenty-first century. Participants will be subject to environmental influences and constraints that arise from regulations and professional guidance, underpinned by neo-liberal welfare policy and 'new public management' (Healy, 2022) approaches to case management within social work, which potentially shape their experience and understanding of the role of empathy within contemporary practice. This will be explored further within my studies.

Merleau-Ponty's (1945:169) emphasis on the embodied nature of perception has also supported insight when interpreting experience. Merleau-Ponty identifies the central role of the physical body as the vessel within which all perception occurs, arguing for a '*body-mind unity*' (Matthews,2002:29) from which the world is experienced differently by everyone. Taylor-Carmen (2008:3) argues that embodiment is the '*most basic horizon of experience*' from which all understanding emerges. In this way, Merleau-Ponty extends Heidegger's (1951) concept of '*being-in-the world*' to also include the visceral and physiological nature of experience, suggesting that such physical sensation will shape our understanding of experiences significantly. Ashworth (2016) helpfully amplifies this idea to identify several '*fractions*' (2016:23) which connect with embodied experience including selfhood, social relatedness, temporal, and spatial aspects of the body, along with mood and emotion. Within social work, there is an emerging interest in the impact of embodied experience, for example in relation to the environments within which workers practice (Leigh, 2015, Jeyasingham, 2014) and to social workers' movement through communities and physical spaces (Ferguson, 2009, 2018). Within my research, this understanding of embodiment has encouraged me to explore aspects of participants' physical practice,

movement and emotional expression as supporting my understanding of their lived experience.

Within my research, I am seeking to integrate these diverse ideas about the nature of understanding, using the hermeneutic circle as I make sense of individual perceptions of empathy, within the context of wider social work practice. In this sense, the hermeneutic circle supports the identification of connections between a single aspect of experience and a deeper understanding of an overall idea or experience (Dahlberg, 2008:74). Gearing (2013:1440) advocates a process of '*existential*' bracketing in which phenomenologists will attempt to temporarily, distance themselves from existing theory while recognising that their own assumptions and beliefs will be an intrinsic aspect of the interpretative process. McManus-Holroyd (2007:3) emphasises the importance of repeatedly 'working the fore-structure' to ensure that dominant professional discourses are sufficiently challenged by the researcher and do not bias their analysis.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has summarised core phenomenological theory and concepts, drawing particularly on the philosophical writing of Heidegger to inform my understanding of interpretative phenomenology as a methodology and has shaped my own approach to this research project. The following chapter will build on this foundation to identify and evaluate my chosen research methods.

Chapter 5: Methodology and methods

Chapter Overview

In this chapter I build on my discussion of interpretative phenomenology as the primary methodology for my study, providing a rationale for integrating interpretative phenomenological analysis with a visual research method, to produce a multi-modal approach. I also provide a narrative for how my data collection and analysis was conducted, concluding with a discussion of ethical and quality considerations within the research.

Research methods.

Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011:98) suggest that a constructivist stance will necessitate interpretative methods that aim to explore the shared meanings of participants. Such a stance supports the value of inductive, qualitative research seeking 'verstehen' (Tracy, 2019:51, Schwandt, 2003:190); a concern to grasp participants' individual perspectives and experiences, in contrast to notions of objective reality (Flick, 2019, Bryman, 2016). Moran and Mooney (2000) stress the phenomenologist's interest in individual perceptions and conscious experience of events or objects within the world, while Creswell (2007) suggests that such a focus is the distinctive contribution of phenomenology in relation to knowledge creation.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, with visual research methods.

In this context, I have chosen to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, 2022) as my method, integrated with an image creation method using symbolic materials to support the participant's reflection (Rose, 2016; Mannay 2016). Building on my understanding of

interpretative phenomenological theory, I chose a research method that would support me in applying these theoretical perspectives within my study. As I embarked on my thesis, I found the structure and clarity of Smith, Flower and Larkin's (2009, 2022) IPA method helpful in supporting my understanding of phenomenological practice. While I have grown in confidence since these early days, I acknowledge IPA as an underlying framework for my study, particularly in supporting the analytical stage of the research, and I regard it to be the core method for my study.

IPA is an increasingly popular method within the UK, particularly in the field of health care and wellbeing (Smith, 2011; Brocki & Weardon, 2006; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). It has also gained momentum within social work as a discipline, with several studies appearing over the last 10 years (Houston & Mullan Johnson, 2011; Hood, 2016, Vickary, Young & Hicks, 2019; Bartoli, 2019, Fogarty & Elliott, 2020). Smith and colleagues (2009, 2022) propose IPA as a systematic approach to exploring individuals' perceptions, providing a rigorous, transparent method of analysing and presenting data. They (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, 2022) outline 3 distinct aspects of IPA, including a reliance on phenomenological philosophy, the use of hermeneutic principles to guide the process of interpretation via the hermeneutic circle, and a focus on the idiographic level of experience (Smith, 2004:41, Smith Flowers & Larkin, 2022:24). From an idiographic perspective, the researcher seeks to understand the perspective of particular people within contexts, capturing detailed and systematic analysis which includes points of divergence and convergence. Smith and colleagues (ibid:24) emphasise the focus on the particular within such a perspective, while highlighting the possibility of offering general interpretations based on exploring individuals' particular

experiences. As such, IPA is a method which complements my ontological and epistemological framework well (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, McManus Holroyd, 2007).

In support of this approach, Smith proposes a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2022:29) within the research process, in which the meaning-making activity of the participant, is in turn interpreted by the researcher, engaged in a second-order level (Larkin & Watts, 2006) of meaning-making. To quote Smith & Osborne '*the participants are trying to make sense of their world, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world*' (2008:53). The interpretative act of the researcher engages with the interpretation of the participant to shape the developing final analysis of findings, in an iterative, collective process.

Integrating visual research methods with IPA

I considered the integration of a visual image-making method of data collection to be a fundamental aspect of the research from the beginning. Visual research methods have gained recognition over the last twenty years (Margolis & Pauwels, 2001, Reavey, 2011, Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), reflected in the increased use of visual methods within social work research (Clark & Morriss, 2014 Leigh, 2015, Bartoli, 2019 Leigh & Morriss, 2020). Both Rose (2016:27) and Mannay (2016:86) differentiate the process of data 'production' within visual forms of research from other approaches to data collection, emphasising the potential role of materials, technology, and artistic intent in the production of visual artefacts and recognising their potential value for collaborative or participatory forms of research. (Mannay, 2016). However, In keeping with Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2022) guidance, I

have opted to retain the broader term 'data collection' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022:53) to include both the process of generating data from interviews and the production of visual images within my studies. I will use this term throughout the thesis.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:129) acknowledge the growth in such multi-modal IPA research, reflected in the range of studies combining IPA with creative visual methods that have been published recently (Boden & Eatough, 2014, Kirkham et al 2015, Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019, Bartoli, 2019; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) suggest that researchers can easily integrate visual methods into a range of qualitative methodologies, while Reavey (2011) proposes that using images alongside a verbal narrative produces rich data suitable for phenomenological approaches. Visual methods offer a potential alternative to the dominance of language within research interviews (Prosser & Loxley, 2008), with Guillermin and Drew (2010) suggesting that image creation supports expression of feelings and ideas that are not easily put into words by participants. Mannay (2010) describes a process of 'de-familiarisation' through the use of image-making activities, - '*making the familiar strange*' (2010:94), while Savin-Badin and Wimpenny (2014:28) describe this as '*unflattening*' the phenomenon, to '*bring it to life*'.

I chose to introduce a visual element into my research using a sand tray and symbols, informed by Lowenfeld's '*world technique*' (1950, 2003) within child psychotherapy which I have used extensively within my therapeutic practice. This method is also used within clinical supervision for the creative therapies (Perryman, Moss, and Anderson, 2016; Hartwig *et al.*, 2017; Stark, Frels and Garza, 2017). Lowenfeld's approach differs from psychoanalytic models of

'sandplay therapy' (Kalff,2020; Turner, 2004) in which the therapist takes a central role in interpreting the unconscious representations of their client. In contrast, Lowenfeld emphasises the narrative description of the client as a primary point of reference (Lowenfeld, 1950: Hutton:2004:609) for gaining access to their world, urging the therapist to wait patiently for the child's interpretation to emerge. On this basis I felt Lowenfeld's model integrated well with both my humanistic therapeutic stance and my interpretative phenomenological design, beginning with the interpretation of the individual.

Mayes, Blackwell-Mayes, and Williams (2004) and Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson (2011) have both previously used sand tray methodology within research, to focus on career planning interventions while Roberts et al (2017) used sand trays to explore students' problem-solving skills. Turner, Callaghan, and Finlayson (2016) used sand trays to explore participants' perceptions of identity and diversity within therapeutic practice. Mannay and colleagues (Mannay, Staples & Edwards, 2017; Mannay 2020) propose '*sandboxing*' as a research method, informed by Lowenfeld's model, but distinguishing it from the therapeutic technique, to explore the experiences of students within educational contexts. Similarly, they emphasise the focus on the participants' interpretations (Mannay, 2016:69) as the primary source of data. Staples, Watson & Riches (2024) have combined sandboxing with thematic analysis in their research into the experience of adoption and fostering practitioners. My study is innovative in combining a symbolic sand tray method with Interpretative phenomenological analysis when seeking the views of safeguarding social workers and managers. Margolis and Pauwels (2001:8) describe such an approach as '*researcher elicited*' image-

making, in which the participant creates imagery at the researcher's invitation, providing additional data for interpretation by the researcher.

Reflection

I conceived the idea to include sand tray and symbols within my research interviews following a conference workshop I attended with Linda Homeyer and Daniel Sweeney (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011) in the summer of 2016, which focused on the use of the sand tray method in clinical supervision. During a workshop exercise with another therapist, I realised the potential value of using symbols within a sand tray to review an experience from different perspectives and to gain new insight as a result. Particularly, I was curious about the experience of being able to explore aspects of my therapeutic practice through symbolic representation, while at the same time feeling confident to explore the emotional aspects of the experience. I felt a flush of excitement and recognition as I understood the potential of this method for my doctoral interviews and raised the possibility with my supervisory team. I also began doing some reading around the use of sand trays within clinical supervision and started to explore the literature on visual research methods.

Interpreting visual data

Boden and Eatough (2014:162) and Spencer (2011:30) argue that visual methods support embodied engagement with the research process, enabling access to unconscious 'pre reflective' aspects - the '*felt sense*' - of an experience, which can then become available for cognitive forms of sensemaking. Rose (2016) reminds us that images and symbols are polysemic in nature, subject to multiple interpretations, and their meaning can change between individuals and across

cultures. For this reason, Rose stresses that '*imagery is never innocent*' (Rose, 2016:23) but must always be understood within the context of practices, values, and technologies.

In my view, image-making and the use of symbols fit well within a constructivist ontological position (Brooks & King, 2017; Jackson-Foster, Deafenbaugh & Miller, 2018) supporting sense-making by participants, illuminating their intuitive sense of their practice, and so encourage a wide range of representations of experience (Lynn & Lea, 2005). Within this context, the question of interpreting symbols becomes key. Banks and Zeitlin (2015) stress the need to explore both the content of the image – the internal narrative - alongside the external narrative, in terms of the historical and cultural meaning of symbols. In keeping with the phenomenological and idiographic aims of the study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022), I privileged the interpretation of participants as the first point of reference for my analysis. However, both Gauntlett and Holworth (2006) and Guillermin and Drew (2011) emphasise that while participants are best placed to offer an interpretation of their own image, the researcher must then analyse the image within the context of the overall body of data and locate it within a wider theoretical framework for interpretation. As such, this fits well within an interpretative phenomenological method, in that the created image provides a further layer of interpretation. Kirkham (2015) and Bartoli (2019) outline such use of visual methods as an extension of the IPA method to develop a 'triple hermeneutic':

'Whereby the researcher was making sense of the participants' interpretation of their visual representation of their experience' (Kirkham, 2015:400).

I have drawn on the theoretical contribution of semiotics as a discipline (Chandler, 2002; Rose, 2016) to explore how symbols and signs function within society. Ledin and Machin (2018) argue that symbols function as shared forms of social meaning, representing objects or ideas in familiar or assumed ways within a society. From a social constructionist perspective, symbols are both informed by underlying ideologies and collective social norms and in turn begin to shape those norms (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001, Chandler, 2002). Ledin and Machin (2018) stress that use of symbols is socially conditioned and largely outside of awareness, reflecting dominant cultural understandings, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2002:94), distinguish between two layers of meaning – firstly, reflecting individual’s intentional conscious association with the image or sign; secondly, underlying cultural connotations which may be inferred by the sign. By providing participants with a range of familiar social and cultural symbols, they can make associations between their practice and the symbols which resonate most closely for them, reflecting aspects of their personal understanding as well as familiar cultural tropes regarding their experiences. By combining this visual method with an interpretative phenomenological interview process, I hope to create opportunities for participants to extend the depth of their reflection and discussion.

Overview of the Studies

In designing these three studies, I am mindful of my research question, aim and objectives as stated at the beginning of my thesis:

Research question: How do social workers experience empathy within their day-to-day practice?’

Research aim:

To explore the role of empathy within contemporary social work practice, by researching the lived experience of practitioners who work with children and families.

Research objectives:

1. To undertake a thematic synthesis of literature regarding the use of empathy in social work practice with children and families.
2. To explore how social workers describe their use of empathy within their practice with children and families.
3. To consider how level of practice experience affects workers' experience of empathy by exploring the different perceptions of 1) experienced workers, 2) newly qualified workers, 3) practice supervisors.
4. To identify implications for the use of empathy within social work practice with children and families.

Based on these aims, I chose to undertake three separate but linked studies, exploring the lived experiences of three distinct cohorts of children and families' social workers. I was influenced by Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2022:46) suggestion that sample size should be approached flexibly, with an emphasis on the depth of exploration of participants' lived experience. At doctoral research level, Smith, Flowers and Larkin highlight the potential use of up to three '*self-contained but related studies*' (2022:46) and suggest at least one smaller study within such a group. I used their outline as a guide, and each of my studies falls within their suggested guidance, although following discussion with my supervisory team, and in keeping with the spirit of their guidance (Smith, Flowers

and Larkin, 2022:46), I have applied their principles flexibly to guide the final respective sample sizes for each study.

Study 1. A study with eight experienced social workers within children and family services, who have a minimum of three years post-qualifying experience.

Study 2. A study with three newly qualified social workers within children and family services, who have less than 18 months experience.

Study 3. A study with six social work supervisors within children and family social work services, who have a minimum of two years supervisory experience.

I was conscious that Study 2 comprised only three participants and was thus a significantly smaller sample than the other two studies. However, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:46) maintain that such a sample size is sufficient to support a detailed examination of a phenomena, and I found this to be the case, with these three participants providing a rich account of their experience as newly qualified workers.

In keeping with a phenomenological perspective, I anticipated the use of a temporal aspect (van Manen, 2015:104) – the length of time qualified as a social worker and/or supervisor – would provide a framework within which to explore the lived experience of empathy from a range of practitioner perspectives and used this criteria as the basis for my three separate-but-related studies. Heidegger emphasises the passing of time as one crucial aspect in supporting individuals' self- understanding (Heidegger, 1975:17; Heidegger, 1931: 18). However, I was mindful of Smith's advice to approach each study as idiographic and unique, rather than seeking to compare results formally (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009: 50). In

this way, the findings from each study illuminate the experiences of practitioners at distinct points in their professional careers.

Gaining gatekeeper access

As suggested by Carey (2012:101) I began my research by making an initial approach via telephone to the learning and development department of a children's services department in England in the summer of 2017. However, this initial authority turned down my request. McLaughlin (2012:122) identifies the potential sensitivity of research proposals for senior social work managers, in relation to how researchers might portray their organisations. In retrospect, I could have anticipated this when making my initial approach.

Following discussion with my supervisory team, I prepared a short briefing paper (Appendix 4) which included details of all three proposed studies and sought to highlight potential benefits for the authority from allowing staff to participate. I approached two further English children's services departments during September 2017 and following meetings with their Learning and Development teams, both authority representatives agreed to present my proposals to their senior managers. Both Departments subsequently gave written confirmation by e-mail of their agreement for staff to participate in the project (Appendix 5).

Identifying participants

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022:45) emphasise the importance of identifying a small, homogeneous group of participants for IPA, in order to understand participants' unique individual experiences. Tracy (2019:87) emphasises 'relevance' as being the key aspect in sample selection, while Patton (2015:311) suggests that particularly for phenomenological studies, smaller samples allow

opportunities for rich, in-depth analysis of participants experiences. Dahlberg (2008) notes that within the interpretative paradigm notions of sample saturation are irrelevant as phenomenological findings will, by their nature, be infinite and dynamic (Merriam, 2009:80).

The distinctive characteristic for my study related to participants who practice within the field of children and family social work within England. In keeping with a qualitative research strategy, I used a ‘purposive’ recruitment method (Bryman, 2016:410, Carey, 2012:39) to identify participants who would provide ‘*information-rich cases*’ (Patton,2015: 264) that would support the development of my understanding in relation to the research topic. I also took a stratified approach (Bryman, 2016:409) by exploring the experiences of three different groups of social workers – those with a minimum of three years post-qualifying experience (study 1), those completing their assessed and supported year in employment within 18 months (study 2) and those now acting as supervisors of other workers’ practice with children, with a minimum of two years in a supervisory role (Study 3).

Following discussion with my supervisory team, I developed the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to assess suitability of participants within my three studies:

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion criteria
Study 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant has completed a social work qualification. - The participant currently works as a child & family social worker. - The participant has more than three years post-qualifying experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant is currently receiving support from Occupational health. - The participant is subject to staff disciplinary procedures.

Study 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant has completed a social work qualification. - The participant currently works as a child and family social worker. - The participant is currently completing their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) as a newly qualified social worker (up to 18 months). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant is currently receiving support from Occupational health. - The participant is subject to staff disciplinary procedures.
Study 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant has completed a social work qualification. - Within their current role the participant provides supervision to qualified children and family social workers - The participant has been in a supervisory role for a minimum of two years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participant is currently receiving support from Occupational health. - The participant is subject to staff disciplinary procedures. -

Table 4 - Inclusion & Exclusion criteria for Studies 1, 2 and 3. (Author's own creation, 2024)

For these studies, the criteria were designed to ensure that potential participants had the necessary qualifications working with children and families and relevant levels of experience to identify a homogeneous sample. The exclusion criteria supported ethical research practice (BASW,2019) by ensuring that potential participants were not vulnerable due to work-related health issues or in conflict with their employers at the time of the interview.

Recruiting participants for study 1 & 2

Following gatekeeper agreement, I was provided with contact information for all children's social work teams within each authority and made initial contact via email with team managers to introduce myself and explain the nature of the research. Eight team managers from the two authorities responded initially, and I was able to arrange visits to six of these teams between late May and September 2018. I met with each team within their agency context, to explain the study and

to ask for potential volunteers. Carey (2012:111) emphasises the value of visiting participants within their practice context to gain a sense of their working environment and to minimise disruption to their work. Given the busy nature of social work teams, my visits to teams were brief, lasting around ten minutes.

From these visits, I was able to develop a list of twenty potential participants for the first studies. These volunteers provided me with their work e-mail addresses and I then contacted them directly, enclosing the information sheet (Appendix 6) and the participant consent form (Appendix 7). I agreed to send a follow up email two weeks later to remind participants of the project. At follow up, fourteen participants confirmed their willingness to take part by responding to my second email and returning the completed consent form.

Of the fourteen, following application of my criteria, one participant withdrew due to imminent family leave, and another indicated she was under Occupational Health supervision so agreed to withdraw. This left a total of twelve potential participants, nine of whom were eligible for Study 1 and three for study 2. One further experienced worker then decided to withdraw. My final samples for the two studies were therefore, eight participants for study 1, and three participants for study 2.

Recruiting participants for Study 3

I began by approaching team managers within two local authorities by email to invite them to consider participating in the study. For study 3, the selection criteria were slightly different, reflecting the different focus of the study with practice supervisors.

I emailed team managers within the two authorities, providing an information leaflet for study 3 to reflect the emphasis on interviewing supervisors and inviting them to respond by email if they were willing to participate. This initial strategy yielded a limited response with only two supervisors replying, despite sending a follow up email two weeks later. Following discussion with my supervisory team, I utilised an opportunistic strategy (Tracy, 2019:86) with several social work managers during a practice visit to an agency office. In this situation I was conscious of benefitting from my identity as a social work academic, enabling me to have a level of 'insider' access to practitioners through my academic role (Ross, 2017). While I am mindful of the limitations of convenience sampling (Patton, 2015, Tracy, 2019) I decided that given the difficulty of identifying potential participants for this study, this approach was justified.

I shared some brief information about the study with these managers by email. Two managers indicated they would be interested, subsequently agreeing to participate in the study. At my request, they also suggested other colleagues who might be willing to take part, supporting the use of a snowballing recruitment method (Patton, 2015:270) to identify two further participants, providing a final sample of six participants. Carey (2012:39) suggests that the snowballing method is effective when working with populations that are difficult to access. In this case, gaining access through a colleagues' recommendation, enabled me to identify participants who might not otherwise have responded to my initial request.

Pilot study

I conducted one pilot interview prior to the research. Pilots can support the development of a coherent interview schedule and ensure relevance of the schedule for the topic (Carey, 2013:120). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) also recommend undertaking at least one pilot interview to support the researcher's understanding of the IPA method. The pilot also enabled me to test the introduction of the image-making activity. A former colleague, who had worked within children's services for many years, agreed to participate in the pilot interview and completed the research consent form. I conducted the pilot interview in March 2017 and following the interview, the participant also provided some feedback about the experience of completing the image-making activity. As a result of the pilot and discussion with my supervisory team, I decided to move the image-making section to an earlier point in the schedule.

Data collection - Interview considerations

Roller and Lavrakas (2015:51) emphasise the importance of a well-planned interview to optimise the credibility of research findings, while Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:56) endorse the use of an interview guide to produce a detailed account of the topic under investigation.

Van Manen (2015:66) and Kvale (1983:174) both emphasise the exploratory nature of the interview as a vehicle for accessing the 'lifeworld' of the participant. Tracy emphasises the importance of building rapport through open exploratory questions (Tracy 2019:164; Carey, 2012:113) while Smith and Nizza (2022:21) recommend alternating between descriptive and narrative questions to encourage the participant to both describe and reflect on their experiences.

I used these principles to inform the development of my own interview guide, modified at several stages through discussion with my supervisory team (Smith & Nizza, 2022:22). I asked participants to focus on a specific situation with a child to act as a trigger for both the image-making activity and for our discussion of the experience of empathy. Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009:58) recommend approaching the core topic of study 'sideways' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009:58), to allow for spontaneity and interpretation by the participant in presenting their own perceptions. In response to this, and following discussion with my supervisory team, I chose to focus the initial interview schedule on the experience of 'emotion' generally, rather than focus specifically on 'empathy' within the interview, to allow participants to reflect broadly on their experiences.

I agreed an initial schedule of questions which was reviewed by the Ethics committee in November 2017, who suggested the inclusion of an additional statement to focus on participants' wellbeing during the early part of the interview. Following these amendments, final approval for the interview schedule was granted in January 2018 (Appendix 8A). On reviewing the transcripts from Studies 1 and 2, I noted that in half of the interviews of Study 1 and all the interviews in Study 2, I introduced the term empathy in response to comments by the participant. I therefore chose to include the term 'empathy' in my interview schedule for study 3. The interview schedule was also amended to reflect the focus on the supervisory function of participants but retained the structure of the previous studies. This amended schedule was approved by the Ethics Committee in October 2019. (See the amended interview schedule protocol in Appendix 8B).

Kvale (2006:482) and Fontana and Frey (2003:62) highlight the potential for qualitative interviews to reinforce asymmetrical power relationships, due to the

researcher's professional status and identity. As a middle-aged, white, male academic, I needed to be mindful of the potential power associated with aspects of my identity during the interview process. Taylor (2015:73) suggests adopting a '*deliberate naivete*' within interviews, to minimise the interviewers' impact on the participant. In addition, Finlay (2011) reminds us that when even working within a familiar context, the encounter with another person is always partial and incomplete, urging researchers to remain curious and empathic towards the participant, in recognition of their 'otherness' within the interview (Finlay, 2011:78).

Data collection – image-making task

At an early point within the interview schedule, I invited participants to create an image within the sand tray to represent their work with a specific child from their caseload. I provided participants with a shallow tray, approximately 65 cm long x 50cm wide x 15 cm deep, with a 4 cm depth of fine dry sand covering the base. Participants were invited to choose from 6 trays containing approximately 400 objects representing aspects of the world selected from a suggested list of materials by Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson (2011 - see Appendix 9), to include images of a diverse range of animals, people, natural and built environments, fantasy, and cartoon characters. While Lowenfeld also provided water for children to use within their worlds (Lowenfeld, 2003), I decided not to include water with my participants, due to the challenge of transporting and using water within the range of office environments where the interviews were conducted. I aimed to cover a range of cultural tropes and characters, offering participants a choice of symbols to use within their images (Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017). Participants were invited to review the objects and to create their image in silence. Clark and Morriss (2014:10) highlight the process of image

creation as a central aspect of the research process, that needs to be honoured as such.

Once participants had completed their image, I invited them to tell me about their work with the child, focussing on aspects of emotion within their practice. In accordance with participants' agreement through the signed consent form, digital photographs of the final images were taken during the interview and participants were invited to name their images, which were also recorded within the transcription. Russell and Diaz (2013) suggest there is a complementarity between visual images and their accompanying textual data, and I have sought to capture this through the iterative process of visual and textual analysis. However, Rose (2016:33) stresses that taking photographs of visual materials modifies them from three to two dimensions and cautions researchers to be mindful of this change within the analytic process. A detailed analysis of the images and titles is available in the finding's sections of this thesis.

Conducting the interviews

I began data collection for Studies 1 & 2 in April 2018 and this process lasted approximately 8 months, completing 11 interviews during this time. Data collection for Study 3 took place between February and July 2020. Table 6 below provides details of the data collected across these 3 separate studies:

Study 1 - Experienced social workers					
Transcript number	Pseudonym	Length of interview in minutes	Face to face/ telephone	Number of transcribed words	Included Sand tray 'World' exercise
1	Liz	49	Face to face	7360	Yes
2	Maggie	45	Face to face	7119	yes
3	Phil	38	Face to face	5483	yes
4	Kirsty	40	Face to face	5649	yes
5	Keith	54	Face to face	8115	yes
6	Bianca	88	Face to face	10092	yes
7	Sally	40	Face to face	3446	yes
8	Gillian	67	Face to face	10674	yes
Study 2 – Newly qualified social workers					
Transcript number	Pseudonym	Length of interview in minutes	Face to face/ telephone	Number of transcribed words	Included Sand tray 'World' exercise
1	Louise	65	Face to face	10089	yes
2	Melissa	56	Face to face	7297	yes
3	Susan	66	Face to face	8705	yes
Study 3 - Supervisors & team managers					
Transcript number	Pseudonym	Length of interview in minutes	Face to face/ telephone	Number of transcribed words	Included Sand tray 'World' exercise
1	Maxine	56	Face to face	9031	yes
2	Amanda	63	Face to face	10917	yes
3	Sharon	51	telephone	9292	no
4	Trudie	50	telephone	7164	no
5	Laura	47	telephone	7093	no
6	Gemma	56	telephone	9355	no

Table 5: Table of Data collected across three studies. (Author's own creation, 2024).

Tracy (2019:182) emphasises the importance of logistical planning when undertaking a series of interviews. Across the three studies, I completed seventeen interviews and needed to negotiate convenient times and venues with each participant, who were offered the choice of being interviewed within their work context, at the university, or at an alternative public venue of their choice. Two participants expressed a preference to be interviewed away from their workplace and came to the University campus to complete the interviews. A further eleven participants were interviewed within their respective workplaces. I booked a

private room for each interview and was able to set up the equipment before the interview began (Carey, 2012;111). The image making materials were laid out on a table with the sand tray at one end for ease of access. Interviews lasted between 37 and 88 minutes with an average length of 54 minutes.

During study 3, because of the Covid 19 pandemic, I was unable to hold face-to-face interviews for 4 participants, who were all social work supervisors. As a result, following ethical approval, I switched to telephone interviews to complete the final study (Tracy, 2021;187; Roller & Lavrakas, 2014:59). Carey (2012:111) notes the absence of visual cues and other data within telephone interviews and this did mean participants were also unable to complete the image-making task.

Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and digital files were transferred to my university digital cloud storage, password protected for maximum security (Carey, 2012:116; Tracy, 2019;185). I reflected in my research diary after each interview, recoding distinctive aspects of each interview, including my own emotions and reactions to the participant and their story (Goldspink & Engward, 2019). This process supported my reflexivity when engaging in transcribing and analysing each script. I transcribed each audio recording, following the guidance from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009:74) to pay attention to the semantic content of interviews as the primary source of data rather than the prosodic aspects. While transferring the audio file for Interview 9, I realised that there had been a problem part way through the recording which had malfunctioned. I immediately recorded detailed notes from memory into my reflective diary to capture the key aspects of the interview (Tracy, 2019:185) and then also transcribed the available data to ensure retention of the maximum detail from this interview.

Reflection

The period of data collection was interrupted by two significant events for me – firstly my twin brother died unexpectedly in March 2020, which was a profound experience of loss for me, followed three weeks later by the Covid pandemic and national lockdown (IFG, 2023). Reflecting on my own emotions during this time, I decided to take some time out from the research and so temporarily withdrew from study for a period of nine months. During this period away, I continued to read Heidegger and made new connections with his writing in relation to the care structure and my own ‘being-towards-death’ (Heidegger, 1953) which had greater resonance for me in the light of my own recent personal experiences.

I was able to complete the data collection by phone prior to withdrawal, but this meant I lost the visual aspect of the research for the final study. I was disappointed about this as I had experienced it as a valuable tool within my other studies but took a pragmatic approach in order to be able to complete the study. While the final 4 participants made some reference to the pandemic, I have not focused on these aspects of the interviews within my discussion in order to ensure consistency across the studies. I used my return to my doctoral study as an opportunity to re-engage with my research data and re-visited my early findings with a fresh understanding and interest, making new connections with phenomenological ideas as a result.

Data analysis process

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:75) emphasise the analytic focus of IPA as a key strength of the approach, seeking to closely represent the participants’ experiences and understanding. Data analysis should seek to represent both

converging and diverging themes within individual and group experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015, Smith Larkin & Flowers, 2022;). Van Manen describes the process of phenomenological analysis as a '*process of insightful invention and discovery*' (2015:88) through which the researcher seeks to capture aspects of the participants' experience and to impose some structure onto the data. In this sense, the researcher's interpretations and responses to the participants' data directly shape the analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2022:75). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:20) acknowledge the influence of Heidegger's philosophy, as the researcher is mindful of their 'fore-conception' of the phenomenon and considers how this pre-existing understanding is influencing their analysis.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:29) describe the active use of the hermeneutic circle by the researcher, exploring each 'part' from within the 'whole' of their own existing understanding in a process of reciprocal influence. Throughout the analysis I closely examined individual lines of text, use of language and metaphor within the larger context of the interview data and also considering these in the context of my own evolving understanding of empathy. In this sense the participants and I participate in a co-construction of the final analysis (Brocki & Weadon, 2006; Willis & Lopez, 2004). I also repeatedly shared my analysis with my supervisory team who encouraged me to question, re-evaluate and refine my themes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:153; Crist & Tanner, 2003). I needed to engage reflexively in relation to my own knowledge and experiences of empathy to support my engagement with participants' data.

Within an IPA framework, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, 2022) have provided a clear structure for data analysis which supports the researcher in this process. Smith and colleagues emphasise the fluid, non-linear nature of this

process (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:76) and indeed, I needed to adapt their process to undertake an analysis of the visual aspects of the interview data alongside the transcript. I thus followed an amended sequence of steps as outlined below (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022: 77):

- **Stage 1.** I began by 'reading and re-reading' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:78) each transcript from the first study, listening to excerpts from the audio recordings to support my understanding of the participant's meanings and reviewing the images created within each interview. Finlay (2014:126) describes 'mining' the transcripts for meaning through repeated review and exploration. I also read my diary entries for each interview alongside the transcript to recall the impact of each interview on me as a researcher. This enabled me to become familiar with the individual character of each participant and to pay attention to unique aspects of their interview and experience.
- **Stage 2.** As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009:83) I engaged in a detailed textual analysis of the first transcript from Study 1, using their suggestion of a three columned page for the transcript to identify initial exploratory notes, highlighting descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:84. See Appendix 10 for an example of this analysis from Study 1). Smith and Osborne (2015:15) characterise this as a 'fragmentation' of the data, breaking it down into the level of individual, particular experience – the idiographic lens – before identifying how these fragments might connect with others.

During this stage, I also undertook an initial analysis of the images produced within the interviews. In keeping with the idiographic aims of the study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022), I began with the meaning ascribed to their images by each participant. Several commentators (Guillermin & Drew, 2010, Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, Mannay, 2016) emphasise the importance of beginning with participants' own interpretation of their image to ensure the validity of the analysis and support overall credibility. Rose (2016:32) cites the influence of 'auteur theory' within film making, seeking to establish the meanings and intention of the image creator.

To analyse the images, I devised a template (Appendix 11) which enabled me to combine a photo of each image, with the title given by the participant, along with text from the script in which the participant referred to their image. Margolis and Pauwels (2011:14) emphasise the importance of using a standardised method for visual data analysis to enable the researcher to identify commonalities between images. I used a 2-stage interpretative method, proposed by Barthes (1957, cited in Ledin & Machin, 2018:48). Firstly, in keeping with the exploratory nature of Stage 2, I examined the **denotative elements**—including a description of the physical aspects of the image (dimensions, shapes, positioning) that constitute the literal appearance of the image (Spencer, 2011:147). For example, the choice of symbols and their placement in relation to one another, along with the description provided by the participant as to their

significance. This initial descriptive level enabled me to make connections between the participants' image and their textual data.

- **Stage 3.** After completing this initial analysis of the first transcript, I engaged in a process to identify individual 'experiential statements' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin:2022:89) which seek to capture the participants' direct experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon. Inevitably, these statements also reflect my own interpretation of the phenomenon, as I impose meaning on the participant's words. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022:86) identify this as a critical process of reducing the data, retaining the most important aspects noted within Stage 2. They emphasise the process of developing experiential statements that capture aspects of the participants' lived experience and of ensuring that such statements remain close to the original transcript source (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:90). To support this analysis, I developed a table for each group experiential theme (Appendix 12) which showed relevant experiential statements of each participant, along with page and line numbers to support ease of access (Smith & Mirza, 2022:42).

I also completed Barthes' second proposed stage of visual analysis (1957, cited in Ledin & Machin, 2018:48) – identifying **connotative elements**, which relate to the meaning of the image within the context of wider social practices and ideology, reflected in the way symbols are used and understood by social groups (van Leeuwen, 2001:96). Ledin and Machin (2018:48) identify some key associations that help explore connotative elements including links to archetypes and

cultural myths; use of colour; the context of the image, including positioning, distance, and use of space; the presence or absence of participants; the emotions and beliefs portrayed within the image. From this perspective, I considered the wider meaning of symbols chosen by participants and the overall emotional impact of their image and chosen title. I used this framework to inform my analysis, moving back and forth between the image analysis and the verbal data to support the coherence of my analysis. Some of the visual themes could be seen to complement the experiential themes, while others seemed new and additional. In this sense, I was engaging in the '*triple hermeneutic*' described by Kirkham (2015: 400) responding to the interpretations of the participant to their visual representation of their experience and introducing my own level of interpretation of this data.

- **Stages 4 & 5:** Smith and colleagues (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2022:90) describe the next steps as a process of identifying connections between experiential statements which can produce 'personal experiential themes' (PETs - *ibid*:94) for the participant. Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006:116) describe this process as 'cumulative' coding within an individual script. Within my own analysis, I reviewed my table of 'experiential statements' for participant 1 to identify connections and copied these statements into separate tables, creating clusters of experiential statements (*ibid*:94). This process of 'clustering' statements together into larger themes is common to several qualitative methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2016:582) and arguably the heart of the qualitative data analysis process. Working with digital files, I used a colour coding method to identify clusters of experiential statements (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:99) within Participant 1's data, choosing a title for each cluster, which aimed to capture aspects of the participant's experience (Eatough & Smith, 2006:487).

Eatough and Smith (2006) emphasise the importance of being able to trace the connection between the participant's own words and the interpretation by the researcher. For this purpose, I developed a table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs -Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2022:94) for the participant, identifying each PET and sub-theme and the extracts from which they originated in the transcript (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2022:95). Alongside this table, I also identified where themes from my visual analysis of the participant's image might fit within this larger group of PETs. For Stage 5, this process was repeated for each participant within the study (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2022:99).

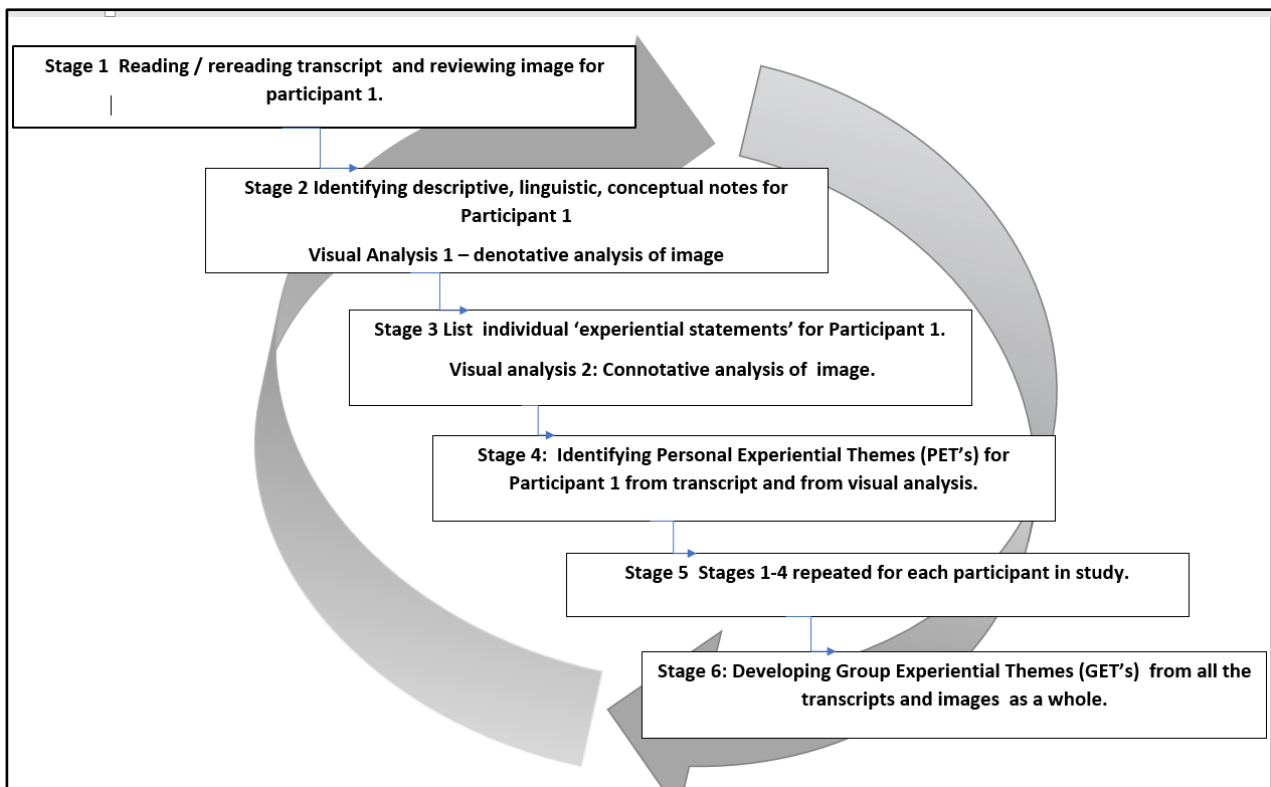


Figure 2. Diagram of data analysis process (Author's own creation, 2024).

Stage 6: Developing Group Experiential themes: During this final stage, I identified similarities and differences across the group of participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:100). I reviewed the tables of personal experiential themes (PETS) for each participant to develop group-level themes which captured their shared and distinctive experiences – *'points of convergence and divergence'* (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2022:100). Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006:116) term this *'integrative coding'* working across the scripts to develop an account of the phenomenon that reflects the range of experiences within the study.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin describe these as Group experiential themes or 'GET's' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:100). Clancy

(2013) warns that potential 'insider' status may lead to an over-identification by the researcher with some participants during this stage at the expense of others, and to privilege their data within the overall dataset. I therefore sought to ensure that I presented all participants evenly throughout the data checking the frequency of the representation within my discussion of each GET. Smith and colleagues suggest that for larger samples, group level themes should be present within at least half of the overall sample's transcripts to demonstrate sufficient validity (Smith, Flowers & Larkin: 2022: 105).

Following on from this process, I produced a table of group experiential themes that summarised my key findings for each study. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022: 101) suggest that such a table forms a '*synthesis*' of the researcher's interpretative endeavour. In addition, I also compared the visual themes from across the participants for each respective study. By examining my visual analysis templates for each participant within a study, I was able to identify several shared visual themes and to integrate these into my analysis during this stage. Guillermin and Drew (2011:184) emphasise the '*inextricably linked*' nature of these two forms of data, requiring simultaneous, iterative analysis by the researcher. Figure 2. represents a visual representation of the data analysis process. I have presented the visual and textual data together within my findings to capture as closely as possible the original experience of the interview for participants.

Reflection

While I have presented a diagram of the data analysis as a linear process (Figure 2) the experience of completing the analysis was both iterative and somewhat chaotic, exciting, and frustrating in equal measure. I returned to the data analysis process repeatedly, revisiting participants' transcripts and images in order to integrate personal experiential themes into group level themes and refine my thinking and understanding. Within my research diary I reflect on the emotional impact of some of the data I shared with my supervisory team, which highlighted for me the potential power of the data and helped me to consider this more explicitly within my analysis.

Throughout 2019, I explored options for completing the visual aspects of the analysis, meeting with a colleague from the arts school who introduced me to semiotics. I recall struggling with the abstract nature of this body of theory, feeling intimidated as to how I could make use of these ideas. During the Joint Social Work Education Conference in September 2019, I had a conversation with a colleague from Robert Gordon University who encouraged me to develop my own template for visual analysis that worked for me, rather than searching for the perfect tool. From this point, I became more confident in conceiving how I might undertake this aspect of the analysis. In hindsight, I felt some benefit from my temporary withdrawal in 2020, enabling me to develop my understanding of and confidence in the analysis process as a whole, so that I was able to revisit my findings again with a fresh eye and refine my group level themes through discussion with my supervisory team.

Additionally, the publication of a second edition of 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) was initially a further source of anxiety due to the significant changes in terminology they had introduced as part of the data analysis process. However, once I had spent some time reviewing this, I found the change beneficial and easy to implement, so adapted my discussion of the analysis to include the new terminology rather than that from the first edition.

Ethical considerations

My first two studies received ethical approval, subject to minor amendments from the Institute of Health and Society Ethics committee in December 2017 and final ethical approval following completion of the amendments in January 2018 (Appendix 13). I completed data collection for Studies 1 & 2 within eighteen months. Due to my work commitments, there was a short pause between studies, while I prepared my ethics application for Study 3, which was granted in October 2019. This study was completed by the summer of 2020.

As a social work researcher, I am guided by the British Association of Social Work Research Policy (BASW, 2019) as well as practicing within the guidance of the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (HRA, 2017) and the university's own Research Ethics Policy and Research Integrity Policy (University of Worcester, 2022). Several issues were relevant for my research project.

Informed consent

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, I paid careful attention to the welfare of participants and was mindful of key ethical research principles (ESRC,

2015, BASW, 2019). Bryman (2016;129) highlights the importance of participants giving informed consent for their participation, including an understanding of the potential risks and benefits, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation (Flick, 2018:140). For each study, I prepared an information sheet (Appendix 6) which explained the focus of the research and outlined the process by which individuals could volunteer to participate. The information sheet outlined the broad focus of the interview as well as providing information about the image creation task. Guillermin and Drew (2011:179) emphasise the importance of preparing participants for creative tasks at the information sharing stage, to support informed consent and reduce potential anxiety. Participants who volunteered were, therefore, aware in advance of the visual research method that they would engage with during the interview. Potential participants had to actively volunteer by responding to an initial email contact, in which they received the information sheet about the study and the consent form (Appendix 7), before confirming their ongoing agreement to participate by responding to a follow up email 7 days later. The information sheet emphasised the voluntary nature of participation in the study and outlined the participants' rights to withdraw their participation during the interview and to withdraw their data for up to 14 days after the interview. No participants opted to exercise this right during the research project.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:48) emphasise the importance of ensuring that participants know what to expect from the research process, including what will happen during the interview and what will happen to their research data following the study. Rose (2016:362) also highlights the importance of informing participants about how their images might be used in future - for example within publications and conference presentations. I included this aspect as one of the

items on the consent form, requiring participants to give their consent to images being used for this purpose. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:48) also recommend re-visiting the issue of consent at the start of the interview to orally confirm the participant's willingness to continue with the study and I confirmed this with each participant at the start of the interview.

Minimising potential for harm

I was also mindful of the potential impact on participants when discussing emotional aspects of their work and my ethical duty to avoid harm and promote the welfare of participants (ESRC, 2015:4; HRA, 2017:10). Flick (2018:143) identifies the tension for the researcher in respecting the autonomy of participants to make their own choices with a general responsibility to promote their welfare. I prepared participants for the potential emotional impact of the interviews by identifying this as a potential risk within the information sheet and judged that as professional practitioners they were competent to make this decision for themselves. The information sheet and consent form also highlighted my whistleblowing responsibilities in the event of concerns arising about the welfare of children or staff during the interview. Following a suggestion from the Ethics committee, I prepared a debriefing leaflet (Appendix 14) which I gave to each participant following their interview, aiming to help participants to clarify the purpose of the study and to highlight further sources of information and support (Carey, 2012; Sharpe & Faye, 2009).

I also considered the potential impact of the visual image-making aspect of the interview. Prosser and Loxley (2008:51) remind the visual researcher of their ethical responsibility for research participants who engage in image creation.

Several commentators (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Savin Baden & Wimpenny, 2014) suggest that such methods have the potential for heightening the emotional impact of interviews. Both Guillermin and Drew (2010:184) and Chapman, Wu and Zhu (2017:812) highlight that researchers should anticipate that image making may evoke unexpected emotions, and that participants may feel uncomfortable or surprised by the process. Mannay, Staples and Edwards (2017:347) acknowledge that visual methods are widely used within psychoanalytic contexts and can provide opportunities for participants to connect with less conscious aspects of their experiences. They stress the importance for the researcher of clearly differentiating the use of visual methods within research, to honour the interpretation of the participant and to maintain the integrity of the research interview process. I was mindful of this responsibility throughout the image-making sequence, to minimise the potential for harm.

During Study 1, one participant did become particularly emotional as she created an image of a difficult home visit involving the removal of some children from their family. When I sensed her distress, I suggested stopping the interview for a brief period. Following a short break, she chose to continue, completing her image and the interview, which in fact was the longest of all the interviews. At the end, I went through the debriefing sheet with her and highlighted my willingness to signpost her to support services if she wished to access them, following up by email one week later. I felt confident that the participant was able to seek support if she chose to do so and respected her decision to explore this difficult material within the safety of the research interview. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022:48) also highlight potential benefits for participants in having their experiences 'represented' within research and it did seem that several participants across the

studies used the opportunity to represent significant aspects of their experience within organisations.

Reflection

During this interview, I was conscious of the emotional impact of the participant's image which she names 'Traumatic and Overwhelming'. As she assembled the image, I sensed that she was re-experiencing some of the emotions associated with what was clearly a difficult event within her practice and I recognised my own strong emotional reactions to the story she told. The fact that she named it as a traumatic event supported my sense that she was re-enacting aspects of the event. I was aware of needing to contain her emotions, to support her in telling the story and processing some of her feelings. As I therapist, I felt confident in acknowledging her distress and used empathy to acknowledge the traumatic nature of the experience both for her and the child. This seemed to help, and she commented that it was the first time she had talked about the event, since it had happened some months earlier. I was surprised to hear this given the very difficult nature of the experience and this enabled me to be mindful of the importance of staying with her story. I suggested she pause to gather her thoughts, and she did so briefly, before completing the image and talking through the experience.

Preserving confidentiality

Another aspect of participant well-being relates to preserving the identity of participants during the study. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:48) differentiate anonymity from confidentiality – while I as the researcher know the identities of the participants, I designed strategies to ensure that their identities remain confidential through the removal of identifying features and use of pseudonyms when data is

presented (Tracy: 2019;170). The use of pseudonyms within qualitative research is widely accepted (Tracey, 2017; Carey, 2012) as a method for providing anonymity. However, Lahman et al (2015) argue that their use can reflect dominant power relationships in relation to gender, ethnicity and class and serve to silence already vulnerable research populations. Lahman and colleagues (2023) urge researchers to be reflexive around their choice of pseudonyms, while Allen and Whiles (2016) suggest asking participants to select their preferred pseudonym at the start of the research process. While I did not ask participants to choose their own pseudonyms, the information sheet and consent form I provided to participants confirmed that their own identities and those of their agency would remain confidential within the data, meaning it would not be possible to identify participants within the presentation of findings.

Tracy (2017) highlights the value of pseudonyms in protecting the participants' identities while seeking to maintain a sense of their personhood through the use of a false name. When selecting pseudonyms, I chose names that were similar in structure, syllables and length to the participant's real name, but sufficient to disguise their identity (Edwards, 2020). While I recognise the limitations of this method, I continued this process throughout the three studies for the purpose of consistency.

Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw their data for up to 14 days after their interview, as stated in both information and consent forms. One participant did contact me following their interview and expressed some anxiety about some of the interview content, in relation to the death of a service user. We reviewed the protections outlined in terms of anonymity, and I explained that the organisation would also be de-contextualised, described simply as a social

services agency within England. Following discussion with my supervisory team, I also agreed to remove some case description from the transcript, to prevent any identifying information relating to child clients of the participant and to preserve anonymity. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:49) acknowledge that due to the idiographic nature of IPA, data will be closely linked to individual participants, and it may therefore be necessary to pay greater attention to issues of confidentiality. This participant was reassured and agreed that her data could remain within the study.

Quality considerations – Authenticity and Trustworthiness

In addition to the ethical aspects of the study, I also address quality matters in relation to my research practice (Bryman, 2016:41; Tracy, 2019:839). Flick (2018:541) identifies tension for qualitative researchers in using established positivist criteria such as reliability and validity to evaluate qualitative data. In two seminal papers Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1986) suggest that constructivist research paradigms require different approaches to evaluation, due to the multiple constructions of experience which they acknowledge. They suggest seeking to establish the 'trustworthiness' (1985:294) of qualitative research, focusing on aspects such as achieving credibility, through prolonged engagement with the study; transferability, by providing rich in-depth description of the findings and context of the study; dependability, in relation to the rigor and transparency of the study; confirmability of the research process, through provision of an audit trail and reflective process by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 :316). Yardley (2000:219) extends these ideas by explicitly emphasising the role of researcher reflexivity, both in acknowledging the social and cultural situatedness of the study,

but also in reflecting on potential impact of the researcher - participant relationship on the findings.

Subsequent commentators have noted the inherent contradiction for qualitative researchers in addressing criteria which seek to mimic positivist notions of objective measures of quality (Schwandt, 2007, Sandelowski, 1993, Finlay, 2006). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:148) suggest that such measures can easily become simplistic or prescriptive, overlooking the fluid and creative nature of qualitative research. Finlay (2006:320) emphasises the importance of embedding a reflexive commitment to understanding at the heart of the research enterprise to avoid tokenism and a check list approach to quality. Lincoln and Guba's second paper (1986:20) added a further criterion of 'authenticity' as particularly suited to constructivist research, including aspects such as presenting findings with 'fairness' to ensure all participants' voices are heard, creating a more authentic understanding of the research topic for participants, and creating new learning that leads to change within a social context.

Several commentators (Smith, 2011; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Brocki & Weardon, 2006) also propose specific quality criteria for IPA research. Smith, (2011:17) suggests that good studies will clearly indicate the prevalence of each theme across the data group (Appendix 12) and present both convergent and divergent themes, supporting trustworthiness of the interpretation. Brocki and Weardon (2006:97) emphasise the need for transparency and reflexivity by the researcher as to their role within the formulation of the research and interpretation of the data. De Witt and Ploeg (2006:224) stress the importance of integrating underpinning philosophical theory within the research findings, to illustrate how their fore understandings have shaped the researcher's interpretation.

In seeking to demonstrate these qualities within my own research practice, I find Finlay's emphasis on '*rigour and resonance*' (Finlay, 2011:263) to be helpful, balancing an awareness of trustworthiness in how the research is conducted and evidenced in a transparent way, with a commitment to capturing the spirit and emotion of participants' experience. The use of a multi-modal approach (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2022:128) using interviews with a visual method, aims to enrich and deepen the credibility and rigour of the research, providing a level of triangulation between the verbal and visual data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:301). In addition, themes were reviewed and refined with my supervisory team, through a process of de-briefing (ibid:308) and reflection to ensure the relevance of personal and group level themes (Crist & Tanner, 2003:203). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:153) also stress the value of a review process with research supervisors to assess the credibility and fit between the raw data and the identified themes and we were able to do this at several points during the analysis stage of the project.

I have provided a clear audit trail of how I have arrived at my interpretations, to ensure that personal and group level themes (PETs & GETs) can be linked to examples from individual participants' transcripts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:95). I followed a similar process with my visual data analysis, using a template to bring a coherent approach to my analysis of the images and symbols used by the participants (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011:14). This is a potential strength of IPA, providing a systematic approach to data collection and analysis which supports the overall dependability and confirmability of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:319). Yardley (2000:222) proposes 'transparency' as a key aspect of overall trustworthiness, supporting the use of an audit trail to help the reader make sense of the researcher's process.

In addition, I kept a reflective journal throughout my research, to support my reflexive stance during the period of planning and data collection and then through my data analysis process. Lincoln and Guba (1985:319) propose that a research journal can serve as a source of triangulation when seeking to confirm the researcher's analysis. Goldspink and Engward (2019) argue that reflective journals may also support reflexivity in relation to the researcher's underlying assumptions and unconscious bias towards participants. I was able to explore my own values and responses both within the journal and with my supervisory team on occasions. In this context, Vickary, Young and Hicks (2017:552) suggest that journalling can serve as an alternative form of bracketing for the IPA researcher, allowing them to bring the 'fore-structure' of their understanding into conscious awareness to minimise the potential impact on their analysis.

Alongside my focus on ensuring rigour and transparency within my research, I was also committed to the principle of 'fairness' proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986:20) as a marker of authenticity. There is a clear congruence with IPA's emphasis on the idiographic nature of data collection, ensuring the individual voices of participants participant are heard and points of convergence and divergence clearly identified (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2022:382). I addressed this quality of 'multi-vocality' (Tracy, 2019:846) by reviewing my analysis and ensuring each participant's distinct contribution was identified for each theme within my findings. I also compared the frequency of representation for each participant to ensure parity of representation in terms of their individual experiences within the data. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:101) recommend producing a table which maps examples of each theme and subtheme from participants to illustrate how

each participant has contributed to the development of the theme, creating a further mechanism for audit.

In terms of seeking resonance within the research, Finlay (2006:322) explores the concept of 'artistry', suggesting good qualitative research will have a 'vividness' which reflects the creative co-construction of experience between participants and researcher. Sandelowski (1993) emphasises the impressionistic nature of qualitative research, drawing on the researchers own frame of reference and reflexivity, suggesting that quality is enhanced by the flair and depth of presentation, rather than by external criteria. In undertaking research which combines IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) with a visual research method (Rose, 2016) I have sought to achieve a balance between the rigour of a structured research method and the flexibility of a visual method to ensure the representation and resonance of participants' felt experience. Each participant was invited to provide a title for their image, helping to capture their distinctive voices within the data. Throughout the research, in line with Lincoln and Guba's guidance (1985:314) I have provided a 'thick' description from each interview, to provide a keen sense of each participant, including a brief pen picture of each interviewee. Similarly, I am mindful of Smith's suggestion (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:101) to integrate personal themes (PETs) into group level themes (GETs) in a way that reflects '*the unique individual way in which different participants are reflecting that shared quality*', identifying both points of convergence and divergence. Sandelowski (1993:4) proposes that the researcher has a role in co-constructing themes to engage in 'persuasion' by highlighting key findings and making them visible through their style of presentation. Van Manen (2015:13) echoes this idea when discussing phenomenology as '*primal telling*'. I have sought to identify

language and metaphors which are evocative of individual participant's experience, whilst also demonstrating my own creativity within my interpretations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the study design and method, including how the sample was recruited, the methods of data collection, transcription, and data analysis. Details of the image creation task have been reviewed and the ethical considerations within the project have been identified. The chapter concluded by examining the criteria of quality and trustworthiness for qualitative research and for interpretative phenomenological analysis projects specifically.

Section 2: Findings

My findings are presented throughout the next three chapters, each one presenting distinct theme from the three separate studies. I have used Smith Flowers and Larkin's (2022:95) convention for presenting themes using the concepts of 'personal experiential themes' (PETs) and 'group experiential themes (GETs) (ibid:100) to generate the final set of group experiential themes and sub themes presented in each of the findings chapters. In keeping with their recommendation (Smith Flowers and Larkin, 2022:95), I have presented the names of Group Experiential themes in **BOLD UPPER CASE** and the names of sub themes in **bold lower case**.

Throughout the findings, the reader should be mindful that participants discuss a range of experiences from their practice, which include some difficult, potentially distressing experiences, including the neglect, injury, exploitation and indeed, deaths of children and young people.

Chapter 6: Study 1 - Findings from group of experienced children's social workers

Chapter Overview

Within this chapter I will present a summary of my findings from my first research study with a group of experienced social workers. I will provide brief biographical descriptions of each participant to support the idiographic focus of IPA studies and present three major themes, each with subthemes, to capture the experiences of these participants in relation to the use of empathy within their practice.

Introducing the participants

In this study, I conducted interviews with social workers who had a minimum of three years post-qualifying experience, during Summer and Autumn, 2018. Participants worked within two children's services agencies in England across a variety of teams working with children and families. In keeping with the idiographic emphasis of IPA, I will briefly introduce each participant to give a sense of their individual contribution to the study. I have used pseudonyms to preserve participants' confidentiality and more easily differentiate between participants when presenting data (Taylor, 2015:10; Tracy, 2019:167).

Participants

- **Liz:** Liz has been a social worker for five years, currently working in a looked after children's team. She is in the process of moving to a new post in another authority. She discusses her work with a young boy with a disrupted placement history, recently moved to another foster home. Liz's interview conveys a sense of sadness and concern for the child and guilt that she is leaving him for a new job.

- **Maggie:** Maggie has been a social worker for four and a half years. She works in a looked after children's team, having previously worked with young people experiencing child sexual exploitation. Her interview describes working with several young people in vulnerable situations. Maggie conveys an enthusiasm and emotional expressiveness in her interview.
- **Phil:** Phil has been a social worker for 34 years, currently working within a looked after children's team. He describes working with a young boy to find a permanent placement after repeated disruptions. Phil describes his enjoyment of the social work role, supporting children within the care system.
- **Kirsty:** Kirsty has been a qualified social worker for three years and works within an initial assessment team. She discusses one of her first practice cases, with a young boy who has experienced neglect and emotional abuse and describes feeling that she has brought a 'fresh pair of eyes' to the case.
- **Keith:** Keith has been a social worker for five years, working in a children's safeguarding team. He discusses his work with an adolescent male who has been removed from his mother's care due to neglect and emotional abuse, reflecting on the young man's anger and aggression. Keith discusses the importance of modelling the management of his own emotions.
- **Bianca:** Bianca has been a social worker for three years, working in a children's safeguarding team currently. During her interview Bianca discusses the experience of removing a 12-year-old child from their home with police colleagues and the emotional impact this has had on her since.
- **Sally:** Sally has been a social worker for six years, working in a children's safeguarding team. Sally discusses supporting a young woman experiencing sexual exploitation and how she needs to adapt her practice to be available to this

young person. Sally's interview was characterised by anger and frustration within the organisation about how young people are being supported.

- **Gillian:** Gillian has been a social worker for three and a half years, working in an assessment team, completing short-term assessments. Gillian discusses an initial visit to safeguard the children of a mother who was being admitted to hospital under mental health legislation and needed emergency foster care. She describes struggling with her own emotions during this case and the impact on her over time.

The sample has a high level of homogeneity, with 7 participants having a career length between 3 - 6 years duration. Phil is an exception, due to having 34 years' service. However, this candidate met the inclusion criteria and as one of only two men in the study, I opted to retain him as a participant, whilst being mindful of his unique perspective. According to the Department for Education (2021) women form 87% of the children and families social work labour force, so in terms of gender these participants are typical of the wider workforce. One participant from the sample was of a white European ethnicity, while the rest were of white UK ethnicity, so the lack of black and minority ethnic practitioner perspectives is a potential limitation to this study.

Findings

Throughout the chapter, I provide quotes from participants with reference to the page number / first line of quote from the transcript in brackets. For example: (Maggie, p.2/13). To support the interpretative aspect of the study, I have integrated both verbal and visual data into my analysis of the findings and will use examples from both to support my development of themes.

The group level experiential themes (GETs Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022)

and sub-themes are presented in the table below:

THEME 1: EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING IN PRACTICE	1.1 Empathic understanding of the child's experience: <i>'I could see she was really troubled'</i> (Bianca)
	1.2 Communicating understanding to the child: <i>-"that is really shit, what can we do?"</i> (Maggie)
	1.3 Meaning making – <i>holding the child's story. 'she had so many unanswered questions about her childhood'</i> –(Maggie)
THEME 2: EMPATHY IN ACTION	2.1 Building empathic relationships over time: <i>'it took me 4 months of work to build a relationship with her'</i> (Sally)
	2.2 Embodied empathy – social work on the move: <i>'we had to break the door down'</i> (Maggie)
	2.3 Balancing empathy with authority: <i>'I think every social worker has two sides'</i> (Kirsty)
THEME3: EMPATHY & EMOTIONS	3.1 Experiencing empathic distress: <i>'I cried, I did cry, I lay in bed that night crying'</i> (Maggie)
	3.2 Emotional regulation strategies <i>'I had to be really strong willed to push for what I thought was best'</i> (Kirsty)
	3.3 Emotional organisations <i>'it's to do with the organisation as well as the person'</i> (Sally)

Table 6 – Group experiential themes & sub- themes in Study 1 (Author's own creation, 2024)

THEME 1 - EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING IN PRACTICE

This group theme brings together aspects of participants' understanding of how empathy is used in their practice to identify key elements of their experience.

1.1 Empathic understanding of the child's experience

Participants conveyed a clear understanding of how the children were feeling. Some participants had well-established relationships with the child, while for

others, they were meeting for the first time, often in particularly challenging circumstances. Most participants identified strongly ambivalent feelings within the children. For example, Keith comments on a 13-year-old boy:

'this is kind of two sides to him he looks sad, but he looks very angry, he looks...kind of anxiety really, he is always worried' (Keith: p.3/25).

Bianca also describes a 12-year-old girl with a history of sexual abuse - *'she presented as a little girl at times, quite vulnerable'* (Bianca: p.2/32) and then chose symbols of gargoyles and devils to represent the child's feelings:

'I could see she was really troubled, so these three figures (points to symbols in tray) represent her demons, I'd like to say, in terms of how she was feeling' (Bianca: p.3/5).

Bianca struggles to reconcile the young woman's apparent adult awareness with her vulnerability, using the metaphor of 'demons' to capture the dilemma for this child. Other participants also used symbols to convey their empathic understanding. For example, Liz used the metaphor of a whirlwind when discussing how a 7-year-old boy feels in care:

'he's been in a whirlwind for a good while, not knowing what's going on, round and round and round and round and up and down, ...just feeling like he's mixed up. mixed around' (Liz: p15/22).

Liz captures the uncertainty surrounding this young boy's frequent placement disruptions through the repetition of words such as *'round and round'*, conveying the child's confusion clearly. Similarly, Gillian describes the feelings of an 8-year-old boy, following his mother's detention under mental health legislation commenting on his disorientation:

'... he just came away with it (mum's coat), he looked like, he looked like a refugee, because he had almost this blanket wrapped around him, wondering, lost' (Gillian, p.12-13/29).

There is a sense of loss and abandonment for the child in the metaphor of 'refugee', of numbness in the face of parental separation and a sense of

displacement. Within her image, Sally chose the symbol of a naked infant doll at the centre of her tray to reflect the experience of a 17-year-old girl at risk of sexual exploitation by a network of predatory men:

'because I think that is how she felt, naked, exposed, vulnerable' (Sally: p.2/12).

It was apparent that workers encounter a range of powerful emotions in response to traumatic events in children's' lives. Three of the workers used the concept of '*chaos*' or '*mess*' (Maggie, p15/19; Kirsty p9/30; Sally: p5/30) as a metaphor within their images to convey their understanding of the child's experience, reflecting the uncertainty surrounding the children.

Kirsty (Figure 3), chose three objects to convey the experience of a 12-year-old boy, including a skeleton, to reflect his frail physical health, as a child subject to concerns of fabricated illness by his mother, a gun to reflect his unusual interest in death and worry dolls:

'because for him it was all hidden... and I think he was so brainwashed into what he should kind of think and feel and say, he didn't know himself' (Kirsty, p.6/24).

Kirsty titles her image 'The Mess', capturing a sense of threat and confusion in trying to build a helping relationship with the boy, who is beset by obstacles and sources of risk, both real and imagined. Helping figures stand around the edge of the tray, struggling to get close to the child. It was evident that the participants were encountering and responding to complex emotions for many of the children in their care.



Figure 3. Kirsty - The Mess (Author's photograph, 2024)

1.2 Communicating understanding to the child.

Workers varied in their willingness to acknowledge the child's emotions directly.

Maggie stood out for the emotional directness of her language. For example:

'to strip away all the rubbish and look at the bare bones of a situation and bear to think 'that is really shit' what can we do?' (Maggie: p.16/6).

Maggie's communication powerfully conveys her understanding of the young woman's situation and willingness to be alongside her. Liz describes supporting younger children to identify and name their feelings:

'be honest and say 'I haven't been where you are' but try and name some of those emotions for you ... I think that you have got to be able to name all of those different feelings' (Liz: p.20/18).

Keith also emphasises communicating understanding to a young man who is experiencing the breakdown of a foster placement:

'I think your role is first and foremost to acknowledge how they are feeling... so sometimes it's about saying, if it was me, I might be feeling like this and giving some permission to feel certain ways' (Keith: p.14/1).

With these children, the workers convey empathy by explaining and naming emotions as well as reflecting them. However, Gillian views empathy as more challenging, expressing reservations as to whether it is helpful to focus on emotions with children in particular:

'Sometimes I avoid it a little bit because it's quite scary if you open someone. And I am really conscious as well, with children I don't want to unpack something that I haven't got the skills or the time to support them with' (Gillian: p.20/26).

This ambivalence towards children's emotion suggests a potential barrier to empathy. Gillian describes instead using a direct work technique using characters from a well-known children's movie to help her introduce emotions quickly within an interview if necessary (Gillian, p.19/4). However, in her interview Gillian does describe an empathic intervention when she uses imagery to comfort an 8-year-old boy who has been separated from his mother and who she is taking to foster care:

'I said, 'just look up at the stars, they are always there, no matter where you are, they are always there, and you can see them no matter where you are, and your Mum can see them' and that was the only thing I could think of, and I thought 'I hope to God that he actually hangs on to that' (Gillian: p.12/17).

Within this statement, there is a tangible sense of Gillian's desire to communicate her understanding of his loss, albeit in an indirect way, to '*make it better*' for him, (Gillian, P12/18). The metaphor conveys understanding more effectively than through words, reflecting her genuine desire to help the child, while stopping short of naming his sadness and isolation directly. This is a reminder of the emotional power of the empathic exchanges between children and workers.

Reflection

During this interview I felt the emotional impact of this image of a frightened boy in the back of a stranger's car, looking at the stars as a way of connecting with his lost mother. The feeling stayed with me in the days following the interview and I used the phrase 'looking at the stars' as a title for a conference presentation. In my diary, January 2019, I reflect on how, despite Gillian's declared avoiding of children's emotions, her use of a metaphor had captured her understanding of the child's fear and sense of loss. This enabled me to see beyond language to consider the felt emotion for this worker, and how this was expressed through metaphor – capturing a shared understanding of the child's experience. This inspired me to return to the symbols and metaphors used as part of my visual analysis, recognising them as a distinct source of empathic understanding within the data.

1.3 Meaning making – holding the child's story.

The participants highlight the value of knowing a child's family history to support their use of empathy, using this knowledge to make sense of behaviour and emotions. For example, Keith discusses the insecure relationship between a 13-year-old boy and his carer:

'I think we were dealing with a young man who from a very young age had a lot that he had not had any control over, and as a result he was trying to control them' (Keith: p.4-5/25).

His understanding enables Keith to make sense of the young man's threatening behaviour, supporting him to develop a trusting relationship as a result. Similarly, Bianca highlights the impact of a girl's history of sexual abuse and how this has reduced her ability to discern appropriate and inappropriate behaviour:

'she is 12 years old, and she has been sexually abused by mum's partner, and by a step sibling when she was seven...Mum chose to remain in the relationship and allowed him back in the house' (Bianca: p.2/25).

Bianca is concerned that the girl's situation is causing her to normalise her abuse (Bianca: p4/23) and make excuses for the abuser's behaviour. Workers' understanding of past and present experiences allow them to put young people's behaviour and emotions into context. Maggie discusses a young woman who had questions about the reasons she was in care and needed clear information about her own history:

'she needed to understand what had happened, she had so many unanswered questions about her childhood' (Maggie: p.14/11).

Maggie provides the young woman with access to her social services file and together they review her care history to help make sense of her experiences. Maggie shows empathic understanding of the child's needs and the importance of sharing information with her:

'we gave her her social services file, her redacted file and we also did quite a lot of work with that which led to us to a ceremonial burning on the beach because she wanted rid of it' (Maggie: p14/4).

Liz also discusses the significance of understanding a child's care history, in relation to a 7-year-old boy who has been in care since infancy and is angry about his separation from parents and siblings:

'he's getting older, so he is asking questions, so we are just going to start a lot more life story work with him now because he's asking so many questions, we need some of that to fall into place for him' (Liz: p 8/18).

Liz suggests that the child feels replaced by another child who is to remain permanently in his foster home:

'it feels like there is another little princess who has arrived and taken his place with family, they want to keep her and not him' (Liz, p.7/32).

This is a powerful image of being unwanted and suggests Liz's own emotions are heightened in response to this loss. Liz creates a picture of the boy's placement history and titles it a 'Complicated Crowd' (Figure 4) identifying the

multiple placements and carers the child has experienced, including: his mother, new partner, and siblings; his father in prison; previous foster carers; siblings who live in different placements; and his current short-term carers. Her image is tightly packed with symbols, organised around but separate from, the child. She chose a monster figure from a well-known cartoon to represent the child's worry and angry feelings, along with symbols of a footballer and dinosaur to represent his favourite possessions, commenting: *'those bits have stayed with him, no matter where he has been'* (Liz: p.5/19).



Figure 4. Liz - A complicated Crowd (Author's photograph, 2024)

Liz comments on the complexity of the child's placement history, suggesting it was difficult for her as an adult to hold in mind, *'never mind him being 7 and it to actually be your life in the middle of it all'* (Liz: p.12/4). This was a powerful representation of the boy's experience and showed sensitive understanding by his social worker of the complexity of relationships for children in care.

In contrast, Kirsty suggests that the familiarity of workers with a child can also be problematic leading to a fixed perception of the family (*Kirsty: p.3/31*). She describes needing to set aside the established view of the family to engage effectively with the child:

'I thought well no one else has made a difference with it, but it just needed that 'fresh out of uni, mind-set', fresh pair of eyes to really see it for what it was really' (Kirsty, p.4/1).

It appears that knowledge of the child's wider context can provide both insight but also potentially limit the worker's ability or willingness to fully understand the child's experience, requiring reflection and self-awareness from the worker.

THEME 2: EMPATHY IN ACTION

This superordinate theme brings together aspects of the interaction between worker and child and considers how these different aspects emerge in practice.

2.1 Building empathic relationships over time.

Participants identify a strong temporal aspect to their relationships, with all of them identifying duration of relationships with children as a significant element within their work. For example, Liz comments:

'he's had these changes of placement since I have known him over this piece of time, yes it's been a very emotional ride' (Liz: p 3/13)

Liz represents herself as a 'grasshopper' within her image commenting:

'it does feel like you jump in and out of the situations, so when there's a crisis, when there's something going on, er, it can just be the visits but you're not there all the time, you are in and out in and out in and out (Liz, P 13/31)

There is a sense of frustration and impermanence for Liz, only able to be alongside the child during crisis events in his life. To counter this, Liz identifies ways in which she seeks to provide continuity for the child, ensuring that his familiar favourite objects are with him whenever he moves placement:

'so, his collection of dinosaurs, his wanting to play with dinosaurs, he has managed to have his duvets and his curtains and all the things that mean dinosaurs have been everywhere with him' (Liz: p.5/20).

Liz demonstrates her empathic understanding of the child's needs through moments of disruption and sadness for him. Such involvement in significant moments is a recurring theme amongst the participants. Kirsty describes her involvement at each key stage in a child's care story:

'I took it all the way from child in need through to care order and he is still in foster care with the foster carers I placed him with, for the interim care order' (Kirsty: p 4/24).

Kirsty describes building a relationship slowly with this mistrustful 12-year-old boy, who grew in confidence over time. It is apparent in the interview how significant her work with this child has become for Kirsty, who conveys a strong emotional investment in this relationship:

'he gave me a card, saying like thank you for everything that you have done for me... which was amazing' (Kirsty: p.7/7).

Within a safeguarding context, Keith describes responding to the initial aggression and mistrust of a 13-year-old boy, following a decision to bring him into foster care:

'When we did break that news to him, he smashed up a load of computers, plant pots, and was saying he was going to kick the shit out of me, kill me, all sorts of things' (Keith, p.5/11).

Keith responds to the boy's anger and aggression, setting limits, and using empathy and honesty to acknowledge his frustration:

'... to acknowledge where he was at with that: 'look I know this is not what you want, I know you are not happy with this', so he was aware that I had an appreciation of how he was feeling' (Keith: p.5/ 15).



Figure 5. *Phil - A Positive Life* (Author's photograph, 2024)

Phil's image (Figure 5) was distinctive within the group in using only 4 symbols. He describes moving a 9-year-old boy into a new foster placement, following two placement breakdowns and his own satisfaction that the placement was now working well. He uses the symbol of the Hulk for the boy '*that's him, Mr Angry*' (Phil: p2/32) and a knight for the carer, commenting '*he fights every battle for him*' (Phil: p3/24). Phil represents himself with a symbol of a totem pole, placed centrally between the boy, the carer and a skeleton which represented the care system. The rest of the tray is empty, offering a clear contrast to the chaotic images of other participants, suggesting that Phil focuses on these key aspects of the child's life experience. I was struck by the choice of Phil's symbol for himself, a totem pole, as a cultural symbol representing accumulated wisdom and experience, but also a sense of endurance and constancy. The image is titled '*A positive life*', suggesting that the longevity of this relationship over time has

contributed to the successful outcomes for this child. Phil's enjoyment of working with him is apparent:

'when I see him, we have great fun, he wants to play, and he wants to show me something and that's great we will play and chat and that's great and I come away thinking 'yeah, he's happy he is safe' (Phil: p: 6/5).

Within the context of shorter-term crisis work, Sally describes how she needed to work differently to build a relationship with a 17-year-old young woman at risk of exploitation, working flexibly beyond standard working hours:

'it took me 4 months of work to build a relationship with her, to build trust and to get a disclosure from her ... I worked with her from August to January, but I did get the disclosure in the end which everyone was pleased about. (Sally, p4/6).

Maggie describes a similar approach with a young person and comments on the emotional intensity involved in supporting such children at risk:

'it was very intense and it's very difficult because when you work with that one young person who has nobody, they solely rely on you, it's really, really difficult' (Maggie, p.13/11).

These workers also acknowledge the emotional impact of working intensively with vulnerable young people:

'blood sweat and tears went into it, I'm not going to lie and I'm very proud of where she is today, I know where she is and I know what she's doing, I know she is leading a fantastic life and has done so well' (Maggie: p.15/1).

Their involvement with children across time draws workers into complex relationships with significant implications for workers' own emotions. Some workers appear to particularly value the relationships they develop with children.

For example, Phil comments:

'that's why I do the job I'm sure, and when they move on or they do something exceptionally well, you are proud of them' (Phil: p13/9).

Interestingly, Gillian expressed a preference for short term assessment work, where relationship was not a primary focus:

'there are other people that are really good at building those long-term relationships and building up those stuff, and I don't like to do that, I like to be able to go, well that is that piece of work and there it is, and move forward' (Gillian, p.3/3).

Importantly, Gillian shows a degree of self-awareness and has chosen a job in an initial referral team that reflects this preference. Both Kirsty (p.8/15) and Liz (p.10/1) highlight the challenges around ending relationships with children and the sense of connection they continue to feel. Bianca discusses her concern about transferring a safeguarding case to another worker:

'I haven't said goodbye yet, to the children I've been through this with ... I erm, I am not thinking about it at the moment...I have a bit of a plan really by introducing the new worker and trying to build the relationship rather than just sending the referral and saying byeee' (Bianca: p 17/1).

Bianca's sense of having '*been through*' something together with the children, was apparent in most of the interviews. Four participants describe deliberately reducing the intensity of their relationships with children, to support the development of new, more permanent relationships. Within the context of long-term placements, Phil comments:

'there's that bit of having to back off and having to let your young person go and build relationships with brilliant foster carers, but you have to back off and back off and that is always difficult' (Phil: p.7/20).

Maggie discusses a similar process with a young woman she has supported and is now encouraging her to move towards a new independent life:

'you have to know I think in social work when to back away and say look you don't need me anymore... but she felt that she needed that crutch and I'm like you know you can drop me a text message that is fine, gave her my works mobile but go and live your life and have some fun' (Maggie: p.15/8).

There is an emotional quality to these relationships with the workers acknowledging the reciprocity involved in their relationships with young people.

Sally also identifies the importance of ending as a way of marking the progress made by the young person:

'but the intense period of work is over now – during that time she needed to know she was special to someone... I think just because I felt this young person really needed me to do it (Sally: p 7/8).

Significantly, four participants also discussed keeping in some form of contact with children and young people, after the end of their professional role. For example, Keith comments:

'He will call me and just ask how I am doing and will give me updates on his life even though I am not his social worker now' (Keith: p.4/4).

Keith uses the concept of *'holding the child in mind'* as a rationale for this ongoing contact (Keith: p/6/1). For three of the workers, the contact appears to be child led, initiated by the child or young person contacting the worker as they wish via work's mobile phone (Sally: p7/5; Keith p4/4). However, this informal contact, appears to have emotional resonance for the workers also. Maggie comments:

'yeah, and she keeps in touch, which is lovely, about once a month to let me know she's doing ok' (Maggie, p.15/5).

For Phil, the young person has now left the care system and is living independently, so he feels comfortable to keep in touch through regular squash matches, offering a level of informal support and continuity at a time when young people leaving care can be isolated (Phil p.7/19). These participants appear to be engaging in authentic shared emotion as part of their empathic responses to the children in their care. These workers need to attend to their own emotions in order to both ensure effective supporting relationships and understand when to reduce the intensity of the professional relationship.

2.2 Embodied empathy - social work on the move.

The data reflects the active, physical nature of practice and the range of environments in which workers need to use their empathic skills, describing key experiences of being physically engaged with children, and parents, while also needing to respond empathically. Workers can spend significant amounts of time within home environments and need to learn to manage the impact of the physical space and the movement of people within them. Gillian describes making an initial visit to a family (*Gillian: p.10/13*), spending 4 hours in this environment, working with mental health professionals to assess the parent's mental health before the police then arrive:

'to me, having the police, there, just quite a scary presence in this small house, having these really serious conversations, around this little boy that just... and it wasn't, there was no violence ... but it was just so intimidating' (Gillian: p.11/31).

This is echoed by Bianca, who describes a particularly difficult removal of two children from a family home, confronting many family members who were waiting for her:

'as soon as I was walking, I walked into the kitchen ...as soon as I walk in the whole family are in the kitchen, mum called the sister, niece, aunt, the whole family' (Bianca: p.7/30).

Bianca explains that she was accompanied by police due to the potential threat of violence from wider family members, but that this added to the complexity of the situation:

'they didn't do anything, their presence, it was getting things even worse... now we are having two social workers here, we have four police inside and I don't know how many outside' (Bianca: p/9/22).

There are clear challenges involved in managing a crowded, emotionally charged environment and Bianca appears to struggle in this situation. Workers

also describe meeting young people in community spaces such as coffee shops (Bianca: p.19/18) or hospitals (Gillian: p21/8). Sally describes working outside conventional workspaces and office hours in order to engage a 17-year-old woman at risk:

'Doing evening visits, giving her my work mobile and talking to her by phone in the evening, going to meet her when she called – it meant I needed to be very flexible and available' (Sally: p.4/9).

This is echoed by Maggie who describes late night visits to restaurants:

'KFC (She laughs) ...chicken at a ridiculous time of night, yeah' (Maggie: p.11/27).

Maggie describes needing to take action to support the young woman including challenging a drug dealer within the young woman's apartment (Maggie, p.12/ 5) and finding the young woman after an overdose:

'we had to break the door down... I pulled her out and then, yeah, my colleague put the fire out as best she could and then obviously the fire brigade got there' (Maggie: p.12/21).



Figure 6: Maggie – Chaos (Author’s photograph, 2024)

Maggie’s image (Figure 6) captures the young person ‘s vulnerability as a small female figure surrounded by symbols of danger – emergency vehicles, alcohol and drug symbols, skull and crossbones representing drug overdose. While there is a potential place of safety at the other end of the tray, a large threatening figure of ‘the terminator’ stands in between, representing the criminal gangs who are preventing the young woman from accessing support and safety. She comments:

‘we were blue lighted out of the city ... a few occasions, to get her out of the way ...without realising it because you are in that fight flight or freeze moment...’ (Maggie: p9/10).

Maggie’s reference to fight and flight is significant, highlighting her own instinctive emotional responses to threatening situations. Her empathic practice

needs to be integrated within a more direct style to manage potential threats to their own safety as well as the young persons, within a rapidly changing environment.

Participants also describe frequent experiences of moving children between placements. For example, Liz describes the process of driving children from one placement to another, emphasising the emotional significance of this experience for both parties through her repetition:

'the one person who has done all the moves, done the respite, I was the one that picked him up, put the stuff in the car with him, I've been through all that with him' (Liz: p.10/15).

Keith describes having to manage challenging situations while moving a young man between placements: *'he was refusing to get out of the car, becoming quite abusive, so that was exhausting' (Keith: p.7/14)* while Maggie describes moving a child to a residential unit after the breakdown of a long-term foster placement:

'I was driving to move him before we even had a placement for him. Having to turn up at a placement there and then, tell a young person - you're moving, 'by the way get in the car, were leaving in 10 minutes' (Maggie: p.6/15).

These workers are managing unpredictable situations, whilst also responding to the emotional needs of distressed young people and using their empathic skill to support the children and to help them to regulate. Bianca identifies a car journey as an opportunity to help the child to calm and begin to prepare for their transition to a new placement.

'I tried to talk to her a little bit about where we are going, she was struggling to breathe (pants) so my colleague was trying to calm her down, so I said look at the little baby, your brother is going to get upset... I had some fruit

and some little snacks, how about you trying to give him some?... she came down, she started to talk' (Bianca: p.11/14-20).

Bianca's rapid description and her own fast breathing (she pants during the description) reflects the emotional impact of this experience. Gillian describes similarly needing to attend to the children's practical needs to help put them at their ease:

'we had to take him and his baby sister off in a car ... in the dark and he hadn't had any food, so we stopped at McDonalds, just to get them food and I just remember driving along, and the baby was fine, he just was silent' (Gillian, p12/11).

In both situations, the workers combine empathic awareness of the children's emotional and practical needs to identify effective ways to support their distress. These incidents capture something of the fluid, dynamic nature of social work practice in which empathy is required, moving from emotionally charged, threatening situations with children, to situations in which they need to help to calm and reassure children.

2.3 Balancing act – integrating empathy with authoritative practice.

Participants describe situations in which they need to consider how best to integrate their empathic skills within the context of statutory practice. This is something of a balancing act. Kirsty comments:

'I think every social worker has two sides, so that you can be really soft and empathetic person, then you know when you need to be really firm and quite strong' (Kirsty, p12/2).

Sally makes a similar comment:

'I can be very professional and smiley, but I can also be this other forceful and outspoken person' (Sally: p5/16).

These comments capture a duality within the social work role, needing to acknowledge the feelings of the other person, while also using the authority of the

role to achieve change. Most of the participants acknowledged this tension within their experience.



Figure 7. Gillian: Rescuing but not saving. (author's photograph, 2024)

Significantly, six of the eight images in this study include the presence of police symbols alongside the social work figure and this highlights the complex nature of the role, working on behalf of the state to intervene in family life. Gillian acknowledges this dilemma during initial visits:

'you get a lot of hostility, when you are the first person who knocks on the door, (laughs) ...knocking unannounced, you get that, and it is learning to roll with that' (Gillian, p.4/12).

Gillian's image (Figure 7) best reflects this tension. The social work figure is accompanied by an armed guard and the family is behind a fence, separating them from potential intervention by the worker, along with a sense of threat from

the police figure. In the distance, figures of Batman and a castle, representing absent family members and an unknown foster home, serve to emphasise the isolation of the children. Gillian's ambivalence about the role is also reflected in her title for the image- '*Rescuing but not saving*' (Gillian, P.18/16) and she goes on to comment:

'it was the right decision at that time, and it turned out to be the right decision moving forward, but there are no winners, there are no winners in this situation' (P18/19).

Gillian's repetition of '*no winners*' emphasises her perception that social work is at times a morally complex activity with no simple outcomes. Keith makes a similar point, but with more optimism. He uses the image of footprints:

'in the ideal situation our footprints in a family's life should be minimal, or as little as possible, in that you are trying to support families to achieve the change themselves... I know the reality is that often your footprint is much heavier, (Keith: p9/28).

Keith uses the symbol of a mechanic to represent himself in practice, emphasising the positive aspects of the role for himself:

'it's just someone that is helpful I... think I'd like to be seen as someone who facilitates that change' (Keith: p.9/25)



Figure 8. Keith: Tension (Author's photograph, 2024)

Within his image, (Figure 8) Keith represents himself caught in the middle of tense relationships between the children's home, represented by a cave to indicate the young man's rejection of the placement and his mother's home, presented as an idealised destination, with a gold cup and shady trees and his mother waiting outside. Keith positions himself by the wall, seeking to support communication and reduce the tension between the two destinations for the young man.

Within their statutory role, participants identified the importance of using their authority sensitively and honestly even when challenging the other person. Maggie describes needing to be honest with her young person:

'It was an always honest relationship, she heard stuff that she didn't want to hear from me, she knew the path that I needed to take with her and she ... you know I said either you sign up or you don't' (Maggie: p12/11).

Kirsty also highlights this dilemma when she discusses presenting the views of a young boy to the court:

'I clearly said in court 'he doesn't want to leave his parents, he wants to stay in his family home, and he doesn't want to go to school' and yes that's his wishes and feelings but it's not what is best for him and so we need to kind of override that' (Kirsty, p.15/5).

Kirsty demonstrates her willingness to act as an advocate for the child, presenting his wishes and feelings clearly, whilst presenting her distinct professional judgement of the child's best interests. Three workers describe needing to maintain firm boundaries around young people's behaviour to carry out their duties:

'I mean erm she was often upset and angry and I was OK with that given everything that was happening to her, but at times she would become abusive, swearing and shouting and I would need to set boundaries and remind her of what was acceptable' (Sally: p.3/32).

Bianca describes confronting the anger and distress of a family around care proceedings in relation to their younger children:

'so, on the day of the hearing well they were upset with me ... and I said 'well I wanted to be honest with you like I've always been, ... I wanted to be honest with you... although they were upset with me for telling them, at the same time I think they appreciated it'. (Bianca: p5/27).

Bianca repeats herself, highlighting her own struggle to reconcile her statutory duties with her relationship with the children. Workers also need to manage their ability to be authentic with children and adults, while maintaining professional boundaries. For example, Kirsty describes becoming tearful when sharing the distress of a young pregnant woman who was sharing her fears and sadness:

'it wasn't like I was full on sobbing; she'd made my eyes water, and she was sobbing a bit, ...because they kind of realise that you are human' ...I think self-disclosure and things like that can be quite powerful' (Kirsty: p.11/15).

Four of the female participants (Gillian, p14/15; Bianca, p9/14; Kirsty, p11/8; Maggie, p5/4) suggest that their own experience as mothers were significant, heightening their identification with and empathy for families in difficult situations:

'I felt, I had lots of feelings on that time, I felt for mother, ... you know I am a mother myself, I felt for her' (Bianca, p.9/14)

while also making them aware of their identification with vulnerable children:

'wanting to cling to my own child and cuddle him and give him the affection I wasn't able to – it's not appropriate, but I wasn't able to give to this other child' (Gillian p.14/15).

Phil also describes sharing his emotions during a professional meeting when he realised how successfully a child had bonded with their new foster carers and was now feeling secure in that relationship:

The social work role requires workers to engage with people at moments of significant emotional crisis and many of the participants acknowledge their own emotional responses to children and young people as a result of their work. One further challenge involves the use of touch which was highlighted in several of the interviews. Phil (p.7/3) and Keith (p.12/3) talk about sharing hugs with children they know well during placement visits. Both identify this as a positive aspect of the relationship that brings them pleasure and a shared sense of affection and playfulness with the child. Gillian has a different perspective and describes children 'clinging' to her anxiously as a source of comfort, even though she is a stranger, during their removal from home:

'I have had situations where, a 7-year-old, I had one who was 6, or 7 and she clung to me, and I was like 'I met this child three hours ago and she is clinging to me' (laughs) (Gillian, p.14/9).

This appears to be a complex area for practitioners and the context of the touch is significant. Both Phil and Keith are describing physical affection in the context of established relationships, while Gillian discusses offering comfort to very distressed children during an initial contact. Maggie stands out within the interviews as someone who is comfortable using touch in her practice, for example using the Welsh term 'cwtches' to describe the process of giving children hugs to soothe and reassure them.

'you know I've had kids in tears, and you know I've held them because you know there's nothing you can do and you know they have 'cwtched' into me for like an hour, one of them and you know I've just rocked her, stroked her hair and whispered you know I am here, it's OK,' (Maggie, p.16/13).

However, Maggie also expresses awareness of the potential confusion for children in the use of touch by adults, particularly given the likely experiences of children within care. She discusses needing to make a professional judgement:

'I think a lot of children crave that physical warmth because a lot of them haven't had it. Some of them do it appropriately and some of them do it inappropriately and I think you need to be able to recognise when those times are' (Maggie: p.8/1).

Maggie's willingness to be emotionally available to the children and to use her physical self to support their emotional regulation was distinctive. However, workers need to exercise considerable judgement and discretion within their roles and to use a wide range of emotional skills to manage these relationships.

THEME 3: EMPATHY & EMOTION

A final theme explores the impact of empathy on the emotions of the workers themselves and considers how workers can manage their emotions. Participants

varied significantly in their views on the role of the organisation in supporting them with their emotions.

3.1 Experiencing empathic distress.

Participants encountered a range of emotions frequently related to the experience of moving or removing children from families. Four participants express feelings of sadness about the process of removing children. For example, Keith comments:

'Sadness... every time I have ever removed children from their parents I feel a real sense of sadness, sadness that the children are being separated, immense sadness if they show no response' (Keith: p13/19.)

Similarly, Liz comments on her emotions towards a young child who has experienced several moves in his short life:

'yeah, it's the sadness behind it that makes you feel 'he's not angry at me' he is very sad at what has been lost' (Liz: p20/7).

Maggie openly acknowledges her experience of distress when working with some of her young people:

'I cried, I did cry, I lay in bed that night crying and I left a 12-year-old boy in a children's residential unit ... it felt really shitty there's no two ways about it' (Maggie: p 6/18).

However, she discusses her awareness of keeping her feelings separate from her response to the child: *'those are my feelings and my issues not his' (Maggie: p6/33).* Gillian comments that her role means she is less frequently involved in removing children from their homes and felt that the experience had a profound impact on her as a result:

'I was quite caught up in it, bound up in it and I thought actually yes that is the way it should be, I am making massive, massive decisions, that affect the life of a child and ... and it should be affecting, it should be that I am sitting thinking about it at night-time' (Gillian, p3/23)

These participants indicate that they experienced lasting emotional distress as a result of their work with the children, impacting their sleep patterns. Two other workers viewed the experience of removing children from home somewhat differently. Phil talked openly about his confidence in his decision to remove children from their neglectful home.

'I went out on a duty visit, saw the conditions and thought these kids, they can't live here, so I removed them, and passed the case back to the social worker who pissed me off big time, because the kids should not have been living in that condition' (Phil: p3/4)

Sally also expressed confidence about the removal process:

'when I have to remove children from their homes I don't get upset, because I know if we have to remove them then things are really bad and that is the best thing for the child at the time' (Sally, p.6/5).

However, Sally goes on to talk about her sense of distress after she has left the children safely in foster care:

'when I have to leave children in a foster home for the first time, that's the bit I find hardest, ...I often don't know the carers ...and I am having to leave the children there and tell them everything will be all right, that is almost impossible...' (Sally: p 6/8).

Gillian chooses the image of a 'dark castle' to represent unknown foster homes, conveying a similar feeling:

'there is something very strange about taking a child to a place you have never been before and to people you have never met before, and then leaving them there' (Gillian: p.15/29).

Participants clearly describe needing to manage a level of emotion evoked during this process of separating children from their families, viewing this as an inevitable part of their statutory role. Two of the participants described especially challenging experiences that left them struggling to process their own emotions. Kirsty describes obtaining a court order to secure the safety of a young boy and remove him to foster care:

'to get him out of the house was horrendous because we had, we couldn't get him to leave and the parents weren't helping us to get him to leave...[I had to] go back to court to get a Recovery order, to get the police to come and physically remove him from the property, which was just obviously a horrendous experience, (Kirsty: p5/19).

Kirsty expressed her worry about the emotional impact on the child (p7/15)

but also recognised how difficult it was for her to talk about the experience:

'talking about the case always makes me feel quite emotional, just because it had, it was such a big deal and had such an emotional impact on me' (Kirsty, p8/15)

Bianca's interview stood out due to the high level of expressed emotion and it was evident that Bianca was describing a challenging experience that continued to have an emotional impact several months later. Bianca named her image (Figure 9) *'Traumatic and overpowering'* (p16/13), using the word traumatic 11 times during the interview.

The image captures the distressing nature of the experience which is supported in Bianca's account. The family figures and the child are protected behind walls and fences while outside multiple police vehicles and figures surround the home. The children are represented by contradictory symbols of innocence – a pram, small child - and powerful emotion including monsters, she-hulk, and a Screaming figure. Bianca represented herself as a professional female with a clipboard, standing at a distance from the family home, conveying a sense of helplessness.



Figure 9. Bianca -Traumatic and Overpowering (Author's photograph, 2024)

Bianca uses the Hulk figure to represent her feelings in the moment:

'it was almost like a fear of what was going to happen (points to the Hulk) trying to follow, trying to do the right thing, it was almost like a monster I had in my head, trying to think of you know how I manage all this?' (Bianca:14/20).

Bianca also conveys a sense of the emotional impact of her involvement in this traumatic situation:

'I can hear the children screaming, I can hear her (points to girl in image) screaming in the kitchen and she is screaming like I have never heard her scream like that, 'they are not taking me away, they are not taking me away' and then I heard ' she promised not to bring the police' yeah, and I stood outside, and my heart sank, ...' (Bianca: 8/1).

Through her repetition and description as well as through the image itself, Bianca conveys a visceral sense of the difficulty she experienced during the visit and of the ongoing impact on her sense of wellbeing.

Reflection

Bianca's interview was the longest and most challenging. I realised that Bianca was using the visual task to process a difficult experience, and it was evident that she was very much in touch with her feelings from the situation in question. Both her dis-jointed narrative style and the words and images she used convey the emotional impact she felt. Within my diary I reflected (January 2019) on my own responses to this interview, experiencing resonance with my own difficult experiences of removing children from home as a social worker, and feeling protective of the participant as I recognised her potential vulnerability and need for support. When I suggested we take a break, I felt ambivalence, wanting to ensure her own wellbeing but also hoping to complete the interview. I also needed to focus on supporting Bianca in her decision and reminded myself of her professional identity and her ability to withdraw her consent. When she agreed to continue, I was mindful of my own feelings and focused on supporting her to provide a narrative account, remaining within my role as a researcher rather than therapist.

It was apparent that participants needed to manage a range of strong emotions within their work. Liz expressed guilt that she would shortly be leaving the child in her care to move to a new job in another authority (Liz, p9/29), questioning the value of her involvement:

'I just feel like I have added to it, the sad the difficult bit, that's the really hard bit, I just feel like I've added another person (pause....) who's changed

to another person (pause...) so he's got used to me and then I'm leaving' (Liz, p.12/7).

Her repetition of the phrase 'added to it' along with her pauses in speaking suggest she is feeling this sense of responsibility deeply in this moment. There is a clear dilemma for workers who are building positive relationships with children in their care, but who are likely to move roles and to need to say goodbye at some point. During his interview, Keith initially commented that he was '*not someone who is tuned into their emotions*' (Keith, p.12/21). However, he then went on to describe his experience of emotions within his work as:

'dread, erm, when you are getting up and you are coming to work, it is that stress about what has happened to the cases I am working on... I think that is probably the overriding feeling' (Keith, p.11/19)

This is a powerful statement, particularly given his suggestion that he does not attend to emotions and hints at the underlying challenges he experiences within his role. Significantly, Keith used the title 'Tension' (Keith: p10/30) and it appeared that this referred as much to his own emotional state as to the child's. From the interviews, it was apparent that workers were experiencing significant feelings of sadness, anxiety and guilt and needed to seek ways to manage these feelings.

3.2 Emotional regulation strategies

Participants use a range of strategies to try to manage emotions they experience within their practice. While some workers avoid engaging with their emotions, others use conscious strategies to process feelings. Liz discusses putting her emotions into '*compartments*' (p18/8) trying to separate her personal emotions from her professional life:

'if you come into work and bring whatever emotion you bring into work in the morning, can have an impact on how full up you are before you start dealing with everyone else' (p17/20).

Keith describes trying to make time to process his emotional responses:

'I think one of the worst things we can do as social workers, is rush from place to place to place, so making sure you have booked some time in between visits, to just at least park what you are thinking and how you are feeling at that point' (Keith: p.14/29).

This suggests a level of emotional awareness and reflection by Keith at times. Two workers, Maggie, and Sally, describe similar methods to help them engage in the cathartic expression of emotion during their car journeys home:

'for my feelings? Hmmm. ...pause. it's probably really stupid but I play really loud music in the car because it is my reflection period, I like to put stuff to bed before I get home to my children, it doesn't always work (laughs)... it depends what mood I'm in it could be Eminem, Guns and Roses, Aerosmith ... anything I can sing to really loud' (Maggie, P.7/13).

Sally uses music more specifically to support her emotional expression of sadness:

'I always cry in the car when I leave them, always and I know I will, so I have made some music to play in the car which helps me. It starts off with a bunch of sad songs that will really take me to my sadness and help me to cry... and then as it goes on the songs start to get more positive you know like 'Eye of the tiger' and it helps me to start to feel better' (Sally, p.6/15).

It seems clear that being able to understand their emotional reactions and identify mechanisms to manage them, is an essential aspect of practice for these workers. However, Keith also describes trying to avoid his emotional reactions by focusing on practical tasks:

'I try to focus on outcomes, ... at what I can do to fix that situation, or what support is needed to achieve a good outcome for that child, so it's less about how I am feeling and what will make me feel better and more about what needs to be done and that will distract me' (Keith: p 15/ 1).

Other participants also describe strategies which divert them from acknowledging the emotional aspects of practice. Phil minimises any potential distress focusing on the children's experiences instead:

'aah there is nothing challenging is there? You're dealing with fucking kids for Christs sake, you're dealing with kids that have been damaged by what adults have done or not done for them' (Phil: -8/3).

In contrast, Sally emphasises feelings of anger and frustration rather than distress, which she feels motivates her within her practice:

'.. I guess I feel frustrated at how the system has developed – that I end up having to argue with managers and they don't seem to have the interests of young people in focus' (Sally: p.5/6).

Sally refers to herself as a *'bull in a china shop'* (p5/11) to describe the way she feels she needs to advocate for the young people in her care, viewing conflict within her organisation as an outlet for her anger. Kirsty chose the symbol of a lion to represent herself in her image, commenting:

'Like fierce, I had to be really strong willed to push for what I thought was best and I guess like everybody, the family and the child saw me as being nasty and vicious and I was just like obviously fiercely trying to protect him'.

I was struck by the contradiction here for workers who were conveying care and empathy for the young people but chose symbols of anger and aggression within their role with other professionals and managers.

Participants also identified other strategies to help them process their emotions. All the participants identify their colleagues and teams as a key source of support, both during difficult experiences with children and young people and afterwards. Maggie describes how her team supported her during a difficult visit with a young woman at the police station:

'the night I had everything going on I had colleagues texting me, checking on me, come and stay with me tonight, don't drive home, I'm close, come here I've got food on the go' (page 17/2).

While Liz describes having a colleague on hand to support after saying goodbye to her young client:

'I am glad I had a colleague and carers there, so obviously you wouldn't want to be upset in front of him, but it was quite hard getting back into the car afterwards, it was like that sinking sort of feeling inside' (Liz: p.10/27).

There was a strong sense of workers supporting one another as a team. All participants identify peer support as the key mechanism for helping them to manage their emotions. Kirsty highlights having someone available in the office after a difficult phone conversation: (Kirsty, p.14/ 4) while Keith comments that *'your colleagues make the job worthwhile' (Keith: p.12/9)*. Both Sally (p.7/19) and Bianca emphasise their colleagues as being emotionally available:

'you know at times you go and have a cry and you get that, you get more, in terms of that, getting more from the team and your colleagues than the formal bit' (Bianca: p20/22).

For Gillian (p.9/5) this peer support was also a significant aspect of her social life outside of a work setting, meeting colleagues informally and Kirsty (p.13/32) also stress the importance of friendships with other social workers . Both Phil (p.11/3) and Keith (p15/28) mention that they are married to other social workers and feel this is a valuable source of support. There was a strong sense in which workers relied on the shared experience with other social workers to support their emotional regulation.

3.3 Emotional organisations

Organisational culture also affects workers' abilities to engage in empathic practice. While all participants discussed supervision as a support mechanism,

there was variation in how helpful they found it. Both Maggie and Liz acknowledge a feeling of being lucky in their current supervisor:

'I am lucky, I have really regular supervision, we have some reflective supervision, and we have regular team meetings' (Liz: p.22/8).

'I was lucky I had an extremely good manager, well she was bloody brilliant, she was a good egg, so I was very, very lucky' (Maggie: p17/6).

Participants generally identified supervision as helpful (Liz p.22/8; Keith p.18/10; Kirsty p.14/15; Maggie p.17/5) and identified opportunities for reflection and exploration of their own emotions. However, Keith highlights the potential tension within the supervisory relationship due to the performance management aspects of supervision:

'there's dynamics there that undermine your ability to be entirely honest with your manager about how you are feeling because you will be aware she has cases to allocate' (p.18/10).

Bianca also commented that she felt the pressure of workload allocation left little time for her feelings to be considered by her supervisor:

'I think the past couple of supervisions have been... (sighs) 'no I'm not doing OK I am really struggling' – 'I know but we can't do anything at the moment we haven't got any other workers' – 'yes but this has been going on for months and I can only handle so much'(Bianca, p.20/15).

There is a clear sense that Bianca feels her own emotional needs are not being addressed within supervision, which seems particularly significant given her account of traumatic practice experience within this study.

Kirsty chooses a gargoyle (P.7/16) to represent her previous manager and conveys a sense of conflict within their relationship in relation to her casework with a family (Kirsty, p.4/30). Sally also describes a conflictual relationship with senior managers for whom she feels little respect (Sally p.7/3) and identifies the negative impact of having several changes of manager in quick succession (Sally, p.6/29).

Sally named her image 'Organised Chaos' (Figure 10) and described conflict with senior managers in her organisation about her work with a young woman.



Figure 10. Sally -Organised Chaos (Author's photograph, 2024)

Sally positioned several figures around the symbol of the young person, including three professional figures to represent the professional network alongside other figures – Hulk, terminator – to represent potential threats to the child. She chose a female figure and a rhino to represent herself placing the female next to the child and the rhino in a position of physical conflict with the professional figures, conveying anger about their decision-making in respect of the young person, while closely allying herself to the child. The placement of figures lying horizontally adds to the visual sense of chaos and disorder which was evident in her interview. Sally expressed a view that organisational policy reduced her ability to support the young woman significantly:

'it's to do with the organisation... the system makes it worse. For me that is worse than what these people have done – you expect that from the perpetrators, but the professionals should know what they are doing' (Sally: p 5/31).

This is a stark comparison by Sally highlighting her alienation from her employing organisation. Interestingly, Sally and Phil, as the most experienced workers within this study, appear to attach the least significance to the supervisory role. While Phil acknowledges his use of management support when managing risk (p.12/11) he presents himself as a practitioner who works autonomously and makes minimal use of support structures:

'oh balls, what formal structures? I do what I want to do when I want to do it' (Phil, p.11/24).

Both seem to disregard organisational structures at times, emphasising their own professional confidence. Sally also highlights the incongruity of talking about her own emotional responses within an organisation that she perceives is making her daily working life more difficult and problematic through agile working practice in offices and reduced staff facilities:

'to be honest I struggle with supervision, it feels like there is a dishonesty an incongruence about supervision which I find difficult ...it's bullshit and it makes me angry – I'd prefer it if they didn't say it at all rather than pretend that they care' (Sally, p.7/28).

Reflection

During my interviews with both Phil and Sally, I was conscious of my own emotional reactions. I regarded these two workers as the most experienced participants in the study, and I was curious about the tone of the interviews which felt distinctive. In my diary in July 2018, I reflect on Phil's high level of emotional expressiveness and his confident disregard for formal procedures. I was conscious of enjoying this aspect, but reflected afterwards on my sense of Phil as a maverick practitioner

who has found a way to practice, almost despite the organisational constraints. During Sally's interview, I was initially struck by her expression of anger and frustration with managers inside her organisation and curious about her self-description as a 'bull in a china shop', feeling positively towards her as I listened. I was aware of needing to remain neutral within the interview and not to join her in her critical narrative, despite my own feelings resonating at times with much of what she described. I found her commitment to the young people she worked with inspiring and became conscious of how much I was enjoying her interview. I reflected on this in my diary in September 2018 and again thought about the term 'maverick'. I made some links with Heidegger's idea of authenticity – and this has stayed with me – how do social workers develop their own authentic practice of empathy with children, within the current practice constraints?

While most participants acknowledged the benefits of emotionally focused and reflective supervision, it is notable that they also question the appropriateness of the supervisory relationship in terms of work pressure, authenticity, and organisational culture. Two participants raised the idea of separating case supervision from reflective supervision for staff, individually or in groups. Kirsty mentions having had this in a previous organisation:

'they set up monthly clinical group supervision for everybody, so that was really helpful because as a collective we would unpick cases ...I don't think that it gets acknowledged enough the amount of emotional toll that the job takes on you' (Kirsty: p14/14).

Keith also proposes separating clinical supervision from managerial oversight:

'I think clinical supervision for all workers and that being separate from your case management supervision and separate from your manager' (Keith: p18/7).

It is evident that Keith believes separating out the different functions of supervision is necessary for staff welfare. Gillian uses a striking metaphor to capture the complexity of the social work task, agreeing that social workers need additional support:

'what we deal with is 'we swim in darkness' all the time, we deal with massive complex ideas erm and so we should be trained,' (Gillian: p.23/21).

This metaphor of 'swimming in darkness' captures a sense of uncertainty and immersion within a challenging practice context. Ensuring that workers have access to supervision which has a deliberate focus on their own emotional awareness and well-being seems essential.

Participants also highlighted aspects of wider organisational culture as having a significant impact on their sense of wellbeing. Phil highlights the increasingly bureaucratic nature of the role as challenging:

'Yeah, paperwork is a nightmare, cos you spend half your life bashing at the keyboard, that is the one side of the job that is a pain in the backside'(Phil p.12/20).

Kirsty suggests that social workers have become 'admin people' (Kirsty, p.10/1) while Bianca identifies the amount of written work involved and how time consuming this can be:

'yes, a huge amount, there was an assessment, a parenting assessment, child permanency report, there was a final evidence, and all that was in a very little period of 7 weeks (Bianca, p20/2).

In addition to the administrative expectations, issues of workload and agency expectations were highlighted throughout the interviews. Bianca identifies the pressure of managing caseloads and achieving key performance indicators within her team:

'I think sometimes, with the best intentions with the large caseloads, it's kind of difficult and I have missed the time to actually sit and reflect and do this, because we talk about, we constantly get the emails, so many percent, so many visits out of date' (Bianca: p19/26).

Maggie discusses the impact of a recent inspection on staff caseloads:

'I think that now we are going to have an influx of more cases as a result of the Ofsted, I think they're taking about going up to 25 and that wouldn't be safe for me to be able to take on that many I don't feel at this time' (Maggie: p 18/32).

Three participants identified difficulties within teams as a further challenge.

Sally describes having frequent changes of manager which led to instability and a lack of oversight of her work for a significant period (Sally, p.2/24). Keith describes his team as 'fluctuating' (p15/20) and suggests that this is particularly challenging for the less experienced workers (Keith, p 16/3). Kirsty comments that she recently joined a team which she felt was not 'available' to her and needed to find ways of managing herself in this context:

'I managed that by kind of sitting myself away in the corner of the office and just not getting involved... (p13/29).

All the participants also identify the impact of the overall culture within their organisations as impacting their wellbeing. Keith makes a general comment about the expectations of workers' emotional resilience:

'there is the expectation that you will go somewhere, be threatened etc, and then you will just carry on with your day, whereas in any other job, if you turned up and you were threatened at work, you would probably take the rest of the day off' (Keith: p19/23).

Both Liz and Gillian identify periods when the stress of the work environment has become particularly challenging for them. Liz identified this as arising because she did not feel supported within her team or by her supervisor:

'like I say I have not had that in the past, not had anyone to share it with, not having that support and ended up ill and ended up having five weeks off work' (Liz: p24/12).

Gillian discussed an experience after a difficult visit to a family when she felt emotionally exhausted:

'I had nothing left to deal with it... absolutely nothing, just spent the entire week crying and when I went into work on the Monday I just can't cope with it, and I very nearly got signed off work, (Gillian: p 15/4).

It seems clear that participants are routinely exposed to high levels of emotionally charged challenging and potentially traumatic experiences. However, both Kirsty (p14/17) and Keith (p19/21) suggest that emotions are not routinely shared by staff within their organisations and there is a sense in which, particularly for more experienced workers, the expectation is that workers should manage their emotions on their own. Gillian also comments on this, describing a sense within her safeguarding context in which not discussing your feelings is viewed as a *'badge of honour'* (Gillian, p.23/3) commenting: *'we don't share it. I mean it's really bizarre (Gillian, p.17/32).*

It appears from the data that there is a significant challenge for organisations to create an effective culture in which practitioners can feel comfortable to share their emotional reactions to these difficult experiences and to process their own emotions without feeling judged as weak or inexperienced.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have presented findings from my first study, exploring views of experienced social workers in children and family settings in relation to their understanding and use of empathy within their everyday practice. I have highlighted three main themes from this study including empathic understanding in practice; empathy in action; empathy and emotions and explored relevant sub-themes to capture the experiences of individual participants. These findings will

be discussed and integrated with themes from the other studies, within my discussion in chapter 9. I will now proceed to discuss the second study within this research project.

Chapter 7: Study 2 - Newly Qualified social workers

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present my findings from my second study with three newly qualified social workers which aims to capture aspects of their experience as they transition into becoming children and families' practitioners and to explore their developing understanding of the role of empathy within their practice. I present three main groups of themes from their interviews.

Introduction to participants

In this study, 'newly qualified' is defined as having completed their social work training within the previous 18 months. The participants were each completing their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), which is a 12-month period of employment-based support and ongoing assessment for newly qualified workers in England I interviewed three social workers who identified as having qualified within this time frame, working in two different local authorities. All the participants were female Again, I have used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and to support the tracking of themes for each participant.

Participants

- **Louise:** has been qualified for six months, working in a safeguarding team. She discusses her work with a 12-year-old boy who is voluntarily accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, due to safeguarding concerns about violence between the child and mother. Louise conveys great warmth and concern for the child while struggling with her professional relationship with the child's mother.

- **Melissa:** has been qualified for six months and is currently in a short-term assessment team. She gives an account of an initial meeting with a 12-year-old boy, referred as a child-in-need (Children Act, 1989, Section 17) who is presenting with mental health difficulties and challenging behaviour, following the unexpected death of his mother. Melissa doubts her ability to build a relationship with this boy and worries that she is not sufficiently skilled to respond to his complex emotions.
- **Susan:** has been qualified for 16 months and is working in a children’s safeguarding team. Susan describes her work with two young brothers who are placed with their grandparents under Special Guardianship orders (Children Act, 1989, Section 14a) and discusses her anxiety about making important decisions about the children’s future as well as a desire to help the children.

The data reveals a picture of three early career social workers, who are responding to the needs of a diverse range of children and families, while also trying to mediate the emotional impacts of working within their respective organisations. I identified three distinct group level themes, presented in the table below:

1. 'LEARNING' EMPATHY:	1.1 Feeling empathy: <i>'That still gives me goosebumps'</i> (Susan)
	1.2 Managing emotional distress - the impact of empathy: <i>'there is a pressure on me to just wave a magic wand'</i> (Melissa)
2. DILEMMAS FOR EMPATHIC PRACTICE	2.1 Empathy within the statutory role: <i>'I am having to play the bad guy all the time'</i> (Louise)
	2.2 Empathy with parents: <i>'you just think, come on you know these are your children'</i> (Susan)

3.ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES ON EMPATHY.	3.1 Sustaining empathy: ‘we’re doing it for the kids’ (Louise)
	3.2 Barriers to Empathy: ‘it’s just all the managerial stuff that is completely bat-shit’ (Melissa)

Table7 – Group experiential themes & sub themes in Study 2 (Author’s own creation, 2024).

THEME 1: LEARNING EMPATHY

The three newly qualified workers identified two key aspects of their practice which reflect their developing understanding of empathy and highlighted areas of challenge at this initial stage in their careers.

1.1 Feeling empathy

Participants discuss learning to identify their own physiological cues as an indicator of how the child might be feeling and as a basis for their empathic response. Susan describes talking with two brothers about the possibility of having to move from a kinship placement, following concerns about their grandfather’s drug use:

‘the thing that really stayed with me the most, was when the child said to me ‘oh if I can’t live there with grandma and grandad, I will have nowhere to live’ and that was the thing that still gives me goosebumps thinking about it ...’ (Susan: p. 3/6).

She comments on how these feelings caused her to reflect on her own childhood experiences, affecting her emotionally:

‘I had water in my eyes, and I said to him, ‘that will never happen’ ... and the fact that he was now, this was something at the age of 10 that he was thinking about, the severity of it was quite significant for me’ (Susan, p7/17).

Susan seeks to reassure the child, but also comments on the vulnerability of such young children having to confront such difficult emotions. Louise also describes becoming emotional during her practice:

'I have cried with families before and that's the first time I did it, I was like, oh my God I can't believe I have just done that, but actually... the families that I have cried with, or I have actually just shed a tear... are families that I am closer to now' (Louise: p18/8).

Both Susan and Louise describe sharing tears openly with children and adults and being conscious of the challenge to regulate their emotions., although Louise believes that sharing her emotions has been helpful in building trust with families. These workers are learning to manage their own personal reactions in response to the emotions of the children and families with whom they work.

Melissa also describes her anxiety about the potential emotional distress of the 12-year-old boy, in relation to his experience of his mother's death:

'he was very close to his Mum, and she died tragically, she was actually pregnant at the time, and he was in the house, and he was only 8 and he witnessed her die... he was the one calling for services... he has had trauma, he has had trauma' (Melissa: p5/18).

Melissa describes a significant experience of loss for the child and her repetition suggests she is also struggling with the emotional impact of the experience for the child. Participants reflect on the children's emotions directly and are able to identify what emotions the child might be experiencing. Louise comments on the young boy in her care:

'I think he is feeling manipulated by Mum, I think he's conflicted, I think he feels unsettled, I think he's not feeling loved' (Louise: p7/10).

She describes taking him for regular walks and using his physical movements as an emotional cue:

'we'll be walking along, and he'll ask me something about Mum and then he'll do a cartwheel, ... you can really tell that he is dysregulating you can see it in him' (Louise: p7/ 25).

Louise uses empathic skills to make sense of the boy's movement and make links to his emotions, although it is not clear whether she communicates this

to the child. Susan gives an example of interpreting the 10-year-old boy's question about where he will live to acknowledge his worry and concern:

'So, I said to him 'you will never be left homeless' that is not your responsibility that is the adults in your life'...so I tried to emphasise that he hadn't to worry about that because he would always have somewhere to live, which I have to say I think helped' (Susan: p5/13).

While both workers recognise the child's emotions, they hesitate to name the children's feelings directly, avoiding powerful feelings of distress or worry, preferring instead to offer reassurance. Melissa also identifies strong feelings of sadness and anger in her discussion with a 12-year-old boy. She chose objects to represent the boy's feeling including Darth Vader and a brick wall, commenting:

'When I first went in, I wanted to ask him about his emotions, 'Oh are you feeling angry today?' And he would not, he was just brick wall... and I feel like behind the wall, there is sadness, there is vulnerability and there is somebody that has got a broken heart' (Melissa: p4/13).

Melissa asks a question directly to the child about his feelings but stops short of empathic reflection to the child. Susan describes using a mixture of reflection and questions to help focus on people's emotions, with both adults and children:

'he was really angry at me, and I said to him, I said look I can see you are really angry, I said; are you scared?' because I just, because that can come out as scared. And he said, 'Well of course I am scared' (Susan, p.9/30).

Susan has confidence to empathically reflect the father's anger and then connect to the possibility of feeling scared, which enables the father to acknowledge and express his deeper underlying feelings. Susan indicates that she has gradually developed confidence in naming children's emotions to help them make progress in their work together:

'just try and name it and help them to explore why they are feeling like that, and that actually we need to look at how we can move past that to work together, essentially' (Susan: p10/15).

Significantly, Susan regards naming the feelings as preparation for moving on to the 'work', rather than viewing empathy as a central aspect of her practice. While these workers often have clear perceptions of children's emotions, they seem to hesitate to share these feelings directly with children, potentially protecting themselves from their own emotional responses. It appears that the strength of children's emotions and the traumatic nature of their experiences is often difficult for workers to process themselves.

1.2 Managing emotional distress.

Participants describe learning to manage their emotional responses and to self-regulate, including the experience of feeling tearful when talking to children (Susan, p.7/17; Louise, P18/8). Louise makes a connection between how she perceives a child's feeling and her own emotions:

'when I was just saying about how he is feeling, those are exactly words I would put to myself as well. Conflicted, torn...' (Louise: p9/12).

Louise identifies closely with the child's experience, sharing some of his feelings:

'I mean I have had a really tough time with it, emotionally myself, not just because of how I feel for him, but because of how nasty and vindictive mum is to me' (Louise: p.13/10).

Louise struggles to separate her emotional reactions from her professional sense of self and appears to experience mum's hostility as personal. It seems she is unable to step back and place their relationship in the wider context of her professional role and potentially needs support with this. Louise describes her emotions at work generally:

'Desperation, exasperation, emotional exhaustion, you just think, and also, it sounds really silly, but you feel a bit guilty for going home at the end of the

day, ... you sort of get home and you think 'God I've got a home to go back to' and this child doesn't' (Louise: p 17/13).

Susan describes a similar feeling within her work:

'it kind of made me question everything else in life, you then reflect on your own childhood, and you think gosh my issues when I was a child were, what football I was going to play with and you know, not where I was going to live' (Susan: p7/18).

Confronting the difficulties and pain that children experience prompts both workers to reflect on their comparative privilege, causing them some discomfort. Melissa also expresses some anxiety about her identity and how well this has prepared her for her work with a 12-year-old boy.

'You know I think to myself 'could I engage with this child a bit more if I was younger? I feel that a bit about myself am I a bit of a dinosaur? You know a female, not having experienced this myself, can I actually make a connection with him, or does he see me as an irrelevant dinosaur?' (Melissa: p4:1).

Melissa uses the symbol of a dinosaur to capture her anxiety about being 'irrelevant' to the young person. Within her image (Figure 11) Melissa captures this self-doubt about the role through her placement of key objects representing herself outside the tray, using the side of the tray as a barrier for the worker and within the tray by the brick wall.

'because what I want to get to, is for the child to be able to talk about his emotions so that it is not all bottled up inside, but getting there is difficult' (Melissa: p4/29).

Melissa represents the child with both symbols of aggression and protection – tiger, guard, Darth Vader – and behind his defensive wall, symbols of vulnerability and sadness – a deer, a heart. While Melissa understands the value of talking about the child's feelings, she also seems to avoid them, *'afraid of bringing stuff up'* (Melissa: p10/5) in case it causes further distress and grapples

with a sense of responsibility in this moment. Her title reflects her awareness of the responsibility she feels in supporting this young child in his grief.



Figure 11. Melissa - Getting over the wall without destroying it. (Author's photograph, 2024).

Melissa acknowledges having to learn to cope with the feelings of worry and concern that she has for the children in her care:

'I have genuinely felt very worried for them, but you have to sort of overcome that, because it is not right to impose your own worry onto a child, I feel like that is sort of managing my emotions in that sense' (Melissa: p.13/4).

Susan also identifies feelings of anxiety in her role:

' my anxieties were such that I was doing a visit every other day because I was worried that these children, what was going to happen to them' (Susan: p10/33).

There is a strong sense that these workers are learning how to manage the emotional impact of their new professional role with children. Susan describes a realisation that although she is anxious about managing risk, she is also aware of the potential impact for her practice:

'I know that I am probably quite risk averse, but I am also aware I don't want to be oppressive as well and I need to balance that' (Susan: p11/15).

Both workers acknowledge the need to maintain self-awareness to manage feelings as they arise. All three participants demonstrate some understanding of the importance of engaging with the emotions of the children and adults with whom they work and are seeking to develop their empathy within their practice to some extent. It seems crucial that these new practitioners have access to support to help them make sense of their emotional reactions and reflect on the impact on their practice decision making.

Reflection

During these interviews I was conscious of feeling protective of the 3 newly qualified participants who reminded me of the social work students I teach and who were struggling with some powerful experiences. I was interested by Melissa representing herself outside of the tray and her doubts that she would be able to find a way of connecting with the young man and the weight of her responsibility. At the same time, Melissa showed clear empathic understanding of the child, but hesitated to consider herself as someone who could or should use their understanding to help the child. I was aware within the interview of wanting to encourage her to see herself as a potential resource for the child and I invited her

to think about what she might need to do to feel that she had entered the child's world and to choose a new symbol to represent herself within the tray. Melissa chose a friendly dog (not in the image) which she placed midway between the wall and the chest of gold and discussed how she felt more confident once she had been able to engage the child through video games. I reflected afterwards on my motivation and recognised a desire to support Melissa with her own emotions. I was aware of potentially stepping into a more supervisory role, as I might with my play therapist supervisees. While this was not an explicit aim of the interview, it felt congruent for me to reflect with the participant about my response to her image, so I decided to do so, before returning to the interview schedule to maintain focus.

THEME 2: DILEMMAS IN EMPATHIC SOCIAL WORK

Participants also discuss their growing understanding of the role and the potential dilemmas involved when trying to use empathy within their relationships with children and parents.

2.1 Empathy within the statutory role

The participants discuss how to explain their role to the children they work with, identifying the ambiguity of the role. Louise explained:

'you know I say 'this is really sad, this isn't OK, and my job is to keep you safe and so this is what we are going to do to keep you safe, to stop that from happening... yes, it's my job to keep you safe, I must say this about a hundred times a day, What is my job? 'To keep you safe' (Louise: p18/22).

Louise uses empathy to acknowledge the child's feelings, while focusing repeatedly on her safeguarding role. Susan uses a similar phrase. Within her image (Figure 12)



Figure 12: Susan - The Life stream. (Author's photograph, 2024).

she uses a stream metaphor to convey the children's journey from the difficulties living with their mother's drug use (represented by the spikes on the seahorse and the police car that removed the children), to the apparent safety of their grandparents (symbolised through angels' wings). However, the small child figure is described as looking anxious due to the deterioration within the grandparents' home. Susan represents herself as a knight figure with sword outstretched, commenting:

'but my job is to represent the child, make sure the child is happy and safe,, not that I'm trying to start a fight, but it's actually the reason I am involved, you need support protecting your child essentially' (Susan, p7/4).

There was a similar emphasis with Louise, through the focus on safety and protection, and an ambitious wish to make the lives of children 'happy'. I was struck by the symbolism of her language when describing her image – she describes the ups and downs of the children's journey through their family life, but

at the same time conveys a sense of needing to battle on behalf of these children. Susan positions the knight apart from the rest of the image, potentially reflecting her sense of professional power. Louise uses similar symbolism for herself within her image (Figure 13), choosing a lion initially to represent her role within the family:

*'I feel like I am having to be this (lion) because I am having to **play the bad guy all the time [my emphasis]**, and then I've also got to be all-seeing (eyes) and all-knowing (brain) and I've got to be able to predict the next process before it has happened' (Louise; p:11/21).*

The phrase '*playing the bad guy*' captures a sense of dissonance for the worker, uncomfortable with the authority of the role and acknowledging the expectations that she feels are being placed upon her to control events and decisions. Arguably such a role undermines their capacity to use empathy, particularly in conflictual relationships with adults. Melissa also uses a striking metaphor to capture her lack of confidence in the role at this point:

'I feel there is a pressure on me to just wave a magic wand and to have the skill to deal with this situation' (Melissa: p 3/28).

The symbolism of waving her '*magic wand*' captures these workers' struggles to manage the expectations of the role and the pressure they feel under as newly qualified workers. Melissa seems to question how she can be effective for the child:

'I think it's what relevance, you know, do I play? He clearly doesn't feel able to open up to anybody, he won't go and see a therapist, so I am sort of struggling around' (Melissa: p5/1).

Melissa underestimates what she can offer the child, perhaps reflecting her lack of confidence in working with children who have experienced significant loss. She describes herself as '*unskilled*' (Melissa: p8/8) and minimises the value of her empathic practice:

'all I can really offer is sort of the empathy of it all and ... the willingness to keep trying, and I think actually ...that tells him something, that somebody cared and that somebody could see that something was going on' (Melissa; p 8/11).

Melissa understates the value of empathy while simultaneously planning to use her empathic skills to convey care for the child. She describes using humour and curiosity to gain his confidence:

'he just wouldn't engage at all and what we ended up having to do, because he would just not talk at all, so what we ended up doing was talking about every-day stuff and the fun came out' (Melissa: p.4/27).

As Melissa relaxes and uses her everyday relationship skills, she is able to find some common ground which enables her to begin to gain his trust:

'the only way I could make a connection with him was sort of laughing and joking with him, and sort of asking, one of the things that we ended up joking about was that he has got really far on Grand Theft Auto [video game]' (Melissa: p6/19).

Melissa uses this shared interest to establish an initial connection, drawing on her empathy and persistence to build the foundations for further discussions. Despite Melissa's self-doubt and ambivalence, I was struck by the hopeful optimism and the belief that her commitment to the child would be of benefit to them.

2.2 Empathy with parents

Participants also need to build effective relationships with children's parents and family members, causing them dilemmas at times. Susan describes working with two boys who had repeatedly witnessed their birth mother's serious heroin use, and who had then witnessed their grandfather using drugs in their new placement, causing them anxiety within the placement (*Susan: p6/7*). Susan struggles with the power of her decision-making role in assessing the ongoing suitability of

children's placement with their grandparents (Susan: p 4/2)., expressing disappointment in the grandfather:

'for me as well it felt like they were back to square one because granddad was supposed to be protective and actually, he is back to square one' (Susan: p3/20).

Susan acknowledges feeling 'uncomfortable' and 'unresolved' (Susan: p16/1), trying to manage her conflicting feelings about the boys' situation and her mistrust in the grandfather following this incident:

'I just was wanting the best for these children because they have been removed from a bad situation ... in some ways you get a bit frustrated, because you just think, you have got children's services involved, know what I mean' (Susan: p16/13).

Melissa also describes trying to maintain a professional relationship with the father of a 12-year-old boy, working hard during a phone call to keep the child within the family home (Melissa:p5/4) and recalls her reaction to how the father talks about his son:

'what made it really sad was I found out that around the time of Mums death, someone in the family had created a memory box with the children to help them with their continuing bond, and Dad and new step Mum put it in the garage, like metaphorically just putting it away in the garage' (Melissa: p5/29).

Melissa disagrees with the parents' approach to the child's loss of his mother, and she expresses a desire to help the parents understand their child's emotional needs:

'I wish I could change the perspective of his Dad and step Mum, because that is the thing I find, because I feel that if I could just get them to be a little more in tune with him, that actually, that might just be the bridge' (Melissa: p11/17).

There is a potential risk that Melissa will position herself closely to the child's experience at the expense of developing positive working relationships with the

adults who are caring for him. However, Melissa is careful to acknowledge the emotional needs of both child and adults in this situation:

'you see, if you don't have a connection with the adults feelings, how do you expect that adult to connect to the child's feelings? I think if you invalidate how they feel or just run rough shod over it, that's not good' (Melissa: p12/28).

There is a clear tension for participants in reconciling the emotional needs of both children and adults, building effective working relationships with all family members during an intervention by statutory services. This requires a skilful use of both empathy and authority. This struggle is particularly evident within Louise's account of her work with the mother of a 12-year-old boy in voluntary care and captured within Louise's image (Figure 13) in which she uses magical tropes such as a fairy godmother, princess, and wizard to represent what she regards as the mother's unrealistic expectations about her son.

The tray is crowded, with objects jostling one another, reflecting the confusion of the worker's experience with this family. Louise chose the symbols of a *'black heart'* (Louise P4/7) and a *'princess'* (Louise: p4/29) to represent the mother within her image, commenting that the heart reflected what she perceived as *'superficial'* and *'suffocating'* affection (Louise: p4/7-10) for the child. She describes the princess character as:

'she honestly doesn't feel that she can do any wrong and the people that are wrong are everybody around her' (Louise: p4/29).



Figure 13. Louise - *Shining light through the chaos.* (Author's photograph, 2024)

These symbols capture the conflict Louise is experiencing in her relationship with the mother. In contrast, she chooses a coloured crystal to represent the child and a chameleon which she describes as: *'having to please everyone around him, he will colour himself to his background'* (Louise: p4/4). Louise initially chose the title of *'Chaos'* for her image but added to it to emphasise the importance of keeping focus on the needs of the child rather than the parent:

'Where is the child, where's the child? I mean this is very reflective of him (crystal) casting some light out on everyone but what we don't do is shine the light on him because everyone is too busy with all of this crisis management' (Louise: p.10/6).

Louise's description of the mother is critical, indicating difficulties in building an effective working relationship that can support the welfare of the child. She seems torn between the demands of the parent and her concern for the child, suggesting that the mother struggles to understand the reasons for social work intervention:

'I am not sure that mum understands the link between her behaviour being the cause, and his behaviour being the effect, and she just hasn't made that link. Despite brutality, honesty, you know complete transparency from us, she just doesn't understand' (Louise: p5/21).

Louise struggles to have empathy for the mother, and it is evident that the working relationship has deteriorated significantly when Louise acknowledges that she has struggled to maintain a professional stance within the relationship:

'it has been difficult for me to think rationally about it anymore, to think... I haven't lost my professionalism about it, but I suppose I have lost my unconditional positive regard for service users' (Louise: p13/23).

This tension between the competing needs of children and their parents is a central dynamic within social work practice. Louise has been in post for six months but is already struggling to balance the competing interests of these family members, leading her to question her suitability for the role:

'...I have felt quite emotionally burnt out by her [mum] and I thought gosh if that's me after like a year, how this little boy must be feeling... She will make me feel like I'm not worthy of the job you know, she literally makes you feel like that. (Louise: p.9/16).

Louise is struggling to manage her emotions in relation to this case and this is having an impact on her general functioning within the role. She goes on to say, *'this was the first time that I actually caught myself thinking 'maybe I can't do this?'* (Louise: p14/21).

It is a concern that these new social workers are questioning their capacity to remain in the role and to offer professional empathic relationships to parents as

well as children. There are implications for how new workers are supported to understand and process the emotional impact of their practice and to put children and parents' behaviour into a theoretical context.

THEME 3: ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES ON EMPATHY.

The new workers emphasise the significance of organisational practices and culture – both formal and informal, in supporting or challenging their practice of empathy.

3.1 Sustaining empathy.

Participants identify the significance of informal support systems for their emotional wellbeing. Louise comments *'I literally couldn't do it without the team'* (Louise: p.19/13), while Melissa comments: *'the best thing about this organisation is the team that I am in, everybody is so supportive of one another'* (Melissa: p16/32). Susan also identifies the importance of the team: *'a really good team and so I just know that I can go to them and say oh I've got to speak about this'* (Susan: p11/27) identifying them as a source of both emotional support and practice advice. Susan comments on sharing her worries with a colleague:

'just opened up one day ... and said is it just me, am I doing something wrong? and she just said, 'oh no I have exactly the same feelings... so it was like reassuring that like, you kind of get through it together' (Susan: p13/15).

There was a strong sense of workers being thrown together as a support system due to the difficulties they were facing and sharing an understanding of the stresses that each other were feeling. Louise describes a team 'mantra' which they quote when feeling under pressure:

'we have a little joke in our office of 'doing it for the kids', like when it all gets too much somebody will just put their hand up and say, 'I'm doing it for the kids' and someone else will say 'yes you are' (Louise: p17/23).

However, Louise does acknowledge that there is a turnover of staff within the team (p19/14) which puts colleagues under increased pressure to cover work and which impacts her own caseload as a newly qualified worker:

'as an ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) you are expected to have a protected caseload and yet I am not about to sit around and hear the discussions of my colleagues absolutely cracking, and my manager not knowing where to allocate cases' (Louise: p19/17).

Louise acknowledges the mutual nature of the support and shared sense of responsibility for her team colleagues. Significantly, while all participants identified informal support as significant, formal support mechanisms, such as supervision, were experienced somewhat differently. Louise describes feeling lucky with her supervisor:

'I'm lucky because I have got such a good relationship with my team manager that we have a lot of informal offloading... how has your day gone?' (Louise: p20/22).

Louise suggests that due to the level of informal emotional support available within the team she does not expect supervision to address her emotional needs, preferring a more case-oriented discussion:

'I respond better to a much more structured supervision where I am like right here's my cases, here's what I need authorisation for, in a task centred way, but that is because I am getting the wellbeing and the informal stuff from the team' (Louise: p.20/26).

It appears that Louise feels well supported and describes choosing to go into the office, even when working from home (p19/22) to be with her team. However, she also describes some contradictory feelings:

'you don't feel on your own... aside from this case, where I have felt on my own, but that's just through the nature of its content' (Louise: P20/16).

It is noticeable that Louise describes high levels of informal emotional support, but also still feels alone at times, and *'burnt out'* (p9/16). While it seems that it would be useful for Louise to discuss these emotional aspects of her practice more explicitly with her supervisor, this does not appear to be taking place. Both Susan and Melissa describe some helpful supervision experiences, but also identify significant concerns about supervision as a source of support. Susan comments:

'my manager is quite good if there is something bothering you, you can just go up to her she will, will always be there, and I think as well in terms of addressing my emotions, when I say oh, I am here and I need to speak to you, she will very much be there' (Susan: p.17/18).

However, Susan goes on to comment that she does not want to become too reliant on her manager:

'because she will go on maternity leave and I was so disappointed because, it sounds awful, because if I don't get a good manager,' (Susan: p 17/31).

Melissa is also experiencing a change in her supervisor:

'I have got supervision, and my manager is good in supervision, it's not all case management she does reflect with me, but she has just resigned, she is going, it's been clear to me for a little while that she hasn't been coping and I think that has bled into her ability to really help us' (Melissa: p16/4).

Both workers comment on the impact of instability and change in their experience with supervisors, affecting their confidence in speaking honestly about their own emotions, while management aspects of the role dominate supervision.

Melissa comments:

'I have now had case supervision with a new manager, and he said ... 'you need to do something about this case, this is really risky' and I was like 'oh I should have known but the manager told me it was fine, so was it fine? Was it not fine?' (Melissa: p16/11).

Both Susan and Melissa describe feeling anxious because of their supervision and struggling to understand what they need to do. For example, Susan explains:

'so you had supervision and it was kind of like 'oh why have you not done this, why have you not done that' and it was like well because 'I am new, you know I am newly qualified' but I don't really know how I managed that ... because I thought it was just me, I'd come out of supervision and I cried, and I thought it was just me' (Susan; p13/2).

Both workers describe manager expectations of their performance which seem to disregard their level of experience and suggest that these expectations are influenced by their managers' own anxieties and struggles. Susan describes becoming apprehensive about supervision, seeking to avoid it:

'I remember thinking 'Oh I can't do this, because I can't cope with the feelings of going into that supervision, it is worse than doing the work' (Susan: p13/12).

From the interviews, it appeared that the managerial aspects of the supervisor role often dominated participants' experiences, limiting opportunities to reflect on the emotional demands of the job. While informal support structures were very much in evidence, there was little evidence of a system-level mechanism to facilitate worker's development and support empathy within their practice.

3.2 Barriers to empathy.

A final theme from the interviews concerned organisational processes which were experienced as barriers to empathic practice. Within her image (Figure 11) Melissa had placed the figure of a ghost outside her tray, which she uses to represent organisational dynamics affecting the practice environment:

'this (ghost) this permeates this organisation, and this is the problem, we as practitioners are going around, and what the problem I find is that there are

all these different powerbrokers in this organisation, and they are putting their anxieties onto you, and you have somehow got to contain that' (Melissa: p.14/13).

This is a powerful image of organisational anxiety as a ghost hovering over the workers and Melissa returns to this theme repeatedly in her interview. She attributes this culture of fear to a lack of clarity about who is in charge and confusion about accountability within the organisation which undermines her own manager's authority and increases workers' anxiety.

'I feel like, too many chiefs, too many chiefs and that makes everything a bit riskier in my mind' (Melissa p17/17).

For Melissa, this lack of clarity is highly problematic:

'but I am an ASYE, and I am thinking, tell me what you want me to do. Don't tell me what the problem is, don't tell me that I need to do something, tell me what to do' (Melissa, p.15/19).

There is a sense for Melissa that the disorganisation within the management structure has repercussions for her developing professional confidence and her ability to manage her own practice with vulnerable children:

'for me, this is the hardest part of it, as a practitioner, is managing everybody else's potential fears' (P14/18).

Susan also experiences confusion between different managers within her organisation. While she expresses positive feelings about her current manager, she also comments that professional decision making varies significantly between managers:

'the other issue is that the threshold, the threshold decision is quite subjective in some ways. And then you have to, sort of manage that in terms of which manager you have and which you think they will do' (Susan: p12/15).

Susan describes amending her assessment style to suit the style of the duty manager (*Susan: p12/23*) and seeking out other managers for emotional support

(P13/26), particularly when she was managed previously by a manager who was anxious herself:

'in terms of managing my other manager's anxiety, yeah that was – last year was quite difficult' (Susan: p12/30).

It is interesting that both these new workers describe needing to manage and respond to the emotional distress of more senior staff, at a point in their own careers where they should be receiving clear emotional support themselves. This is highly problematic in terms of developing and sustaining workers' ability to undertake empathic practice.

Louise highlights an additional challenge within the organisation in relation to resources:

'the challenging bits are when you are prevented by the structure of doing the best for children, that is the toughest part' Louise; p16/8).

Louise describes the emotional impact of having to manage uncertainty for a young boy due to the limited availability of placement resources within the organisation:

'the lowest moment for me I think was ...I had to walk with him over to the placements office, and say you know this little boy you are finding a placement for; this is him, and it is six o'clock, and you know what do you do? What do you actually do?' (Louise: p16/18).

Louise's emotional dilemma is captured in her repetition of the phrase *'What do you actually do?'* acknowledging her feelings of helplessness and she reflects on how the emotional impact stays with her:

'well, you do take them home in your heart, because you just think, you don't go into social work to be having to fight for beds for children, that is just really hard that is' (Louise: p17/9).

It was clear that at an organisational level, a culture of uncertainty and anxiety prevailed within the organisations for these participants. Louise views this as inevitable:

'it's always going to be falling apart around you because that's the landscape that we are in, that's the political climate' (Louise: p23/14).

However, there is a significant impact on worker resilience, particularly for workers at this early stage in their careers. Melissa demonstrates a worrying lack of confidence in her senior managers when she comments: *'it's just all the managerial stuff that is completely bat-shit'* (Melissa: p18/2). Her uncharacteristic use of language reflects her impatience and anger at her situation as a newly qualified worker and highlights the need for an organisational response that will support new workers in their important task of focusing on the emotional needs of the children and families in their care.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed the experiences of three newly qualified social workers as they develop their understanding of using empathy within their practice. From their discussions, I identify three key headings which include the process of learning empathy, experiencing dilemmas which challenge empathic practice and identifying organisational aspects that influence the practice of empathy in children and family social work. These findings will be integrated with findings from other studies within my discussion in Chapter 9. The next chapter will consider findings from the third and final study with social work supervisors.

Chapter 8: Study 3 Social Work Supervisors

Chapter Overview

In this chapter I present findings from the third study in this research, exploring the views and experiences of 6 social work supervisors in order to understand their perspectives on the role of empathy within social work with children and families.

Introduction to participants

The interviews for study 3 took place between February and July 2020. The first two interviews were undertaken face-to-face within agency settings and included use of a visual research method. However, following the national lockdown in March 2020, due to the Covid19 pandemic, subsequent interviews were conducted by phone, and did not include a visual research element. This change in study methodology was agreed with the ethics committee (Appendix 13). The six participants were in supervisory positions across two local authority children's services agencies within the UK. Four were in management roles, while the remaining two were in advanced practitioner roles which involved supervision of newly qualified staff and social work students. All participants were female, with a minimum of two years of supervisory experience. Pseudonyms have been used to represent participants. During the interviews, participants discussed a range of challenging, and indeed distressing situations they had encountered with children and families.

- **Maxine:** has been a qualified social worker for 13 years, currently in a middle management role within children's services. Maxine describes a situation in which a social worker and manager are seeking to address the care needs of a 14-year-old boy who is frequently absconding from local authority care. Maxine

discusses the tension within practice between supporting the emotional needs of staff and ensuring the agency responsibilities are delivered.

- **Amanda:** has been a social worker for 12 years and holds a post as an advanced practitioner within children's services, specialising in criminal and sexual exploitation, and supervising a small number of other workers. Amanda discusses several challenging situations with young people who were vulnerable to potential exploitation, describing the anxiety within the professional network when young people went missing.
- **Sharon:** has been qualified for 13 years and has been a manager for two years. During the interview, Sharon describes several situations involving abuse and neglect, focusing on the emotional impact of practice and the role of supervision in enabling workers to reflect on and regulate their emotions more effectively.
- **Trudie:** has been a qualified social worker for 10 years and has been the manager of her current safeguarding team for 3 years. Trudie discusses the impact of a child's death on the team and emphasises her role in supporting workers emotionally. She also discusses the need to performance manage a worker when their emotional responses seemed to impact their work significantly.
- **Laura:** has been a qualified social worker for 23 years and a team manager team for 10 years. Laura discusses several challenging situations within a safeguarding team including the removal of a young infant from their mother due to substance use, acknowledging the emotional impact on herself and the team. She reflects on the importance of modelling her own emotional regulation and sharing her distress openly.
- **Gemma:** has been a qualified social worker for 12 years, working as an advanced practitioner for 7 years, supervising newly qualified workers and social

work students across the agency. Gemma describes a situation of domestic abuse and helping a student to manage their emotional distress. Gemma discusses the balance of being able to manage workers' emotions so that they do not adversely impact children or their families.

I have identified several distinct group experiential themes within the interview data, provided in the table below. I have integrated visual data from two interviews within this analysis.

1. SUPERVISING EMPATHIC PRACTICE	1.1 Empathy in Supervision: <i>'Our focus is on the children and although they make us sad, we have to make the decision'</i> (Laura).
	1.2 Containing workers' emotions: <i>'Guiding the worker in the right direction, so I can manage her emotions more effectively'</i> (Amanda)
	1.3 The limits of empathy: <i>'I can still challenge it, but you don't have to do it in an authoritative way'</i> (Amanda)
2. REFLECTING ON SELF	2.1 Managing emotions: <i>'it took me the whole weekend to get over it and process my distress'</i> (Laura).
	2.2 Use of self: <i>'You have to have your own self-awareness and your own understanding'</i> (Maxine).
3. MANAGING WITH EMPATHY	3.1 Organisational culture: <i>'she needs to understand that this is her job'</i> (Maxine).
	3.2 Support for supervisors: <i>'Sometimes, you could just do with someone saying, 'oh that sounds rubbish for you''</i> (Sharon).

Table 8 – Group experiential themes & sub-themes from Study 3 (Author's own creation, 2024).

THEME 1: SUPERVISING EMPATHIC PRACTICE.

These supervisors acknowledge the value of empathy within workers' practice with families and within the supervisory relationship itself. The interviews highlight the

role of the supervisor in containing a wide range of emotions and of being available to workers both emotionally and practically.

1.1 Empathy in supervision.

Supervisors show awareness of their workers' empathic practice and discuss their own use of empathy within the supervisory relationship. Laura uses a familiar metaphor to capture the sense of her workers' empathic practice:

'she often talks about her own childhood experiences of being a young carer, and difficulties with her own parents, and she, they, are all able to put themselves in the service users shoes and also to understand the fragility of life' (Laura: p. 11/30).

Laura refers to an awareness of the worker's own life experiences and an understanding that a shared sense of humanity can support empathy for workers. Supervisors also identify the ability of the workers to convey an empathic understanding of the child to others, using their knowledge to inform the professional system. Amanda sums this up as:

'the worker has been able to facilitate a much deeper understanding of the child for most of the people in the system' (Amanda: p22/19).

Trudie gives a further example where empathic understanding was used by the worker to support a family member to understand issues around a child's response to contact plans:

'she really used her empathy skills within that situation to try and help the grandmother, to see things from the grandmother's point of view but also to help the grandmother see things from the children's point of view' (Trudie: p. 8/11)

Sharon gives a vivid example of how a worker's empathic understanding of the child's experience had informed her decision to initiate court proceedings for a young disabled child within a neglectful and abusive home environment:

'I can feel what the social worker has understood about her and that makes me try to understand what life is like for this little girl, and I think that was about the skill of that worker, and I sat in that courtroom, and it was the most

relieved I have ever felt when someone said 'yes you can have this court order' (Sharon:p.25/26).

The supervisors use their worker's empathic understanding as a significant indicator of the well-being and needs of the children. However, two supervisors also identify situations where workers struggle to use empathy within practice. Maxine describes a situation in which the worker experiences a sense of threat which undermines her ability to work empathically with the child:

'so, the worker, our worker, is very scared, and has been trying to get taken off the case...because it is a lot of work, and the family are quite scary, (Maxine: p.6/8).

It is apparent that the worker's own fear, and need for safety, disrupts their ability to be available for the child or family. Gemma describes a similar situation for a social work student working with a domestic abuse situation, commenting that the student *'could not control his emotions'* (Gemma: p.2/31) and *'would come to supervision completely overwhelmed'* (Gemma: p.5/6).

Supervisors also discussed using empathy within their supervisory practice, acknowledging workers' emotional responses to children and families, and gaining insight into workers' emotional functioning. Sharon draws on her previous practice experience to inform her empathy:

'I would say 'oh I worry about her, and I can't imagine how much you worry 'but I would often say 'there was a time that this happened to me, and this is what I experienced' and I would always come back to what I've been through in my career ... human common ground' (Sharon: p.26/22).

Other supervisors draw on experience to convey a shared sense of responsibility. Laura comments:

'I feel that you know we are making these decisions together, while they are really hard and they make us sad, our focus is on the children and although they make us sad, we have to make the decision and then treat the parent and be their advocate' (Laura: p.9/14).

As well as using empathy to identify a shared sense of sadness, Laura uses the pronouns 'we' and 'us' to try and convey shared ownership of the decision making within this situation. Amanda takes a similar approach to help prepare a worker for a difficult event, attending the funeral of a child:

"I said, it's going to be horrible, it's not the sort of day we want to do, I'm not going to say 'yaay we are going to a funeral' because that's not going to happen, but we are there for the right reasons and that is what you have got to remember" (Amanda: p.34/20).

Again, Amanda acknowledges the worker's feelings of fear and avoidance and conveys her commitment to supporting the worker by sharing the experience and reminding them of the importance of their role in safeguarding the child. Several participants also use empathy to assess the non-verbal communication of staff members to assess their emotional state. This is clearly illustrated by Gemma:

'you will get, be able to gauge straight away, I can see where they are in terms of sort of emotions so I will walk in and you know by the face immediately,' (Gemma: p17/20).

Trudie echoes this in her description of one of the team members:

'you know and you would know when she is having a bad day, laughs, you wouldn't get to hide it, ..., and I keep trying to encourage her to come into the little quiet office and talk in private' (Trudie: 11/24).

Supervisors appear to regard empathy as an integral aspect of their everyday supervisory practice involving use of both non-verbal and verbal skills, reading the emotional cues from their staff as well as naming feelings directly to support emotional processing.

Four supervisors stress being available as a key aspect of their empathic practice, with their workers. Gemma discusses sharing emotions with a worker after a shared visit:

'we have gone to some real difficult situations, where to be honest with you, I have walked out and we have both gone "what is going on here, bloody hell" ... and we have both gone "thank god you are with me" (Gemma. 22/7).

Amanda recalls a similar experience, for a worker who was afraid of making a visit:

"it was the worst experience she had ever had, she didn't want to go, the worst experience and I just said, 'look I will be there, we will be there together, we have got the police officers with us, we will be fine' (Amanda: p.34/19).

Sharon describes this quality as 'mutual respect' between supervisor and worker:

'a level of mutual respect actually when you need us, we are here, if you need me to jump in the car and come with you to a grotty house then absolutely, I will do that because that is what we are all doing this job for' (Sharon: p.28/17).

There is a sense in which this availability of the supervisor involves a physical embodied element of support, - *'jumping into the car, visiting a 'grotty house'*. The imagery conveys a strong sense of the physicality of the home visit which is a foundation of social work practice and links strongly to the idea of the social workers' real-world practice. Supervisors express their empathy through their embodied physical presence alongside the worker as well as through their verbal identification of feelings.

1.2 Containing workers' emotions.

Supervisors also discuss the importance of being able to manage and respond to workers' emotional distress. Laura uses the image of a *'safety net'* here:

'I kind of see myself as a container, a circle around her trying to contain her in some way and put this safety net around her, trying to soak up her feelings' (Laura: p. 7/32).

Amanda uses the metaphor of a *'little stress bucket'* (Amanda: p. 4/28), suggesting a key aspect of supervision is enabling workers to offload their emotions from practice:

'you can bring it back and offload, and that's where I fit in, you know to be there to offload about how they feel and also allowing that not necessarily to be politically correct... because they can't do that in front of the families that they are working with' (Amanda: p24/29).

Participants describe encouraging their workers to express a wide range of emotions, to help them gain insight into their feelings and support their empathy in practice: Sharon acknowledges workers might find particular people difficult and need to offload their personal views within supervision (P.8/12) while Trudie emphasises the importance of creating a safe place within supervision for workers to experience containment to their emotions:

'Providing they feel safe and contained within the supervision, I think they will open up about those feelings, and they do, certainly within my supervision, they do feel able to do that' (Trudie: p.13/8).

Gemma (p.17/25) uses the language of emotional regulation to discuss her role in helping new workers learn to regulate themselves emotionally through supervision. However, from her management perspective, Maxine was distinctive in questioning whether all supervisors actually have the ability to undertake such tasks:

'the manager should be offering full reflective supervision, that should be based around emotion, but I don't think that is within the manager's capability' (Maxine: p11/18).

This creates a dilemma for workers –if a supervisor is recognised as not having the necessary skills to contain and support workers emotions within practice, potentially undermining their ability to make effective decisions and build relationships with children and families.

Three of the supervisors use the metaphor of 'parent' (Amanda, p.14/16) or 'mother' (Laura, p15/4; Trudie, p.10/25) to characterise this aspect of supervision. For example, Trudie comments *"I did kind of feel like I was bringing her along on a journey with me as a mother and child would"* (Trudie: p.10/25).

During her interview, Amanda created an image (Figure 14) which captures this aspect of the supervisory relationship, choosing symbols of a tiger for herself and a tiger-cub for the worker, emphasising their shared identity and her role in guiding the worker:



Figure 14. Amanda – Confusion (Author's photograph, 2024).

'so, this is me (tiger) and I am a bit like a parent in this particular scenario... a bigger version (comparing tiger to cub) ... because equally, we're quite dependable but also quite tenacious and I feel I support her as like a parent would, even though the age difference isn't much (laughs)' (Amanda: p.5/4).

Amanda conveys a confidence in her ability to support the worker with their emotions, based on her seniority and experience (p.14/32). Laura reflects on her own preferred personal style and being mindful of how this might impact the professional relationship with the worker:

'my preferred style is when I have got a worker that I can use that maternal side with, I have to be really clear about whose needs I am serving' (5:p.14/4).

It appears that there is often a complex sharing of emotions within supervisory relationships with the potential for each partner in the relationship to draw on aspects of their personal as well as professional life experience. Participants recognised the emotionally challenging and distressing nature of social work practice with children and families and their role as supervisor in using empathy to acknowledge and contain these feelings.

This is potentially challenging for supervisors when workers are unable to manage their emotions. Gemma describes being unable to contain the emotions of a trainee, despite her best efforts:

'I couldn't calm him down, I struggled to keep him calm and say, you know, he just got too overwhelmed with all of it really' (6:5/9).

Similarly, Maxine discusses the situation with a worker who has asked to be removed from a case:

'the worker then sent me an e mail saying I feel frightened, anxious ..., so we have had to respond by changing the case, ..., but I feel really frustrated with this worker, and the way they have behaved, although I have been there and I do understand er, what it is like to be a social worker (Maxine: p.8/10).

Maxine refers to her own experience of practice as a way of conveying empathy and understanding but her responsibility as a manager also affects her response to the worker, including feelings of frustration and questioning the quality

of the supervision being provided. Maxine had a distinctive view of the supervisory role:

'you start with the personal stuff, you ask them how they are, if they are crying and sobbing you are not going to get onto the case stuff, but you are not a counsellor, that is not your role... that sounds awful' (Maxine: p,24/7).

Maxine displays some impatience with the emotional aspects of the supervisory role, reluctantly recognising that emotional containment might be necessary for staff to enable them to progress to the 'case stuff' (ibid). Clearly, there is a tension for managers between addressing the workers' emotional needs and ensuring that the safeguarding responsibilities of the agency are fulfilled.

1.3 The Limits of empathy.

Participants discuss a balance within supervision, between an empathic, emotion-focused approach and a more questioning and challenging style. Trudie comments about the expectations of the wider organisations in this respect:

'Certainly, there is a direction that we do need to challenge, we know that it is part of our role, but it is just how that is done, and everybody challenges in different ways' (Trudie:22/29).

For Amanda, this is about integrating challenge within her own empathic style of supervision:

'I can challenge, I can still challenge it, but you don't have to do it in an authoritative way, you can do it in a way which helps people understand' (Amanda:18/27).

In contrast, other participants identified difficulties with workers where they felt they needed to move away from an empathic style to achieve a shift within the worker. Sharon describes hitting a 'wall' (Sharon: p.15/20) in her supervision with

one worker who was failing to arrange contact between a young girl in foster care and her father, despite being set timescales for contacting him:

'I totally got how she struggled with, you know this man beat these children with a metal bar, you know, and I know ... and she's frightened of him' (Sharon; p9/23).

Regardless of her empathic understanding, Sharon describes needing to shift the style of her supervision: *'to try and plough through some of her wider emotions" by focussing on tasks and activities'* (Sharon: p14/5). Ultimately this involved reminding the worker of her legal duties within the care proceedings process:

'I think the role in supervision was twofold really, to challenge that in terms of our duty and legal responsibility to him as a parent with PR (parental responsibility) but also to have some space to acknowledge you know we are humans' (Sharon; P 8/32).

Trudie also discusses an example, where a worker's anxieties are affecting their performance:

'not being able to meet deadlines... we struggled in terms of any form of challenge from myself in terms of progression of deadlines and overall children's care planning, so there is definitely anxiety there' (Trudie: p.20/24).

The role of unconscious emotional responses which impact workers' subsequent practice seem significant, and it is vital that supervisors can identify and address these processes. Laura discusses a situation with a worker who shares a similar personal history with a parent and is struggling to accept the authority of her role as a result, distancing herself from decisions (*Laura: p.8/19*) and avoiding her safeguarding responsibility with the family:

'I am trying to work with my worker to understand her and trying to say to her about how she can treat this mother with respect and dignity and compassion and still make a difference within the system, so quite challenging really' (Laura: p.5/1).

Amanda offers an example of a worker who feels distressed and frightened about a family situation, asking to be transferred as the case worker. Amanda acknowledges her worry but challenges her to remain with the case, offering to support her and visit with her:

'I had to make her part of it all, because she said I don't want to work this case with you, and I said it's not happening, you are working this case with me, we are doing this together' (Amanda: p.34/7).

Amanda seems to prefer an approach of gently challenging workers when they seem uncomfortable with some aspect of a case, using empathic awareness to *'acknowledge that there is something not quite right'*. (Amanda: p. 24/3). The participants provided a range of examples where their empathy for staff needed to be carefully balanced with their organisational authority and responsibilities. A further striking example was provided by Maxine, who describes a situation in which a worker refused to visit a child due to feeling frightened of the family (Maxine, p.10/24).



Figure 15. Maxine - *How to bully a social worker*. (Author's photograph, 2024)

She describes the startling image of a worker hiding in the office, while the sense of threat is conveyed by the presence of police cars to back up the manager. Maxine created an image of this home visit during her interview (Figure 15) in which the worker is represented by a small female child with a horse, and the manager as a knight standing in front of the child with sword outstretched. This symbol of vulnerability and immaturity is significant, with the worker appearing dependent and ineffective. The inclusion of a horse, reflecting a childhood hobby is poignant, further emphasising the worker's apparent vulnerability. The family is represented by two tigers and a dinosaur emphasising their potential aggression. The image is a powerful representation of the apparent conflict between the worker and family. Maxine uses the title '*How to bully a social worker*' (p.22/16) for the

image, but there is an ambiguity - the worker feels afraid of the family but also appears to feel pressured to undertake the task by her managers. The symbol of a manager as an armoured knight rescuing the worker also reinforces the worker's lack of agency and idealises the manager as their defender. Maxine is clear that her role is to challenge the worker in this context, to support her professional development:

'if you ask that worker, I think she would say that's she didn't feel safe, and I think what she doesn't understand is what she needs to do to make herself feel safe' (Maxine: p.27/13).

While there may be an empowering intention from Maxine, it appears that the worker continues to feel fearful and unsupported. There is a tension for managers – to try and support social workers to undertake complex tasks with children and families, whilst also acknowledging the emotional impact of this work. Participants discussed managing this balance of empathy and challenge, although their supervisory styles varied. Trudie continued to place a strong emphasis on empathy:

'Helping her to try and understand how each family member was feeling, bringing it to feelings each time and trying to get her to put herself in the child's shoes if you like' (Trudie: p.8/28).

However, Laura discusses the need to become more authoritative within supervision at times:

'So, to be more tough and say you need to push yourself out of your comfort zone, you need to do this, this, and this' (Laura: p.14/19).

Clearly, there is a tension for managers in that while they recognise the impact of worker's personal lives and personalities on their work, they do not have a clear mandate to explore these aspects, and this is likely to be particularly difficult

when workers feel emotionally vulnerable or reluctant to acknowledge their anxieties, due to concerns about performance management.

THEME 2: REFLECTING ON SELF.

Supervisors highlight the need to find strategies for managing their own emotions within supervision, reflecting on their own personal histories and how these affected their supervisory practice.

2.1 Managing own emotions.

Participants vary in the degree to which they acknowledge their own emotional responses to emotionally distressing family situations within the supervisory relationship. Amanda recognises that such events could be distressing for both worker and supervisor:

'she [the worker] didn't know what to do, she internalised it that she had done something wrong that she had missed something...and I.... it was equally upsetting for me' (Amanda: p32/2).

Similarly, Trudie describes the impact of a child's death on herself and reflects on how to best support her workers, whilst also acknowledging her own emotions:

'just giving her that time, trying not to bring in my emotions, although that is difficult, trying to help her see that she is not the only one having those questions in her mind, and even with my experience of the case, that I still have the same questions and feelings' (Trudie: p5/27).

Although it is clear Trudie shares many of the worker's feelings and concerns, she stresses that she would seek to keep her own emotions separate from her workers:

'I think I do manage to contain myself in the office, I have certainly had that feedback from team members before' (Trudie: p.23/10).

In contrast to Trudie, Sharon emphasises the role of her emotions within her practice:

'As a supervisor I am quite emotionally led, and I think it would be quite visible emotionally to see what is going on for me and I think sometimes that is just about who you are' (Sharon: p.23/10).

From this perspective Sharon talks honestly about her emotional responses to the history of abuse by a particular father *'I mean he was a really nasty dangerous man, that goes without saying,'* (Sharon: p. 7/11) and it is notable that Sharon shares the viewpoint and emotions of her worker here. Sharon gives an account of her relationship with a particular child over several years and emphasises the strength of her emotional commitment for the child:

'I don't know what it is that just gets you, that is the only word I can use to describe it, you can just really relate to, I don't even know if relate is the right word to use, because I wouldn't say necessarily you would share their experiences, but there are certain children that your relationship feels stronger with' (Sharon: p. 19/9).

Sharon is comfortable acknowledging her own emotional responses and recognising how these might impact her practice at times. She expresses a belief in the shared humanity between worker and family, giving permission to workers: *'permission almost for that human element of stuff' (Sharon: p.20/30).*

Laura uses a similar term to describe her emphasis on emotion within supervision:

'It is about looking at, understanding how fragile life is and how things can happen to us as human beings' (Laura: p. 4/30).

There was a sense for both these supervisors that it was important to acknowledge and model openness in their emotional responses. Laura also acknowledges the cumulative emotional impact of the work for her as a team manager:

'I get overwhelmed by some of the cases, and it makes me feel really sad ...sighs... and I am left with those feelings' (Laura: p.19/1).

However, Laura discusses how she has learned to manage her emotional responses to support workers to undertake their responsibilities on behalf of children:

'I mean I have always been able to maintain the empathy and emotional stance, but you become aware as a manager that you do have to make quite ruthless, brutal decisions and you process that' (Laura: p.6/20).

There was a sense from two participants that over time, they found the emotionality of the work less challenging, becoming accustomed to the emotional demands of the role. Maxine suggests that this can lead supervisors to become somewhat de-sensitised to human distress:

'I do wonder whether people truly understand how emotive the work is and whether people... its interesting in that you become acclimatised to things and as a social worker you know they are horrific things, and you know you have your dark sense of humour and become quite inappropriate' (Maxine: p36/7).

Four participants also identify frustration in response to their workers. For example, Maxine discusses her feelings about the worker who has withdrawn from working with a family:

'I feel really frustrated with this worker, and the way they have behaved, although I have been there and I do understand er, what it is like to be a social worker, but you can't just abdicate yourself from all of it' (Maxine: p.18/3).

Maxine's interview was characterised by a sense of frustration, using the word 12 times when describing her own emotional responses to both service users and staff. Other participants also identified feelings of frustration, for example, Trudie comments:

'Trying to support workers who aren't very good at managing deadlines and that can be incredibly frustrating, through supervision, 'have you done this?' no 'why not?... (Trudie:p.20/12).

Sharon makes a similar comment from her perspective:

'The word that comes to me is frustration, like almost like we are going over and over the same things again and again and there is quite a simple solution, task-wise' (Sharon:p.15/21).

Gemma comments that she felt '*completely drained*' (Gemma: p.10/6) by a student social worker and unable to help.

'I am really sad for him because I couldn't... couldn't help it and for me, that was a personal 'Damn it I am normally good at this' and for me that was personal' (Gemma: p.11/30)

Gemma's own anxiety is apparent, questioning whether she can effectively support the worker at this challenging point in his career. It was evident that participants needed to manage a range of different emotions within their supervisory relationships and that at times, these emotions intruded into those working relationships.

2.2 Use of self.

Supervisors also discuss the importance of their own self-awareness when supporting staff emotionally. Maxine comments: '*I think you have to have your own self-awareness and your own understanding*' (1;1/23), while Trudie highlights the importance of the supervisor's capacity for self-regulation:

'Yes... you have to be able to erm, sit with uncomfortable feelings yourself, rather than push them away' (Trudie: p.12/32).

For some such self-awareness involves changing their preferred supervisory style to address particular workers' needs. For example, Laura comments:

'I have had trouble, I have had to tailor my supervision because some workers don't like that emotive caring, they want more pragmatic, let's look at the more rational factual approach' (Laura: p.13/19).

Sharon also acknowledges that some workers struggle much more with emotional expression: *'there are some who just wouldn't go there'* (Sharon: p.24/6).

Amanda suggests that a key role in supervision is to support workers to develop an understanding of their emotional coping mechanisms: *'how they manage their emotions, their default styles when things go wrong'* (Amanda: p.26/2) while Sharon describes needing to make a judgement about how workers' emotions might be affecting their decision making:

'We have to respect how far someone wants to go as well don't we, and I suppose it only becomes an issue when you see like an emotional detachment in relation to their work' (Sharon: p.24/24).

Amanda suggests that the initiative needs to be left with the worker:

'If they want to talk, they can, if they don't want to, I am not going to invade their personal space or their emotions, they can decide when they want to come' (Amanda:20/33).

Trudie also emphasises the importance of not forcing the worker into such discussions:

'the worker didn't really totally open up about her personal life, and you know that is her choice, I wasn't going to force that' (Trudie:9/30).

Gemma describes waiting for a worker to acknowledge their emotions themselves:

'and then the one day she just burst out crying and I just went 'thank god for that (laughs), you know I just said I have been waiting for that I don't know how many weeks...' (Gemma: p.20/6).

Gemma clearly anticipates that the emotion will need to emerge at some point but chooses to respect the worker's defences. Workers' ongoing emotional

distress will potentially affect their ability to show empathy to children and families. This represents a dilemma for supervisors who need to exercise their judgement to decide when to explore workers' emotional responses within supervision.

Supervisors also used self-awareness to reflect with workers about how personal life experiences might influence their practice. Maxine argues that personal history only becomes relevant when it has a direct impact on the worker's practice:

'it depends on what it is, doesn't it? You know if you want to go and talk about your Dad and the shit experience you had, then you do that with your mates down the pub...if your Dad has been sectioned and you know that is having an impact on you, then you need to talk to your manager about that in whatever capacity that is' (Maxine: p.24/24).

However, other participants see a role in helping workers to make direct connections between their responses within work and their personal histories.

Trudie comments:

'not losing sight of what it means for the social worker and bringing it back maybe to the social worker's previous experiences in cases, maybe in her personal life' (4:9/7).

Laura discusses how a worker has a similar personal history to one of the mothers she is supporting which impacts her practice:

'I know this worker has had a difficult childhood herself, like me, so what this worker says is 'well this could happen to me tomorrow' so she makes comparisons with the service user' (Laura: p. 6/8).

Laura recognises that they both have experienced a strong identification with this vulnerable woman's situation as a single parent with a young infant, particularly because Laura has also become a mother again recently (Laura: p.4/21). They explore this in supervision to keep a focus on the risk in the situation due to pre-natal substance use and risk of physical abuse:

'it is about how we manage it as workers and mothers, because we feel a lot of empathy for this mother, we are like really committed to ensuring that we get her expressed breast milk from herself to the foster carer' (Laura: p.4/14).

Sharon also acknowledges how her own personal distress around recent life events could adversely impact her emotional responses within work:

'what jumps to mind is two nearly three years ago, when I was having treatment for cancer when I wasn't even allowing anyone to go anywhere near anything emotional because if I cried, I couldn't stop' (Sharon: p.24/9).

It seems that for both workers and supervisors, previous experiences personally and professionally, can influence their practice and supervisors need to pay attention to these dynamics within their supervision.

THEME 3: MANAGING WITH EMPATHY.

A further set of themes relates to the context in which supervision occurs and how this environment affects the nature of supervision for workers and sets the tone for empathic practice.

3.1 Organisational culture.

The culture of the wider organisation also affects supervisory practice. Maxine presents a pragmatic view about the inherent risks associated with the social work role, suggesting that workers need to understand and accept these exist within their practice (Maxine: p12/6). This affects her supervisory style:

"...you cannot let her off the hook because she needs to understand that this is her job...whilst we are not going to put her at risk of danger, this is the job and by not doing it and by being scared of it, you are not going to grow as a person'. (Maxine: p.11/7).

The phrase *'let her off the hook'* is striking, with Maxine suggesting that this worker needs to manage her feelings of fear and anxiety. Gemma makes a similar comment about her student's response to a family situation:

'but these are very, extremely low level of what you are worried about and getting overwhelmed about, in reality the job is far, far tougher than what you are dealing with right now' (Gemma: P.5/30).

This 'toughness' to the job is a potential challenge to the participants, portraying a threatening, unpredictable work environment in which empathic practice becomes increasingly challenging. There are significant implications for practitioners' well-being when organisational culture anticipates aggressive and abusive behaviour as an everyday occurrence, but without clear mechanisms in place to help staff manage the impact of these experiences.

Trudie discusses the impact of new organisational policies on staff morale and workload:

'I also think that sometimes that isn't always considered when you have got the push for performance, across the organisation, and not considering the full workload that the team have' (Trudie: p.24/4).

Gemma similarly comments that organisational demands are too great for some managers:

'we have got some who basically are not coping themselves... you know you know they are behind in all of their stats, their figures, their workers are not working' (Gemma p. 18/25).

This emphasis on performance and management indicators is picked up by Amanda, who identifies a gradual shift in the values and norms of her organisation:

'I mean there are some people that are genuinely caring and genuinely want, are supportive, but there is far more that are all about procedure and data' (Amanda; p. 26/29).

This emphasis on performance indicators appears to be affecting turnover of managers within their organisations, leading to greater instability in the supervision and support of front-line staff. Amanda describes sickness rates within teams as '*really high*' (Amanda: p. 30/32) while Sharon identifies how the use of agency managers has made the environment challenging for staff:

'you see agency managers come and go into teams that have had six managers in six months' (3:27/19).

This is echoed by Gemma who describes a team who have had four managers in twelve months (*Gemma: p.18/10*), describing the working environment as *'chaotic'* (p.19/22) when she first took up her post:

'we were in a bloody mess, we had managers crying in offices, we had newly qualified workers who had not been supported and it was a bloody mess'. (Gemma: P.19/ 18).

This sense of instability and change directly affects the wellbeing of supervisors and workers and their capacity to respond to the challenging emotions they may encounter. Laura recalls moving jobs due to the negative organisational culture she was working in:

'I have moved from one local authority to another, I worked in one authority where they didn't treat staff very well and left so bruised, but I just, those experiences have helped me to become more resilient'(Laura: p.20/14).

Gemma acknowledges a similar period when she herself struggled to manage the demands of her role: *'I was not supported at all at the end of last year, I nearly left I was that upset'* (*Gemma: p 5/22*). Maxine also refers to the impact of a threatening work environment on her wellbeing in previous supervisory roles:

'I had quite a toxic team and I used to sob on the train on the way home, in the end I handed my notice in and had three months off sick, ... like I was rocking, I was actually rocking' (Maxine: p.30/17).

It is clear that these three participants have had very similar experiences within their different working environments, suggesting a sector wide difficulty with organisational culture. Amanda also comments on how quickly staff are being promoted into supervisory roles:

'you know there is an expectation that they will promote social workers into management posts, without the nurturing around that and helping them to understand what the role is about' (Amanda: p.31/6).

It seems significant that Amanda herself has stepped down from a manager role into an advanced practitioner role where she feels more able to support her workers (p2/28). Maxine also raises the issue of whether team managers are always able to meet the emotional demands of the supervisory role:

'What should happen is proper reflective supervision, to unpick those feelings I don't think that does happen because...pauses. if we are going to get really philosophical, I don't think that manager (points to image) can do that because that manager doesn't know themselves enough (Maxine: p.18/8).

There is a tension for organisations – how to deliver expected performance outcomes, whilst also ensuring the emotional wellbeing and empathic capacity of their workforce to undertake this challenging and vital role with children and families.

3.2 Support for supervisors.

Participants also describe a mixed experience in accessing support for themselves within the organisation. Sharon describes having supportive contacts with other managers but comments that these have been somewhat inconsistent due to organisational changes:

'We have team manager meetings, but we also have a WhatsApp group and check in with each other and that has been a little bit disjointed, it has been a changing group of managers, and they changed the area so who your peers are changed' (Sharon: p.30/24).

Trudie highlights the absence of regular support within her organisation:

'I think some managers think there is the gap of peer group supervision. I think that is something that we lack, we don't have reflective supervision as such either so that is an area that could be developed further (Trudie: p.22/31).

It seems significant that these supervisors do not have a similar supervision process to support their own emotional wellbeing. Laura also suggests that

supervisors need support to process the difficult experiences encountered within their teams:

'What is really absent is when there are critical things like a child death or something there should be a de-briefing, I am just amazed that they have no de-briefings sessions' (Laura: p.20/29).

Given the spectrum of situations that the participants described taking place for their workers, this seems particularly important. However, four of the six participants acknowledged that although some support was available, there was a consensus that this would be perceived negatively within the organisation. Laura comments:

'it would be really helpful to me to access six sessions of counselling in work, but to do that I would have to tell my own manager, and my manager is going to assume that I am not coping' (Laura: p.21/5).

Maxine agrees:

'I wouldn't take it up if there was counselling, which there is available, because I have asked myself shall I ask for that? no, I'm not going to ask for that' (Maxine: p.36/23).

Amanda describes this as a

'bit of a blame culture... yeah if you say that you are struggling, that is seen as a weakness' (Amanda: p36/13).

It appears that the emotional needs of managers are not routinely considered by organisations and there was an unspoken sense of disapproval for supervisors expressing a need for emotional support. Sharon comments that she would not feel comfortable sharing her emotions with her current manager:

'I would struggle to let myself be openly emotional with him, I would struggle with that, ... well sometimes, you could just do with someone saying, 'oh that sounds rubbish for you' and he just doesn't do that' (Sharon: p.29/13).

While Gemma describes being recently supervised by a supportive manager after a difficult period within her organisation:

'I had a good manager for me to support me and a good team, so I didn't feel left out in the dark' (Gemma: p.10/26).

As a senior manager, Maxine discusses her expectations of supporting the supervisors she oversees, commenting that they do not usually bring their emotions to their own supervision (Maxine, p23.12). Maxine states that while supervisors may reflect on their own emotions, this also varies between individuals:

'I think it does happen and some managers will be stronger than others at doing it... it will also go up and down in terms of how busy that you are... but you are not a counsellor, that is not your role' (Maxine: p.24/1).

Participants created a picture of organisational cultures that discourage supervisors from acknowledging their own emotional distress, focusing rather on the organisational targets and duties that need to be completed. At the same time, the participants discuss a range of challenging and emotionally complex situations in which both workers and supervisors are routinely expected to use empathy to complete their duties effectively. The apparent lack of support within the organisations and the stigmatisation of emotional needs, presents a serious challenge for both supervisors and practitioners who seek to sustain empathic practice within their work.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter I have presented findings from my third study, focusing on the experiences of social work supervisors in relation to their use of empathy within social work practice with children and families. Findings included a discussion of how empathy was used within the supervisory relationship, as well as reflections on the supervisor's use of 'self' and their own awareness and identifying organisational aspects which affected their ability to support staff in managing the

emotional impact of practice. These findings will now be integrated along with findings from studies 1 and 2 into a discussion and analysis of the experience of empathy within children and families' practice in chapter 9.

Chapter 9: Discussion of findings

Chapter Overview

I now present a discussion of my findings from these three chapters (6, 7 and 8) in which I bring together themes from my three studies to support my exploration of participants' lived experience of empathy within their practice and to consider what might support or constrain their use of empathy within their work. My analysis is informed by an interpretative phenomenological stance which recognises the value of multiple perspectives and disciplines to support a curious, critical exploration of my findings – in line with Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's 'hermeneutics of questioning' (2022:31) as discussed in chapter 3 . While I identify as a phenomenological, humanist researcher, I utilise an integrative approach to theory to support my analysis, drawing on psychodynamic concepts such as transference (Bower, 2003) and containment (Bion, 1962) and critical sociological theory (Hochschild, 1983) to inform my discussion.

To focus this discussion, I re-visited the final stage of Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2022) data analysis process to support me in identifying identification of super-ordinate themes, integrating the Group Experiential Themes (GETS) of the respective studies in chapters 6, 7, 8. My intention here was to synthesise and evaluate the group level themes from each individual study, to identify connections and implications across the three different groups in relation to their experiences of empathy. Within my analysis I have paid attention to the nature of participants' empathic experiences in practice (objective 2) and the differences between their experiences according to participants' level of experience (objective 3). I undertook a period of iterative analysis, comparing the GETs and sub- themes

from each group, and was able to cluster them under headings which have helped to shape this discussion. See Table 9 below:

Element of Empathic Practice	Identified Sub themes	Mapped to Group Experiential Themes (GETs) from studies 1, 2 & 3.
1. EMBODIED EMPATHY & 'FELT' EMOTION.	Empathy and bodily perception	Study 1: Embodied empathy – social work on the move. Study 2: 1.1. Feeling Empathy.
	Felt empathy and emotional distress	Study 1: 3.1 Experiencing empathic distress. Study 2: 1.1. Feeling Empathy. Study 3: 2.1 Managing emotions.
	Empathy and time	Study 1: 1.3 Meaning making – holding the child’s story; 2.1 Building empathic relationships over time.
2. BALANCING EMPATHY IN PRACTICE	Communicating empathy	Study 1: 1.1 Empathic understanding of the child’s experience; 1.2 Communicating understanding to the child. Study 3: 1.1 Empathy in Supervision.
	Balancing empathy with authority	Study 1: 2.3 Balancing empathy with authority; 3.2 Emotional regulation strategies. Study 2: 2.1 Empathy within the statutory role; 2.2 Empathy with parents. Study 3: 1.3 The limits of empathy.
	Becoming a confident empathic practitioner	Study 1: 1.3 Meaning making – holding the child’s story. Study 2: 2.1 Empathy within the statutory role. Study 3: 2.2 Use of self.
3. EMPATHIC ENVIRONMENTS AND LEADERSHIP	Informal support and organisational moods	Study 1: 3.3 Emotional organisations. Study 2: 3.1 Sustaining empathy. Study 3: 3.2. Support for supervisors.
	Sustaining empathy through supervision	Study 3: 1.1 Empathy in supervision; 1.2 Containing workers’ emotions.
	Empathic organisations and leadership.	Study 1: 3.3 Emotional organisations. Study 2: 3.2 Barriers to Empathy. Study 3: 3.1 Organisational culture.

Table 9 Mapping of GETs to Elements of Empathic practices. (Author’s own creation, 2024)

From this analysis, I identify three elements that I suggest combine to contribute to their experiences of empathy, illustrated in Figure 16 below:

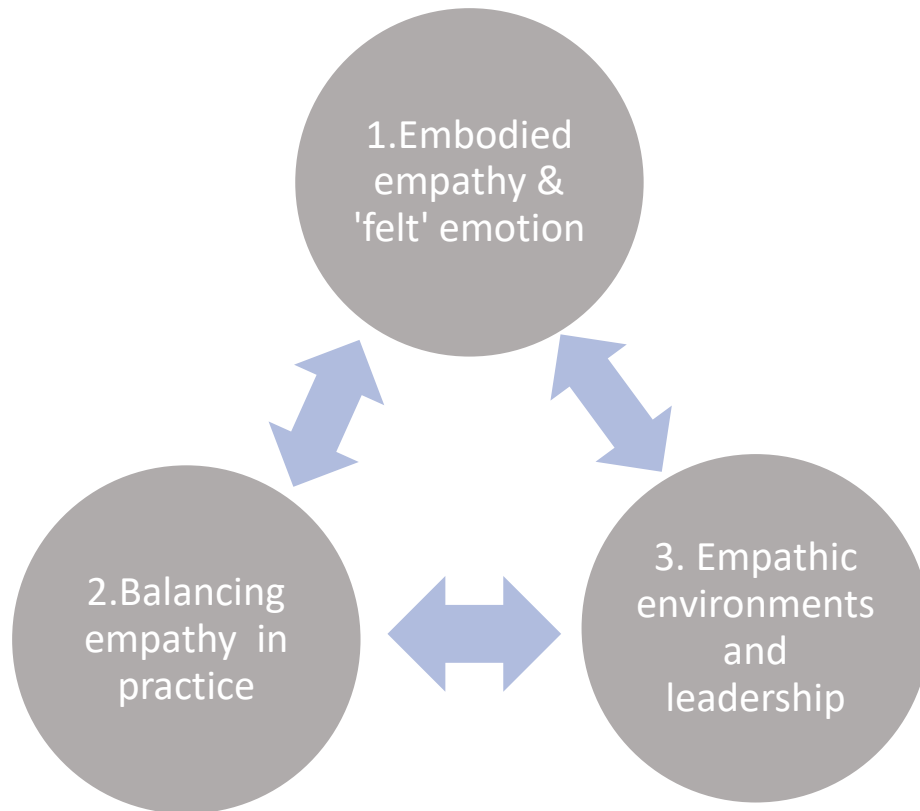


Figure 16. Elements of empathic practice (Author's own creation, 2024)

I will consider each of these elements in turn, bringing together evidence from across the three studies and integrating relevant literature to support my discussion of potential implications for social work practice.

1. EMBODIED EMPATHY AND 'FELT' EMOTION

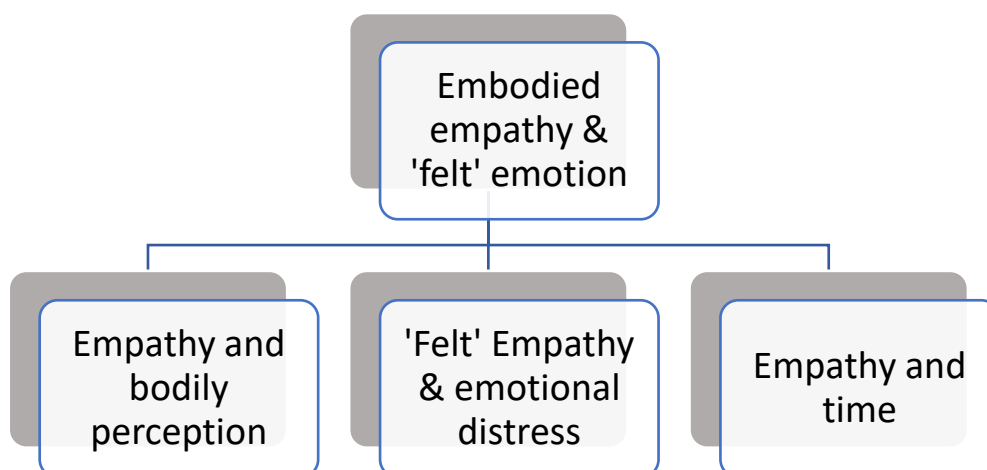


Figure 17. Element 1: Embodied empathy & 'felt' emotion. (Author's own creation, 2024).

Within this element, I develop a particular focus on the embodied nature of participants' experiences and the need to manage a range of strongly felt emotions within their practice.

Empathy and bodily perception

I identify a central role for participants' bodily experience, as they move through the lifeworld of everyday practice. Participants in study 1 describe the physical nature of their practice, particularly their sensory, bodily responses to situations, providing cues for their emotional understanding. For example - physically 'being with' children and families – within family homes (Gillian, p11/31; Bianca, p7/30;), public buildings (Gillian, p21/8; Phil, p6/28; Kirsty P15/5) risky community settings (Sally, P4/9; Maggie, p11/27), or sharing long, car journeys together with children and young people (Liz, p10/15; Keith, p7/14 Maggie, p6/18), taking long walks

with young people (Louise, p7/25) or playing video games (p6/19). In these situations, participants demonstrate empathy through their responses to family members while managing their physical presence within potentially risky environments. Workers' embodied presence thus serves as a lens for their empathic practice, requiring reflective ability to understand their own reactions, within the wider context. Supervisors also recognise the importance of their physical presence, by accompanying workers to difficult and emotionally demanding events such as funerals (Amanda, p34/20) court (Sharon, p25/26) or challenging home visits (Gemma, p22/7; Sharon, p28/17, Maxine, p8/19) to offer support directly through shared experience.

In addition, participants also acknowledge their own physiological responses in their practice at times. For example, in study 1 participants describe feeling tearful with clients at times (Phil, p6/27; Sally, p6/15; Kirsty, p11/15) or using touch to support children's emotional distress and convey care directly to them (Study 1: Maggie, p16/13, Keith, p12/3; Phil, p7/3, Gillian, p 14/9). In study 2 Susan describes having '*goosebumps*' (Susan: p.3/6) when hearing the stories of the children in her care and both she and Louise also describe shedding tears with families (Study 2: Louise, p18/8; Susan, p7/17). There was a sense for these new workers that they are learning how to manage powerful physiological responses to their empathic experiences and to find a way to respond 'professionally' while the experienced workers accepted these experiences as a normal aspect of practice.

Participants use bodily metaphors to describe their own feelings, including Kirsty claiming she was a '*fresh pair of eyes*' (Kirsty,p4/1) to explain her different approach to a family, and Bianca describing how her '*heart sank*' (Bianca, p8/1)

during the removal of a young child from her family, while Maggie comments she has put 'in *blood, sweat, and tears*;'(P15/1) with a young person. Similarly, the participants also convey their embodied perception of the child's experiences – for example Liz uses the metaphor of a '*whirlwind*' (Liz, p15/22) for a young boy, and Gillian describes a child being wrapped in his mother's coat like a '*refugee*' (P12/29), while Sally describes a young woman as '*naked and exposed*'(p2/12). Participants experience a wide range of visceral physiological cues and reactions that influence their empathic practice.

I connect this embodied practice to the work of Stein (1989) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) who emphasise the body as a primary lens for all human encounters (1945:169), facilitating '*direct perception*' of other's emotions within empathic responding (Stein, 1989:11). This correlates with the psychological idea of '*bottom up*' responding (Decety & Lamm, 2006) to emotional distress in others – the workers' own physiological cues support their empathic understanding of the other person, provided workers are able to distinguish their felt experience as that of another person, demonstrating self-other differentiation (Eisenberg, 2011). More recently, Rhyn, Barwick and Donnolly (2021) also use a phenomenological perspective to emphasise the role of '*direct perception*' within social work practice, suggesting such emotional resonance within the worker which can inform their empathic responding to the person. These ideas support Tempel's (2007, see chapter 2B) proposal that social workers must attend to their sensory experience reactions within practice environments to enhance their empathic understanding of how service users might also be feeling.

There are implications for social work training here in preparing new practitioners for empathic practice by enhancing their self-awareness and their self

–other differentiation. Bilson (2007) and Walter and Shenaar-Golan (2018) suggest the use of movement therapy and gestalt techniques to support workers' understanding and awareness of their physiological responses and emotions. Following recent experiences using virtual reality equipment with social work students and practitioners, I suggest virtual reality also offers a potential source of training for practitioners. Recent studies by Lanzieri et al (2021) Simpson, Haider and Giddings (2023) and Rambaree et al (2023) propose that virtual reality training can enhance workers bodily awareness as well as their understanding of and empathy for people living in diverse environments and cultures. Several authors (Thomas & Otis, 2010; Bonifas & Napoli, 2011, 2014; Halpern & Ekman, 2012, Grant, 2014; Dupper, 2017; Stanley & Bhuvanewari, 2018) propose mindfulness training and practice as a vehicle for enhancing self-awareness while strengthening self -other differentiation, building protection for workers from the potential impact of other people's emotions. On this basis, I suggest that there is a need to strengthen the focus within social work training on the physiological aspects of experience as a fundamental aspect of empathy, paying attention to both physical arousal within particular environments and emotional resonance to the emotion of other people.

'Felt' empathy and emotional distress.

Another key aspect of empathy for participants was the experience of emotional distress. Theoretical models (Davis, 1980 Geddes and Segal, 2010, King, 2010) identify that emotional distress is an integral part of the empathic encounter, requiring a level of emotional self-regulation (Gross, 2013) by workers. Such models identify the role of '*top-down*' (Decety & Lamm, 2009) cognitive abilities to support the individual to reflect on their felt emotion and identify whether their

feeling derives from another person's emotions or is their own. Key theorists (Davis, 1980; Decety & Lamm, 2009, Hoffman, 2011, Eisenberg 2011) acknowledge the interaction of affective and cognitive elements as fundamental to models of empathy, supporting self-other differentiation (Eisenberg, 2011). The ability to '*take perspective*' is emphasised within empathy literature (Gerdes & Segal, 2009; King, 2011 Grant & Kinman, 2017) as an important protective factor for social workers within their practice. However, from a phenomenological perspective Van Ryn and colleagues (Van Ryn, Barwick & Conolly, 2021; Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019) reject the concept of '*perspective taking*' as a '*simulation*' of empathy (Spalding, 2017), arguing against the possibility of knowing another person's thoughts in this way (Tsang, 2017). Instead, these authors suggest that emotional resonance within the body offers the key route to experiencing the feeling of the other person (Van Ryn, Barwick & Conolly, 2021:150).

Heidegger's (1951:114) concept of '*being with*' is relevant here, in proposing a sense of unconscious, shared connection with other human beings which supports the experience of shared affect. In study 3, two managers make direct reference to such a sense of shared humanity between professionals and service users. Laura comments '*how things can happen to us as human beings*' (Laura: p. 4/30) while Sharon acknowledges this shared humanity with supervisees directly - '*you know we are humans*' (Sharon; P 8/32). Such awareness by supervisors of shared human emotionality offers a firm foundation to support empathy within practice. This awareness was uniquely expressed within study 3 with supervisors, rather than by practitioners, suggesting that supervisors are best placed to support a reflective and compassionate stance with

their social work staff. Writing from a feminist perspective, Freedberg (2007) supports this perspective, arguing social workers should share their authentic emotional responses, whilst being conscious to hold their sense of self-other differentiation, in order to model empathy for families and reduce the power differentials between worker and family members within a statutory context.

While the philosophical debate is beyond the remit of this thesis, my interest is in understanding the role that workers' emotional distress plays in their overall experience and how they can be effectively supported with such experiences to sustain their capacity for empathy. Participants certainly identified some instances of emotional contagion (Eisenberg, 2011) while sharing children and families' painful emotions (Study 1: Phil, p6/27; Sally, p6/15; Kirsty, p11/15; Study 2: Louise, p18/8; Susan, p7/17) but there was also a strong sense that workers needed to frequently manage their own personal emotional distress. For example, in study 1, Keith identifies feeling sadness '*... every time I have ever removed children from their parents*' (p13/19) while Sally (p6/15) comments that she expects to cry when leaving a child in a new foster home, and Gillian discusses how emotions from work intrude into her unconscious when she is asleep (*Gillian, p3/23*).

Singer and Klimecki (2014) distinguish emotional distress, which they suggest is motivated by a 'self-orientation', focused on the worker's emotional response to the situation, from empathic concern, which they suggest is 'other-oriented', motivated by a worker's compassionate desire to help the other person. Thomas (2013) also suggests that the experience of such distress for social workers undermines their empathic responding through a focus on the self of the worker. However, my findings indicate a complex relationship for practitioners who are experiencing authentic distress.

While most participants describe managing their emotions and self-regulating effectively in the moment of interaction with the child or adult, they also suggest that they need to find ways to manage their own emotional reactions subsequently. Given the complexity and intensity of contemporary social work practice, it seems clear that workers experience their own authentic emotional reactions to the challenges they witness within children and families' lives and need to process these separately from their interaction with the child or adult. Within all three studies, participants need to manage emotional distress routinely alongside empathic concern. My findings indicate that participants require support to find strategies for managing their own distress and that organisations should anticipate that such distress will be a common element of practice.

I make a link here with literature on emotional intelligence within social work practice (Ingram, 2015, Howe, 2008, Morrison, 2007) which draws together aspects of self-awareness, emotional self-management, and communication of empathic understanding. Ingram (2015) identifies empathy as a central component in Mayer and Salovey's 4 branch model of emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), while both Morrison (2007:246) and Howe (2008:6) suggest that workers' ability to demonstrate empathy will support service users to process their emotions and contribute to the overall success of social work interventions. Morrison (2007) highlights that emotional intelligence requires both intra-personal aspects, including self-reflection and emotional regulation, alongside inter-personal aspects including empathy, communicating understanding, and supporting emotional regulation processes in others. Additionally, Grant and colleagues (Grant & Kinman, 2013, Grant, Kinman &

Alexander, 2014, Grant, 2013) suggest that such empathic skills may support the development of emotional resilience and reflective capacity for their worker.

Participants reflect on their own experiences and make connections with those of the children and parents. For example, half the participants in Study 1, reflect on how their experiences of being mothers (Gillian, p14/15; Bianca, p9/14; Kirsty, p11/8; Maggie, p5/4) affect their emotions, identifying potential implications for their practice. In such situations, there is the possibility for participants to experience countertransference, connecting with their own emotional experiences as parents (Bower, 2005:11), or projective identification (Bower & Solomon, 2018:8), experiencing the emotions of vulnerable children in their care in a heightened way. Such emotions interact with their cognitive and empathic responses, so workers need to be supported to be self-reflective, able to differentiate their own emotions from the emotion of the other person (Davis, 1980, Hennessy, 2011). Both Maggie (p6/33) and Gillian (p.3/23) provide examples of self-other differentiation, reflecting on their awareness of how their own emotions needed to be managed within their practice - '*those are my feelings and my issues, not his*' (Maggie: p6/33). Supervision for experienced workers seems crucial here, supporting practitioners to maintain a clear awareness of their own emotions and those of the children and families with who they work.

Within study 2, all three participants (Susan, p10/33; Melissa p.13/4) discuss feeling anxious as they adjust to the responsibility within their new roles and struggle to manage emotions. This is particularly apparent for Louise, who describes having had a '*really tough time*' (P13/10) within a relationship with a parent who she perceives as '*nasty and vindictive*' (ibid) towards her, struggling to differentiate her own feelings from the experience of the child. While Louise

appears to struggle, both Susan and Melissa show some ability to reflect on and separate from the emotions within the child or family. For example, Susan reflects on trying to manage a tendency to be risk averse which she recognises as potentially oppressive for families (Susan, p11/15), while Melissa (p.13/4) also acknowledges the difference in her own feelings from the child's experiences – *'it is not right to impose your own worry onto a child, I feel like that is sort of managing my emotions in that sense'* (ibid). There is a sense that while some of the newly qualified participants are gradually developing their empathic skills, others may struggle at times to maintain self-other differentiation, in the face of strong and persistent human distress and trauma within the children and families they support.

Emotional distress is also apparent within the supervisors' study as Maxine comments (p36/7) *'I do wonder whether people truly understand how emotive the work is?'* Two supervisors (Amanda, p32/2; Trudie p5/27) describe trying to support staff following the deaths of children in different authorities, whilst also needing to manage their own personal distress *'it was equally upsetting for me'* (Amanda, p32/2). Others discuss feeling overwhelmed (Laura, p19/1) and emotionally distressed by particular situations (Sharon, p19/9). Both Laura (p6/20) and Maxine (p36/8) describe needing to limit their empathy at times in order to make difficult decisions about safeguarding families which take time to process emotionally.

Across the studies, it is evident that all participants experience levels of emotional distress within their respective roles and need to find sources of support to help them reflect on and process their emotions. Grant and Kinman (2014; Grant, 2014) propose the concept of *'accurate empathy'* (Grant, 2014:339) as the ability to understand and communicate the feelings of the other person, *'while*

avoiding adverse emotional consequences from the encounter'(ibid). Within my findings, practitioners at all levels describe trying to manage such adverse emotional consequences, and there was a sense that such distress was an everyday aspect of their practice. This prompts the question as to how workers are expected to avoid such consequences and where responsibility lies for helping them to do so?

There is a dilemma for practitioners in trying to balance the impact of emotional distress in order to be emotionally present and available in the moment for the child or parent, whilst also being able to acknowledge their own experience of emotional distress in a way which will enable them to process their emotion. Within my thematic synthesis, several authors identify the potential for workers to become emotionally '*detached*' (Rose & Palattiyil, 2019) or '*numb*' (Lavee & Strier, 2018) due to over exposure to others' emotional distress. Ferguson (2021) argues that this is in part due to an organisational and management culture that understands the emotional nature of everyday practice but fails to provide support or acknowledge the complexity of the social work task (Ferguson et al 2021:33).

The use of terms such as '*accurate and inaccurate*' (Grant, 2014:339), is problematic in such a context, potentially stigmatising workers' experiences of distress and implying failure on the part of workers who experience such emotions. My findings suggest that workers continually struggle to balance their authentic acknowledgement of children and parents' emotions and that there is rarely a single exchange on which to judge their 'accuracy' in this regard. Within my studies, participants vary in their ability to maintain a clear self-other differentiation across specific situations and with individual children or families. Factors such as their own personal histories and current circumstances, the context of their

particular team and organisational culture interact to produce individual outcomes within practice at different points in their careers and with different situations and families. There is also some indication from study 1 that participants become more confident in their self-other differentiation skills gradually over a significant period of time. In this sense, the participants experience a somewhat messier, less linear process in relation to their developing empathy than existing models (Gerdes & Segal, 2009; King, 2011) imply.

I suggest that it is helpful to acknowledge practitioners' felt emotions as a critical element of their practice, recognising the dynamic, interactive, nature of their experiences. I connect here with Siegel's (2020:170) concept of '*feeling felt*' within the context of infant -caregiver relationships and therapeutic exchanges which captures a sense of inter-subjective sharing of affect to support the development and regulation of the child or client. For the purposes of my discussion, I identify this as 'felt empathy', integrating workers' embodied experiences with an acknowledgement of their own emotions and experiences with the other person, albeit while maintaining self-other differentiation - the 'as if quality' (Rogers, 1959).

My earlier discussion of the social work literature, in Chapter 2A, (Biestek, 1957; Perlman, 1957, Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997) supports such an approach, with Payne (2011) suggesting that workers should feel an authentic sense of the other person's emotions within themselves, and Shulman (2015:190) encouraging workers to '*reach for feelings*' in this way. This is echoed by Wilson et al (2011) who suggest that workers' congruent emotional responses will support them to take appropriate action.

There is a delicate balance to be achieved for practitioners between authentic emotional engagement on the one hand, and their ability to maintain a separation from the child or parents' emotions in order to be helpful and carry out their duties on the other. In this context participants' emotional experiences should be acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of practice, and a potential resource for building relationships with children and families. Such a stance seeks to destigmatise and contain workers' emotional distress as an essential first step in supporting workers to process their emotions and sustain their self-other differentiation. It seems particularly important that during early stages of their careers, newly qualified social workers are provided with positive role models to facilitate their understanding and processing of their own emotional distress.

Several authors (Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Gibbs, 2001; Harvey & Henderson, 2014; Lawlor, 2013, Ruch, 2012) propose models of reflection and supervision which prioritise the emotional aspects of practice as central to the supervisory role. I share Bradbury-Jones (2013:256) view that workers' emotions need to be in the 'foreground' of supervision by focusing on worker's felt emotions as a significant aspect of practice. Gibbs (2001) emphasises the potential danger of emotional harm and increased anxiety for staff if organisations do not acknowledge the emotionally intrusive nature of safeguarding practice. Both Lawlor (2013) and Harvey and Henderson (2014) use psychodynamic theory to inform their analysis, arguing that supervision should offer workers opportunities to reflect on their emotions and defences directly, promoting workers' self-awareness whilst also conveying a sense of caring interest in the worker.

However, in study 3, three supervisors (Amanda, p20/33; Sharon, p24/24; Trudie, p9/30) identify reluctance amongst some workers to reflect on their

emotions. For example, '*they don't want to, I am not going to invade their personal space or their emotions*' (Amanda: p20/23). This creates a dilemma for supervisors if emotional aspects of practice are not available for reflection within supervision, reinforcing a culture where emotions are stigmatised within practice. At times, it appears supervisors in study 3 are reluctant to use empathy to focus on the worker's emotional responses, fearing that this may be too intrusive, despite such emotions leading to workers' avoidance of responsibility and ongoing emotional distress in their practice.

In the absence of well established, support mechanisms and reflective supervision, practitioners who engage in emotionally authentic and available relationships with children and family are potentially more vulnerable to processes of emotional labour such as '*surface acting*' (Hochschild, 1983; Leeson, 1991) or subject to compassion fatigue (Kapoulitsas and Corcoran, 2014) leading to potential emotional de-sensitisation and increasing the risk of burnout for staff (McFadden, 2018). However, my discussion of emotional labour within Chapter 2B suggests that many practitioners may regard the expression of authentic emotion as a legitimate and positive form of practice, which, can offer a potential source of compassion satisfaction (Wagaman et al, 2015, Grant & Kinman, 2020). Indeed, Thomas and Otis (2010) in their study of emotional distress in practice, identify that felt emotion appears less harmful than anticipated, provided workers have access to emotionally focused sources of support.

Empathy and time

I also identify the significance of the passage of time for participants' experience, both for workers' understandings of significant events in children's lives and to

support reflection on their own life experiences. Gadamer (1975) and van Manen (2015) both highlight the significance of historical context and situatedness as a horizon which fuses with the individual's perception of experience. I recognise the relevance of the political and historical context in which participants are experiencing their practice – specifically working within local authority safeguarding services provision in England in the early twenty-first century. As such, participants, and I as researcher, are subject to environmental influences that arise from government and professional guidance by regulators, underpinned by neo-liberal welfare policy and 'new public management' (Healy, 2022) approaches to case management within social work, which potentially undervalue traditional casework and empathy-informed approaches to practice (Ruch, 2012). I return to this issue later, starting on page 317, when I discuss implications for organisational culture.

Heidegger proposes the concept of the '*care structure*' (1953:185) to consider the impact of time on individual experience, arguing that experiences of the present moment also connect with a person's origins and early identity, as well as their expectations and ambitions for the future. Within the studies, several participants reflect on aspects of their own progression through the life course as a source of understanding which supports their empathy for others. For example, in Study 1, Phil (p.8/25) reflects on how his early care career experiences motivated him for his role as a social worker, while both Bianca (p9/14) and Gillian (p14/15) reflect on their identities as parents of children and how these interact with their current experiences. Within study 2, Louise (p17/13) and Susan (p7/18) both make connections with their childhood experiences and positive home lives as providing them with a secure foundation for their practice.

In study 3, several supervisors also make links between workers' practice and aspects of their own identity and life experience – for example, Laura (p11/30) identifies the relevance of a worker's early experience as a young carer for their own parent, and her own experience as a single parent with infant children (P6/8) as potentially impacting their practice decisions. It is evident that participants' life experiences and identities contribute to their motivations and commitment to their social work practice, reflected in Phil's comment "*that's why I do the job I'm sure*" (Phil, p13/9).

Participants acknowledge their understanding of children's own personal histories and identities and how these affect their shared interaction – for example, Bianca reflects on the impact of a young girl's repeated experience of sexual abuse by family members (P2/25) and Liz (p7/32) describes undertaking life-story work with a young boy who feels he has been abandoned by his parents in favour of younger siblings. Similarly in study 2, Susan identifies the impact of maternal substance use on children's anxiety (Susan, p.16/13) while Louise (p.5/21) discusses the impact of a mother's mental health on her son's self-harming behaviour. Understanding children's lived experience over time supports workers to make meaning from the past, for children and adults, and to potentially support a more authentic empathic response within their practice.

Participants' also described the experience of relationships with children and young people across time – for example Liz describes sharing repeated placement moves with a young boy in her care (Liz: p 3/13) while Kirsty suggests her lengthy involvement with a child has been especially important in achieving the required outcome: *'I took it all the way from child in need through to care order and he is still in foster care with the foster carers I placed him with* (Kirsty: p 4/24).

It appears that these participants attached significance to their presence with children at particularly difficult or emotionally intense points in their lives, and in often being the consistent presence for children through a range of experiences.

Five participants in study 1 (Phil, p2/32; Maggie, p13/11; Keith, P4/25; Sally, P4/6; Bianca, p17/1) emphasise the significance of building and maintaining relationships across time, and how this supports their understanding and empathy for the child or young person. In study 2, despite shorter periods of Involvement, both Susan (p.16/13) and Louise (p.7/4) recognise that time has enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of children and their situations and to enable trusting relationships to grow. However, two participants who work in short-term duty teams appear to have a different experience. Melissa, (study 2) questions her relevance for a young person, suggesting her role limits her ability to show 'creativity' (Melissa: p.12/4) in her work and expressing anxiety about opening up the child's 'defences' (p11/31) without being around to support him:

'you are meant to be in and out as soon as possible, so even if he were to start disclosing strong feelings to me, what would I do? I would just be another person that leaves' (Melissa, p.8/1-4).

During her interview, it seemed that Melissa struggles to recognise the value of the work she was doing with this child, despite her apparent success in engaging him through playful interaction. She finishes the interview expressing the desire to move to a long-term team where she

'can spend a year or two in a child's life' (Melissa, p.18/23).

Somewhat in contrast, Gillian (study 1) expresses a clear preference for short term intervention and has chosen a role that enables her to have time limited involvement with families as a matter of preference.

'but there are other people that are really good at building those long-term relationships and building up those stuff, and I don't like to do that' (Gillian, p.3/1-3)

During both interviews, I was struck by the dilemma for these workers, in seeking to build rapport through empathic responses while being aware of the limitations of their involvement. Both these participants expressed concern about engaging too directly with the emotional needs of the children in their care. For example, Gillian comments:

"I don't want to unpack something that I haven't got the skills or the time, the involvement to be able to support them with" (p20/29)

Melissa expresses similar concern about discussing a child's emotions, fearing that she has limited skills to help (P9/11) and might make the situation worse:

'I would be afraid of bringing stuff up... wouldn't want to interfere with his day-to-day functioning' (P.11/5)

During their interviews I was mindful of the particular constraints these workers experienced within a short-term practice context and recognise that such practitioners might need specific forms of training and support to encourage them to remain open empathically within such a practice context.

Several participants in study 1 (Keith, P4/4; Phil , p7/19; Maggie, p15/5; Sally p.7/8) describe how they keep in contact with children beyond their formal period of involvement, suggesting a level of significance for young people and workers , often as they move out of the formal care system (Bowlby, 2005; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2018)– for example *"yeah and she keeps in touch which is lovely, about once a month to let me know she's doing ok"* (Maggie, p.15/5). This is

echoed in study 3 by Sharon (p.19/19) who describes holding case management for a particular over several years and then maintaining contact with the child into her adult life. There is resonance here with Heidegger's concept of '*being with*' (1951) one another and a sense that some participants are committed to maintaining relationships if they feel this is valuable for the child or young person. It also seems significant that these more experienced workers in studies 1 and 3 (ranging from 4 years to over 30 years qualified) seem to be exercising greater levels of autonomy and decision making, potentially reflecting their growing confidence in empathic practice, and making emotional commitments to the young people in their care.

Significantly for other children or young people, workers also described the importance of deciding when to '*back off*' (Phil, p7/20; Maggie,p.15/8), reducing the intensity of their professional relationships as children have been able to build connections with permanent carers or to grow in confidence and independence: '*the intense period of work is over now – during that time she needed to know she was special to someone*' (Sally: p. 7/8). However, where participants had chosen to keep in touch with young people following their official involvement in their care, this was viewed by those participants as a positive experience and a source of pleasure and satisfaction (Maggie, p15/5; Phil, p7/19) within their work, rather than an additional emotional demand.

The dynamic nature of participants' practice over time raises important questions for the practice of empathy within the context of statutory children's services. Participants describe emotionally intense periods of practice with children and families, often over significant periods of time, which shape their practice but may also profoundly affect participants' own emotions and

relationships. Workers require access to support mechanisms to support reflection on their practice and explore potential defences and counter-transference responses to separate out the child's interests from the workers own emotions. This would support workers to recognise when it may be appropriate to sustain ongoing relationships with children who have left their direct care, and when it might be important to decide to back off to support the young person's ongoing development.

These findings are also significant in the context of recent data on high levels of staff turnover in the children's social work force -17% in 2022 (DfE 2023) and findings regarding children's experiences of frequent changes in their allocated social worker -60% experienced at least one change per year in 2019 (CCO, 2019). Arguably, the practitioners' experiences of empathic relationships with children and families helped to sustain such relationships and provide a source of job satisfaction and stability, albeit with some experience of distress at times also.

2. BALANCING EMPATHY IN PRACTICE

A further element within my findings relates to how practitioners intentionally use their empathy skills within statutory practice. My findings suggest that most social workers encounter some personal dilemmas within their practice and need to find ways of resolving internal conflicts, to reconcile these two important aspects of practice.

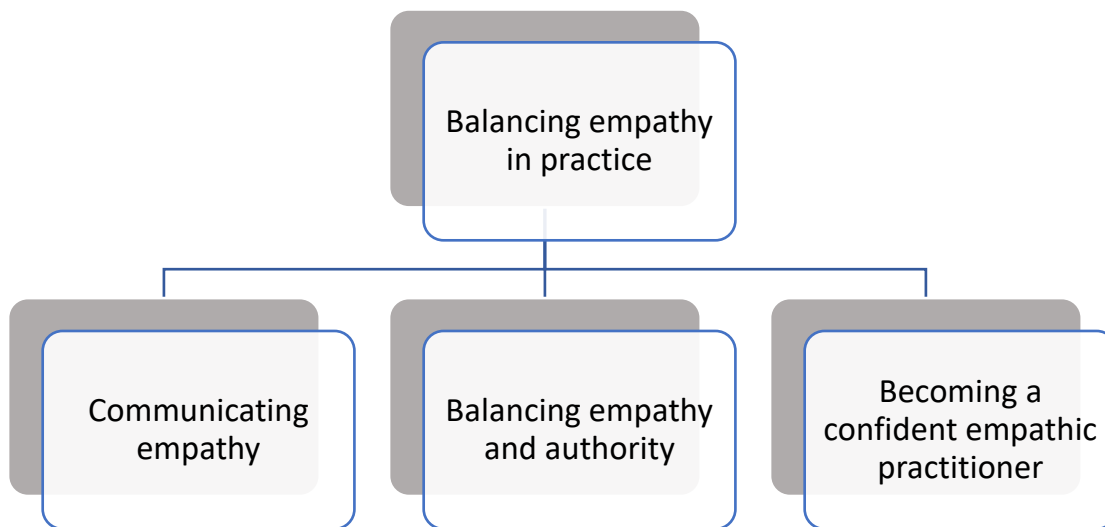


Figure 18. Element 2: *Balancing Empathy in practice* (Author's own creation, 2024).

Communicating empathy

Within my research, participants describe using empathy in their practice with children in particular, as well as within supervisory practice. This offers a contrasting perspective to research by Lynch, Newlands and Forrester (2019), who found that the majority of their participants did not display empathy in their practice with adult family members, albeit the comparison is limited by the different methodologies used in our respective studies.

Throughout my findings, participants regard empathy as a central aspect of their practice, although vary in the degree to which they feel comfortable with their experiences. Key definitions of empathy in social work and therapeutic practice (Howe, 2019; Rogers, 1959; Barrett-Lennard, 1983, King, 2010) emphasise that empathic understanding must be communicated back to the individual as part of the empathic encounter. Participants within my studies describe both experiencing

empathy and communicating their empathic understanding directly to children and families.

Participants in all three studies give examples of how they communicate their empathic understanding to children and families. In study 1, Maggie (p16/6) summarises her honest, direct empathic response to a young woman as *'this is really shit, what can we do'*? while Liz (p20/18) and Keith (p14/1) both emphasise the importance of naming the child's feelings back to them directly. The supervisors also describe using empathy to support social workers by naming their concerns directly – for example, Sharon names her workers' *'worry'* (P26/22) while both Amanda (p26/22) and Laura (p9/14) acknowledge their workers' *'sadness'*. Such descriptions of empathy correspond closely to those identified within my thematic synthesis (Eriksson & Englander, 2017; Tempel, 2007; Ortega-Galan, Ruiz-Fernandez & Ortiz-Amo, 2020), in relation to integrating embodied awareness, cognitive understanding, and a focus on emotion, suggesting a level of consistency between the studies in how empathy is perceived.

However, among the newly qualified workers (study 2), while participants appear confident about understanding another person's emotions (Louise, p.7/10; Susan, p5/11; Melissa, p4/13) they hesitate naming feelings directly. For example, Melissa uses questions to help a child focus on his anger (p4/13) but stops short of reflecting his feelings, explaining that she is *'afraid of bringing stuff up'* (p11/6) and feels *'unskilled'* (p8/8) in working with emotions. Significantly, this echoes a comment by experienced worker Gillian in study 1 (P20/26) who displays ambivalence about using empathy because *'I don't want to unpack something that I haven't got the skills or the time to support them (children) with'*. This is a potentially legitimate concern for some participants particularly due to the short-

term nature of some teams' involvement with families. However, Susan as a more experienced new worker describes growing in confidence in her ability to use empathy within her practice (p9/27) and suggests that naming feelings can help children and parents to think more clearly '*just try and name it and help them to explore why they are feeling like that*' (Susan, p10/15).

It appears that as participants grow in experience and confidence, they feel more able to acknowledge the feelings of children and parents directly and regard this as a legitimate aspect of their practice. There are implications here for how workers' empathy skills are taught and practiced during their training and how to support workers to gain confidence in responding to the emotional needs of service users, both children and adults, as a legitimate aspect of practice.

Within my findings it also appears that participants felt more able to respond empathically to children than adults, echoing the findings of my thematic synthesis (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018; Cook, 2020; Albaek, Binder & Milde, 2014). Within studies 1 and 2, some participants conveyed empathy for the adult family members (Study 1: Kirsty, p11/15; Bianca, p9/14; Study 2 Melissa, p12/28), but most focused on their empathic practice with children and young people. There are clear tensions for the participants, given the intensity of their involvement with the children, which potentially undermine their capacity for empathy towards adult family members. For example, Bianca (p2/25) expresses a negative perception of a mother's decision to remain with her partner, while Keith (p4/25) discusses his critical view of ongoing aggression between mother and son. Participants described frequent situations of conflict and hostility involving parents and families (Kirsty, p5/19; Gillian p4/12; Keith p.19/23; Maggie, p.9/10), potentially leading to negative dynamics with parents. For example – Phil comments '*kids that have*

been damaged by what adults have done or not done' (Phil, p8/3). In study 2, Susan expresses her doubts about the reliability of grandparents caring for children, following grandfather's renewed substance use (p.3/20), while Louise feels she has lost her 'unconditional positive regard' (p13/23) for a parent who she feels is unable to focus on the needs of her son (Louise, P.10/6).

In such situations, participants may experience a strong identification with the child – for example Liz (p10/15) describes feeling she is the only source of support for a young person through multiple moves, while Sally (p. 7/8) emphasises the isolation of a young woman at risk of exploitation: *'she really needed to know she was special to someone'*. From a psychodynamic perspective, Harvey and Henderson (2015:344) warn about potential emotional disturbance for practitioners who work closely with children who have experienced significant harm, suggesting it may well be difficult for them to hold in mind the needs of both parents and child, leading to defensive practices such as 'splitting' (Ferguson, 2021:27), leading to conflicting feelings about different family members.

My findings suggest the majority of participants do demonstrate some empathic understanding of the children and families in their care, often drawing on their own emotional experiences as a reference point – for example: *'your role is first and foremost to acknowledge how they are feeling... so sometimes it's about saying, if it was me, I might be feeling like this' (Keith: p.14/1)*. This supports Agosta's assertion (2014) that the conscious act of empathy builds on a shared sense of social familiarity to develop more explicit cognitive and affective responses to particular individuals and situations. This is a hopeful finding,

suggesting that workers continue to find ways to integrate empathy within their daily practice with children and families.

However, workers will need supervisory support and additional skills training to help manage their own emotional defences and provide authentic empathic service for all family members. Gair (2010, 2013) identifies the potential for social work students to empathise more closely with people from similar social, cultural, ethnic and class backgrounds and argues that supporting workers to recognise their '*shared humanity*' through exposure to the art and literature of other communities is a useful way for workers to develop a stronger sense of 'being with' others. Other researchers (Dupper, 2017, Greeno, 2017; Stanley & Bhuvaneshwari, 2018, Mullins, 2011) propose a range of training techniques including simulated interviews and role play (Dupper, 2017), exposure to parents' own stories and experiences, (Mullins, 2011) and the use of live supervision and feedback to support development of empathic responding and identify areas of unconscious bias (Greeno, 2017) It is important that practitioners are supported to reflect on these aspects of their practice throughout their careers, in order to grow in self-awareness and understanding.

Balancing empathy and authority.

Within my thematic synthesis (chapter 2B) I identify a theme of '*professional detachment*' (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018:1935) in the literature, reflected in the use of metaphors such as '*switching off*' (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020:32) or '*shutting a door*' (Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, 2015:696) to workers' emotions. The synthesis suggests a view that emotion need to be separated from the professional role, promoting the idea of rational, professional practice.

This struggle to integrate empathy with the statutory authority of the social work role is also evident in my research, albeit the metaphors are somewhat different, emphasising duality rather than the need to remove emotions entirely. Both Kirsty (p12/2) and Sally (p5/16) comment directly on the apparent contradiction between the empathic and authoritative aspects of their role: '*I think every social worker has two sides*' (Kirsty, p12/2). Keith acknowledges these constraints within his image which he titles '*Tension*' (P10/30) explaining that his safeguarding responsibilities lead to greater levels of intervention than he would like. (P9/28). Similarly, Gillian uses the title '*Rescuing but not saving*' (P18/16) for her image, to highlight the contradiction she perceives within in her role. Similarly, the frequent use of police symbols and characters within 6 of the 8 images in study 1 (Chapter 6, p23) reflects the potential for workers to identify closely with powerful agents of the state.

This tension is most apparent in study 2, where the newly qualified workers struggle to adjust to the authority of their role. Louise uses the phrase '*having to play the bad guy*' (P11/21) reflecting a struggle to integrate the authority of her role with her empathy for the children and families involved. Both Louise and Melissa describe feeling pressured to take responsibility and make decisions on behalf of the children in their care as a significant aspect of their developing professional identity using metaphors such as '*wave a magic wand*' (Melissa, P.3/28) or being '*all seeing and all knowing*' (Louise, p11/21) to reflect this tension.

While the newly qualified workers struggle to adjust to the authority of their role, participants in studies 1 and 3 appear to have developed clearer strategies for integrating the authority of their role with empathic aspects of practice. I have used the metaphor of 'balance' to capture this aspect of participants' practice. For

example, Maggie (p12/11) Kirsty (p15/5) and Bianca (p5/27) describe needing to be honest and direct with children while also acknowledging their anger and distress. Sally (p3/32) and Keith (p5/15) give examples of needing to set boundaries around aggressive behaviour, while offering empathy to the young people involved. This balance of authority and empathy is also reflected in participants' discussion of touch within their practice, where workers are in the position of simultaneously providing comfort and reassurance to children (Phil, p.7/3; Keith, p.12/3) whilst also engaging in statutory interventions with their wider family. Maggie demonstrates a high level of availability and empathy for children through her willingness to comfort children physically by hugging and rocking them when they are distressed (P16/13) but also acknowledges the importance of setting limits and modelling appropriate forms of touch for children (p.8/1), while Gillian (p4/9) acknowledges how uncomfortable this can be for some workers to manage.

Within study 3, it was apparent that supervisors also describe needing to balance their use of empathy with their line management role, to ensure that mandated tasks were completed within required timescales by their staff. While there is a clear focus on ensuring the work of the agency is carried out, there is significant variation in how supervisors approached this task. In two cases the supervisors identify workers' underlying emotions of fear (Sharon, p9/23) and anxiety (Trudie, p20/24), suggesting that these feelings are undermining the workers ability to complete their duties. Additionally, Laura (p8/19) suggests that a worker has closely identified with a parent she is supporting, while Sharon (p9/23) identifies how her worker has become closely identified with the children in her care and struggles to manage her feelings towards the parent. In both these

situations, the supervisors seek to manage the workers' emotions and resistance in order to ensure that case management responsibilities are achieved.

The two images from study 3 capture different approaches to the supervisory role, with a contrast in the balance of empathy and authority within supervisory relationships. Within Amanda's image (Figure 14) she presents the supervisor and worker as adult tiger and cub, positioned alongside one another, emphasising their shared identity and involvement in facing the situation together. There is a strong sense that the larger figure is helping to contain and sustain the smaller figure within a difficult situation with a family, supporting the worker to undertake a difficult task. In contrast, Maxine's image (Figure 15) places the supervisor between the worker and the family, poised ready for 'battle' as an armoured knight, while the worker is presented in a passive position which suggests vulnerability, emphasising the hierarchical power relationship between the two. Maxine chooses the image of a '*fairy godmother*' to represent herself, commenting that she feels a responsibility to 'sort it all out' (Maxine: p13/5)

These images present very different approaches to balancing empathy and authority within the supervisory relationship. This is reflected in the supervisors' different responses to workers' anxieties – Amanda (p34/7) acknowledges the worker's fear, showing empathy and a willingness to be alongside the worker '*you are working this case with me, we are doing this together*' (ibid). In contrast, Maxine emphasises the worker's responsibility to carry out tasks as a defining aspect of her role and avoids engaging with the worker's heightened fear and anxiety '*you cannot let her off the hook because she needs to understand that this is her job...*' (Maxine, p111/7).

While both supervisors are seeking to resolve complex situations, their use of empathy differs significantly. As the researcher, I experienced a qualitatively different tone between these two interviews, with potential implications for their responses to their staff. As I discussed on page 262, Maxine's interview was characterised by a sense of frustration with her staff and her image (Figure 15) conveying a sense of impatience and a feeling of needing to take the lead to sort out the situation. In contrast, the overall tone of Amanda's interview and her image (Figure 14) emphasised the importance of emotionally containing her worker to support her in continuing in her practice with the family. Arguably, there is a fine balance to be achieved in the use of both empathy and authority within the supervisory role. It seems likely that the individual circumstances of managers, workers and specific family situations can directly impact supervisors' use of empathy within supervision, with implications for their management style and staff experience.

Most participants in study 3, (for example Sharon, p15/20; Trudie, p20/24; Laura, p8/19) describe needing to move between an empathic, emotion-focused style to a more challenging, task-based style, stressing the agency's legal responsibilities and expectations of deadlines for completion of work tasks. Within the study, supervisors appear ambivalent about this aspect of the role and identify limits to how far they are willing to think with staff about their emotions.

It is vital that social workers are trained to balance authority with the use of empathy and are supported to sustain this challenging practice through supervision and organisational culture. Ruch (2014:2159) proposes the use of '*confrontational empathy*' within children and families social work, encouraging practitioners to be mindful of the emotionally challenging nature of their

involvement in families, whilst acknowledging the legitimate power of their role. Similarly, Raatikainen, Rauhala, and Mäenpää (2022:3) have proposed the idea of '*qualified empathy*' which involves the deliberate use of empathy with individuals, while maintaining clear professional boundaries and an awareness of the wider systemic context.

While acknowledging the difficulties that exist for practitioners in integrating these two important aspects, I suggest that most participants seek to find a balance between their use of legitimate power and authority and use of empathic skills to support children and families. My findings suggest that participants in all studies were willing to engage with their authentic emotions and viewed this as an appropriate aspect of their professional identity, while also exercising the authority of their statutory role. I propose the term '*balanced empathy*' to demonstrate the ability of practitioners to combine an empathic acknowledgement of the feelings of the child or adult while also being transparent about their statutory responsibilities and duties and honest about the potential outcomes of their involvement. While this may lead to confrontations with dissatisfied children and adults at times, the emphasis here is on using empathy as an active process to support individuals in coming to terms with statutory social work intervention.

In suggesting such an approach, I am mindful of Wilkins and Whittaker's (2018:2013) participants who viewed such empathy as '*disingenuous*' and preferred an emotionally distanced approach. However, this was not evident within my findings and the participants in these three studies appeared to work hard to integrate the authoritative aspects of their practice with an empathic recognition of people's circumstances and emotions.

Becoming a skilled empathic practitioner.

Across the studies, I also identify a growing professional confidence for some practitioners as they developed in practice experience. Participants describe empathy as an integral aspect of their practice, and my findings resonate with existing models of empathy (King, 2011, Gerdes & Segal, 2009) in relation to the interaction of cognitive and affective aspects, within an active, embodied style of social work practice. Heidegger's concept of '*comportment*' (1975:260) is helpful, arguing that as people become familiar with their lifeworld – in this case the world of children and families social work, they develop a form of '*embodied knowhow*' (Nulty, 2006:441) which supports their practice, becoming increasingly at ease in using the required skills and equipment to support their activity. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) argue that through repetition and reflection, practitioners can become '*expert*', achieving a high degree of competence over time.

My findings suggest that participants in study 1 are using such familiarity (Heidegger, 1953:99) with considerable expertise to support their empathic practice - for example both Bianca (p. 11/14) and Gillian (p.12/17) describe having emotionally charged conversations with young children during car journeys, using regulatory techniques such as breathing or visualisation techniques, to help children understand and manage their anxieties. Similarly, both Sally (p6/15) and Maggie (p7/13) show strong self-awareness through self-regulatory techniques, using music in the car as a way of processing their emotions. In these examples workers are integrating their embodied engagement with the world of everyday practice, with their conscious empathic skills in a deliberate way. In contrast, the

newly qualified workers in Study 2 appear to be struggling more to achieve 'competence' levels of empathic practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005:738) as they begin to implement their knowledge and skills within real world contexts and grow in confidence about using empathy more consciously. It seems essential that new workers are exposed to the use of empathy by colleagues who are expert practitioners in order to recognise and learn the value of empathy within their developing practice.

Heidegger's proposes the concept of '*authenticity*' (1953:175) to argue that across time, individuals can become more intentional and deliberate about their actions, working to fulfil their own sense of life purpose, alongside the expectations of the wider organisation. As practitioners gain experience and progress through their careers, my findings suggest that they may also become willing to work autonomously and to take risks – for example, by making decisions about keeping in personal touch with children they have worked with in the past, (Keith, P4/4; Phil, p7/19; Maggie, p15/5; Sally p.7/8) or by challenging organisational processes and decision making (Keith, p13/8; Sally p.5/25). There are multiple examples of participants going the 'extra mile' for the children in their care by making sure children have precious objects with them in new placements (Liz, P5/20), playing video games (Melissa, P6/19) or squash (Phil, p7/19), developing rituals to support children's understanding of their lives (Maggie, p.14/4), tolerating aggression and helping young people manage their behaviour (Keith, p5/15).

These findings also suggest that such authenticity can result in participants working outside of organisational processes if they believe this is justified. For example, in study 1, Phil dismisses procedures: '*oh balls, what formal structures? I do what I want to do when I want to do it*' (Phil, p.11/24) and dismisses any

emotional impact of the work in a characteristically colloquial way (Phil: p.8 /3). Admittedly, Phil is unusual among the participants having been qualified for 34 years and coming to the end of his career. His image (Study 1, Figure 3) is distinctive in presenting a largely positive view of his practice with a child in foster care and minimising potential complexities. Phil's hard-won confidence over a long career appears to help him focus on the positive aspects of his work in a way that other participants may struggle to emulate. In contrast, Sally's image (Study 1, Figure 8) is overtly critical of her organisation, directing anger at other professionals in particular (Sally, p.5/31) and she argues that at times she needs to circumvent procedures and managers to achieve what she feels is in the child's best interests.

The literature on organisational mavericks (Gardiner & Jackson, 2012, Taylor & LaBarre, 2006) is helpful here, defined as '*a behavioural tendency to engage in creative, dynamic, risk taking, disruptive and bold goal-directed behaviours*' (Gardiner & Jackson,2012:498). Phil and Sally demonstrate some of these qualities, both in the passion they convey about their work with the children, and in their willingness to circumvent aspects of organisational culture. Sloane (2016) suggests that experiencing conflict between one's own beliefs or ethical code and the requirement of an organisation is one factor in causing maverick behaviour within organisations, along with reduced levels of supervision and support. There is a potential risk for organisations in such authenticity, which may well bring workers into conflict with the priorities and values of the organisational culture.

Evidence from this study supports the idea that as workers grow in experience and professional confidence, they exercise greater autonomy in

decision making and in taking risks with their empathic practice. Additionally, Lindebaum (2011) suggests that workers with higher levels of emotional intelligence and empathy, are more likely to challenge what they regard as unhelpful or unethical practices and procedures within their agencies. This has relevance for my third research outcome (page 16) exploring the significance of differences in the stage of participants' careers.

Research into compassion satisfaction within social work offers support for this perspective. Hansen et al (2018) argue that the impacts of emotional distress within practice appear relatively short term, in comparison to the satisfaction workers draw from building authentic relationships with people using services. Wagaman et al (2015) suggest that empathy may contribute to social workers' sense of compassion satisfaction, provided they are able to maintain their self-other differentiation, while Senreich et al (2019) also suggest that compassion satisfaction acts as a protective factor against stress and burnout within social work, provided workers are emotionally contained by their support systems. Kinman and Grant, (2020) propose that the intrinsic qualities of empathic helping contribute to sustain compassion satisfaction and to offset extrinsic factors that may cause stress within the organisation.

Drawing on these ideas, I propose that empathic skill can play a role in supporting workers to develop an authentic and personal style of professional relationship which can be a source of both motivation and potential job satisfaction within their social work role providing a potential source of strength and resilience. However, this potential is reliant on the availability of support systems which can help workers to contain and process their experiences reflectively. Unfortunately, such support appears to be largely absent from the participants' organisational

environment increasing the likelihood of emotional distress and compassion fatigue.

3. EMPATHIC ENVIRONMENTS AND LEADERSHIP.

A third element from my findings focused on the role of working environments on participants' capacity for empathic practice illustrated through the use of similar metaphors and themes across the studies. Participants described the background mood within which their practice took place as well as discussing the potential support structures and features of their working environment which directly affected their daily practice. The role of organisational leadership by supervisors and managers is highlighted.

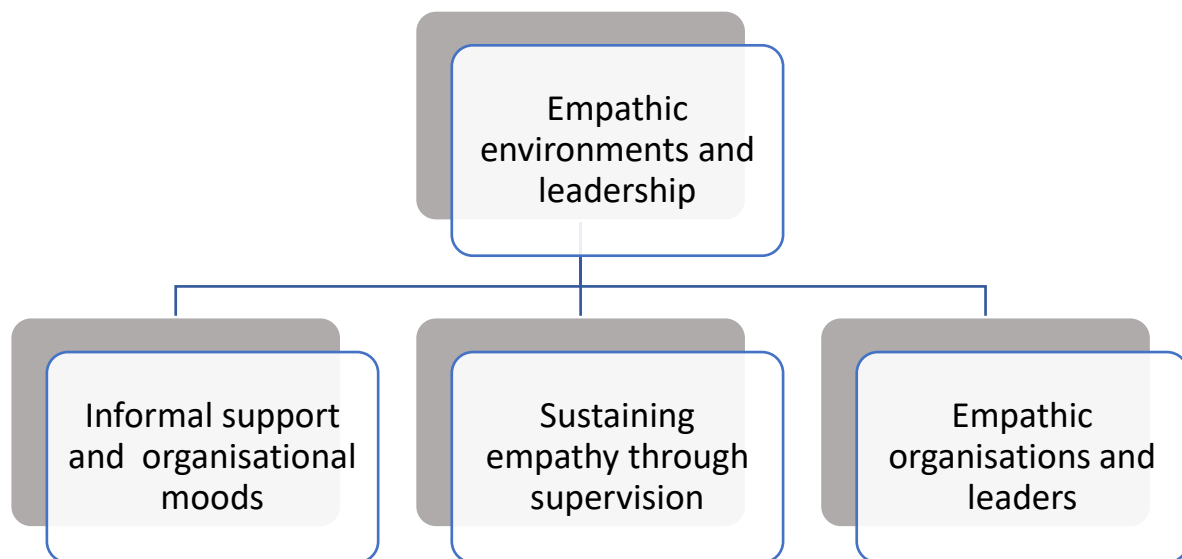


Figure 19. Element 3: *Empathic environments and leadership* (Author's own creation, 2024).

Informal support and organisational moods.

Heidegger's description of '*being-in-the-world*' (Heidegger, 1951:53) emphasises the unconscious assumptions and expectations that shape engagement with lived

experience, providing a shared, pre-reflective context that influences workers' conscious emotional responding. My findings convey a picture of the demanding, changeable, often risky environments which form the everyday context for empathy in social work practice with children and families. This is captured in many of the participants' images, with densely packed sand-trays that reflect themes of complexity and conflict. From study 1, these include titles such as '*complicated*' (Liz: p.15/14). '*mess*' (Kirsty p9/30) or '*chaos*' (Maggie, p15/19; Sally: p5/30) and '*tension*' (Keith: p10/30) to describe feelings associated with everyday work, while Bianca titles her picture '*traumatic and overpowering*' (Bianca, p16/13). These feelings are echoed in the other studies with Louise also using the image of '*Chaos*' (Study 2, Louise, Page 13/5) to describe her attempts to work with a young boy and Amanda (Study 3, page 23/18) using the title '*Confusion*' for her image of supporting one of her workers.

Collectively across the studies, these images convey a clear sense of the day-to-day lived experiences of social work practice for participants focused on feelings of chaos and emotional tension that serve as an important background for their conscious engagement with empathic practice. This is supported within my thematic synthesis (Chapter 2b) by both Cook (2020) and Ferguson (2021) who also stress the emotionally challenging, conflictual nature of social work practice, provoking routine feelings of anxiety and fear within practitioners. From a Heideggerian perspective the language and emotions attached to participants' perceptions of their lifeworld help to '*disclose*' the nature of their lived experience within the world (Heidegger, 1951:156) while also shaping their expectations of how the world will be. In this important sense, participants' experience of chaos

and uncertainty serve to 'set the scene' for their use of empathy in social work practice.

Within study 1, participants frequently identified their teams as an important informal emotional resource to support empathic practice, with experienced workers highly valuing the emotional support of colleagues. Maggie describes colleagues supporting her through a difficult out-of-hours scenario, offering food, shelter, and transport (Maggie, P17/2) while Liz emphasises the importance of being accompanied by team colleagues during a particularly challenging home visit (p10/27). It is notable that these participants found the emotional support of colleagues to be more beneficial, and safer, than sharing emotions with their supervisor (Keith, p12/9; Sally, p7/19, Bianca, p20/22). Four participants also stress the value of informal links with colleagues as a source of informal supervision (Gillian, p9/5; Kirsty, p13/32, Phil, -11/3, Keith, P15/28). However, both Keith (p15/20) and Kirsty (p13.29) discuss how team dynamics can change rapidly due to staff turnover and identify periods when they have felt less safe and supported within their teams. Data from study 3 also supports this view of teams, with participants describing rapid turnover of team managers within both participating authorities (Amanda, p30/32; Sharon, p27/19; Gemma, p18/10), creating instability and anxiety for team members.

The newly qualified workers in study 2 also identified the significance of their teams as a major source of support and identity (Louise, p19/13' Melissa, p16/32; Susan p.11/27) with Melissa describing her team as the '*best thing*' (P16/32) about the organisation, while Louise comments '*I literally couldn't do it without the team*' (p.19/13), Louise makes specific reference to the impact of team norms and values when she describes a team '*mantra*' '*we're doing it for the kids*

(Louise,p17/23). This was reinforced through the terminology used by two of the participants to explain their role, keeping children '*happy and safe*' (Susan, p7/4; Louise, p 18/12). Such phrases support the participants to adjust to their roles, while also providing a sense of shared identity and an agency narrative to justify their roles. In this sense, such terms also convey the organisational norms and expectations to which the new workers must comply, increasing the likelihood of conformity and co-operation with agency expectations.

There was a clear sense that relationships with teammates were crucial for the newly qualified participants' wellbeing, offering reassurance, normalising experiences (Susan, p13/15) and working cases together (Louise, p20/7). However, both Louise and Melissa also describe some challenges, including contradictory advice about practice issues amongst team members (Melissa, p14/4) and a sense of being left to manage complex family situations on their own at times (Louise, p20/16).

Recent research by Biggart et al (2017), Cook (2020) and Ingram (2015) highlights the primary role that social work teams and informal relationships play in supporting the emotional lives of workers and this was supported within my own research, particularly for newly qualified workers at the start of their professional careers. Biggart (2017:120) uses the attachment-informed concept of a '*secure base*' to suggest that social work teams provide a largely informal source of emotional processing, by reflecting feelings for one another and prompting reflection on the underlying source of emotion. Biggart explicitly identifies a role for empathic reflection (ibid) in enabling workers to support one another and 'restore equilibrium' for one another. Ingram (2015:940) similarly identifies the

team as a preferred source of support for workers due to perceptions of safety, informality, and lack of hierarchy between colleagues.

Within study 3, the absence of a similar supportive team culture for supervisors is striking and raises questions about how they access their own emotional support. Both Trudie (p.22/32) and Laura (p.20/29) identify a gap in relation to the provision of peer support and incident de-briefing to support supervisors with the emotional aspects of their roles, while Sharon identifies the rapid turnover of manager posts as contributing to a sense of instability for supervisors in her organisation (p30/24). Within such a practice context, identifying sources of support for supervisors seems critical in order to sustain their own empathic availability to staff. Kahn (1993) drawing from organisational theory, highlights the role of informal networks in strengthening support for professionals, arguing (1993:541) that such networks sustain the emotional wellbeing and resilience of staff through expressions of empathy and understanding for one another, encouraging compassion and emotional warmth between team members, and showing interest in the practice and wellbeing of individual workers

Wilkins (2017) supports such a view, emphasising the use of a range of informal support structures including team interaction and peer supervision as supplements to the role of formal supervision within child safeguarding practice. Wilkins also identifies Schwartz rounds (Cullen, 2016), which are emotion - focused, multi-disciplinary peer-support forums within health and social care settings (Cullen, 2016) as a potential additional resource to support social work staff wellbeing.

Sustaining empathy through supervision

The studies present a contradictory picture of the role of supervision in sustaining empathic practice. While supervisors conveyed a belief in the role of empathy and emotional containment within the supervisory relationship, other participants expressed more ambivalence about the value of supervision. Within studies 1 and 2, participants varied to what extent they felt comfortable sharing their own feelings with their supervisor. While some of the experienced workers found supervision helpful and supportive (Liz p22/8; Maggie, p17/6, Kirsty, p.14/15), they also expressed reservations about sharing their emotions honestly with supervisors (Keith, p18/10; Bianca, p20/15) due to concerns about performance management and workload. Kirsty (p7/16) describes conflict with her previous supervisor, while Sally is outspoken in her criticism of her supervisor and wider management, suggesting that supportive supervision feels dishonest in the current managerialist climate: *'it's bullshit and it makes me angry'* (Sally, p.7/28). Kirsty (p.14/14) and Keith (p.18/7) both propose separating reflective, emotionally focused supervision from case management oversight, while Gillian emphasises the need for ongoing training to help manage the emotional complexity of social work practice with children and families (p. 23/21).

Within study 2, participants were ambivalent about their experiences of supervision. Louise describes receiving most emotional support informally (Louise, p20/22; p.20/26) and comments that her emotional needs are not a focus within supervision. However, she also describes feeling alone with a difficult case (P20/16), indicating there may be a role for supervision to support her emotionally. While other participants acknowledge general emotional support from their supervisors (Susan, p17/18; Melissa p.16/4) they also described instability and

change within supervisory relationships (Susan, p17/31; Melissa P16/4), both mentioning their current supervisors are leaving shortly. Significantly, both also describe supervision as a source of anxiety, experiencing a lack of clarity about what is expected of them (Susan, p13/2; Melissa, p15/19) and needing to deal with the emotional distress of their supervisors, as Susan describes '*managing my other manager's anxiety*' (Susan: p12/30; Melissa, p.16/11). There was a strong sense that these newly qualified workers did not experience supervision as a source of emotional support, in which to explore their own emotional responses or reflect on their practice.

These findings echo other research relating to supervision for qualifying social work students and newly qualified workers. Carpenter and colleagues (2012) suggested that while new workers found supervision helpful, they also identified inconsistency and lack of opportunities to reflect on their emotions and experiences (ibid: 111). Jack and Donellan (2010) identified a failure within supervision to address issues of emotional wellbeing for new workers, overlooking the '*humanity*' (2010:317) of workers, causing staff anxiety and frustration with organisational processes (2010:315). There is a dilemma here for newly qualifying workers seeking to develop their empathic skills, within an organisational culture that does not acknowledge the importance of reflecting on their emotional responses or provide significant sources of support for such a task.

In contrast, supervisors from study 3 identified a central role for empathy within their supervisory practice. (Laura, p.11/30; Amanda, p22/19; Sharon, p25/26) and discussed using empathic skills directly to support workers and facilitate their self-awareness (Gemma, p17/20; Trudie, p11/24). Supervisors described using their worker's empathic responses to children as a key

assessment tool in gauging risk – for example *'I can feel what the social worker has understood about her [the child]'* (Sharon: p25/26), allowing the worker's own empathic experience to inform the manager's understanding: *'that makes me try to understand what life is like for this little girl'* (*ibid*). This suggests that supervisors play an important role in supporting staff to reflect on their empathic practice and to facilitate further cognitive understanding of family situations, supporting perspective taking by the worker in relation to their decision making and practice.

Four participants in study 3 use the concept of *'emotional containment'* (Laura, p7/32; Amanda, p4/28; Trudie, p13/18, Sharon, p 8/12) to describe their roles, using metaphors such as *'soaking up'* feelings (Laura, p7/32) *'offloading'* into a *'little stress bucket'* (Amanda, p4/28), enabling staff to *'air some personal views'* (Sharon, p8/12). It is notable that half the supervisors also use the metaphor of *'parent/ mother'* to capture this aspect of the supervisory relationship (Laura, p15/4, Trudie, P 10/25, Amanda, p14/16). This resonates with Bion's theorising on emotional containment (1962:90) drawing on psychoanalytic theory on the role of the mother in supporting the child to develop cognitive understanding and begin to self-regulate their emotions. Bower (2005) and Ruch, (2007, 2009, 2019) have each explored the potential application of Bion's work to the supervisory relationship. Bower (2005:11) stresses the importance of the supervisor connecting with the felt, embodied perception of the other's experience as a key mechanism for understanding and containing their emotion. Ruch (2009) identifies the potentially dis-orienting impact of children's emotions, in the face of abuse and neglect, suggesting workers may seek to avoid children's distress as a result. Ruch and colleagues (2019) emphasise the role of emotional containment for workers

within supervision, in order to enable workers to then contain the children's emotions and help them to make sense of their histories and experiences.

In this context empathy has a role to play in supporting supervisors to provide containment for their staff and it is of concern that some supervisors, as Maxine suggests, may lack the self-knowledge and emotional intelligence to undertake such a role. (P18/19) Maxine's description of a worker who literally hides in an office, refusing to face her fears about working with a family from who she feels under threat is a powerful example of how workers' unprocessed feelings can undermine their ability to carry out their duties. While Maxine acknowledges her feelings, this is done within the context of expecting the worker to '*make herself feel safe*' (Maxine: p27/13). Arguably, this worker is not experiencing emotional containment by her manager or within the organisation, with implications for their personal development and performance.

Such findings echo previous research into the challenges of supervision within children and families practice (Rushton & Nathan, 1996; Baginsky et al 2010; Manthorpe et al 2015; Wilkins, Forrester & Grant, 2016) which repeatedly highlight a tension between contradictory styles of supervision. Ruch and colleagues (Richards, Ruch and Trevithick, 2005; Ruch, 2012; Turney & Ruch, 2018) argue that supervision practice in the UK has adapted in response to the development of new public management approaches (Richards, Ruch & Trevithick, 2005: 414) to welfare provision, with a focus on bureaucratic indicators of performance. Ruch describes an emphasis on the 'rational' measurable aspects of welfare services in supervision and an avoidance of what has come to be regarded as the irrational and ambiguous spheres of human emotion and behaviour (ibid). Rushton describes this as an '*inquisitorial*' approach (1996:359),

focusing on case oversight and direction, ensuring tasks are being performed within timescales. In contrast Manthorpe et al (2015:54) outline an '*introspective*' approach, focusing on the emotions and reflective processes of the worker as a key area of supervisory concern. Given this apparent tension in supervisory styles, the use of empathy within supervision becomes more challenging but also potentially beneficial. However, recent studies (Manthorpe et al, 2015; Wilkins Forrester & Grant, 2018) suggest that, while supervisors aim to attend to workers' emotional and self-reflection needs, in practice supervision is dominated by case discussion and identification of tasks.

I propose that a key role for empathic practice within supervision remains, to support the process of emotional containment by the supervisor, helping workers to make sense of their emotional responses within practice, in order to then continue with their statutory tasks in an authentic manner. This supports arguments within the literature for integrating psychodynamic and psycho-social perspectives within supervision (Gibbs, 2001, Harvey & Henderson, 2018, Ingram, 2013) to help enhance workers' self-awareness of their unconscious emotional defences and enhance reflective ability to consider how these might impact their practice.

Empathy and organisational culture.

The culture of organisations also constitutes an important horizon from which participants shape their expectations and practice of empathy. Heidegger (1953) discusses the impact of language and group norms in shaping individuals' behaviour, creating conformity and compliance with the expectations of the majority – '*the they*' (Heidegger, 1951:123) while distancing the individual from

their authentic self. Within the lifeworld of social work practice with children and families, national and organisational rules, and norms, such as professional codes of practice (BASW, 2021, SWE, 2019) also guide and constrain behaviour. Fineman (2000) emphasises how expectations around organisational emotional expression are communicated through social norms and institutions at an organisational level, suggesting that such norms are fluid and dynamic, responding to external factors such as government policy, business practices and brand expectations. He suggests that within all organisations there will be tension between individuals' experience of emotion and their public display within the organisation. Additionally, Goffman (1959) and Hochschild (1983:56) emphasise the role of informal '*display rules*' which create expectations around how workers should behave within organisational culture.

Across my studies, participants describe feeling constrained by aspects of organisational process that shape their daily experiences and their willingness to engage emotionally. I identified earlier in this chapter a general lack of confidence in supervisory processes and a reliance on informal support which contributes to the organisational culture for these practitioners. In addition, four participants in study 1 refer to the nature of organisational discourse, suggesting that social work organisations are focused on performance issues, prioritising caseload allocation, within the context of high staff turnover and sickness (*Maggie: p 18/32; Liz: 23/12; Phil p.12/20*). Keith (p.18/10) comments that power dynamics around caseloads prevent him from being honest about his feelings within supervision, while Bianca (p.20/15) feels her emotional exhaustion is overlooked due to staffing shortages and the need to allocate work. Both Kirsty (p.4/30) and Sally (p.7/28) describe a lack of confidence in their managers which undermine the supervision process –

for example: *'I'd prefer it if they didn't say it at all rather than pretend that they care'* (Sally, p.7/28).

Two participants in study 1 also suggest that workers do not feel comfortable sharing their feelings within the office environment (Kirsty, p,14/17; Keith, p.19/21) while Gillian in study 3, concludes that the culture discourages workers from sharing of emotions: *'we don't share it. I mean it's really bizarre'* (Gillian, p17/32) suggesting that there is pressure within the organisations for workers to minimise the emotional aspects of their practice. Keith comments on the lack of support and concern shown for staff who experience aggression and threats at work: *'there is the expectation that you will go somewhere, be threatened etc, and then you will just carry on with your day,'* (Keith: p19/23).

Worryingly, it seems the newly qualified workers in study 2 have already developed a similar perception of an unsupportive organisational culture, most powerfully illustrated by Melissa's choice of a *'ghost'* symbol which she suggests represents the anxiety that *'permeates this organisation'* (Melissa, P14/13). Melissa uses colloquial language to summarise this aspect of her experience, - *'it's a shit show'* (Melissa, p17/27), clearly conveying her strength of feeling. She describes feeling uncertain and confused about decision making and procedures, feeling accountable to multiple managers - *'too many chiefs'* (p17/17) - and that she has to manage *'everybody else's potential fears'* (p14/18). This echoes Heidegger discussion of background *'moods'* (1953:131) that affect individuals' unconscious emotional states and shape their interaction within their environment. This has clear application to the participants' experience in which the organisational mood conveys anxiety and normalises acceptance of aggression towards staff, discouraging the honest sharing of feeling. There is a sense that

participants do not feel able to share their own vulnerability at this early stage of their careers and do not trust the advice and support from their supervisors. Louise also captures this uncertainty and indicates a growing disillusionment when she comments: '*it's always going to be falling apart around you...that's the political climate*' (Louise, p23/14).

This is echoed by the supervisors in study 3, who express a reluctance to seek emotional support for their own needs within the organisation, even when it is available, due to the risk of stigma (Laura, p21/5; Maxine p36/23) and fear of being blamed as weak (Amanda, p36/13). Such an organisational culture, where emotion is stigmatised by senior managers is likely to significantly inhibit the practice of empathy by supervisors, but also by social workers themselves, who will take their cue from the overall emotional culture.

Participants across the 3 studies also identify a range of other factors that affect the overall organisational culture in which they seek to practice. Experienced workers identify increased bureaucracy (Phil, p12/20, Bianca, p20/2, Kirsty, p10/1) workload pressures (Bianca, p19/26; Maggie, P18/32) and staff turnover (Sally, P2/24. Keith, p16/3) as key factors in creating an anxious and unstable working environment. For newly qualified workers, these factors are exacerbated by unclear lines of accountability and decision making by managers (Melissa, p15/19) unclear thresholds for intervention (Susan, p12/15) and inadequate resources to support care plans (Louise, P16/18). The concerns of participants in study 3 mirror these issues – for example Trudie (p24/4) highlights the '*push for performance*' regardless of team workloads, and this is echoed by Amanda (p26/29) and Gemma (p18/25) who describe anxiety amongst managers about getting behind with their monthly statistical returns and becoming pre-occupied with '*procedure and data*'

(Amanda, p26/29). There is evidence that turnover amongst supervisors and team managers is high (Amanda, p30/232; Sharon, p27/19; Gemma, p18/10) with half the participants having considered leaving or having left previous posts due to the levels of stress within agencies, affecting their emotional and physical wellbeing (Maxine, p30/17; Gemma, p5/22; Laura, p20/14). Gemma's description of managers weeping at their desks as a '*bloody mess*' (Gemma, p19/18) is particularly striking and resonates with descriptions by newly qualified workers in study 2.

It appears from the participants' experiences that the organisational cultures they experience are problematic, reflecting a mood of collective anxiety and uncertainty and inhibiting the participants from sharing their emotions. This is particularly concerning for newly qualified workers at a crucial stage in their professional development. Previous research by Barlow and Hall (2007) and Litvack Mishna and Bogo (2010) with social work students supports the impression that organisational climates restrict students' willingness to share their emotional reactions to practice, due to perceived power dynamics and a fear of criticism and negative assessment of their abilities.

In my introduction I discuss the impact of successive neo-liberal governments on the culture and emotional climate of public welfare organisations and the introduction of 'new public management' procedures and systems (Garrett, 2019, Healy, 2022; Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014) which potentially constrain professional autonomy and practice. Munro (2011:86) suggests one result has been a growing emphasis on managerialism, focused on bureaucratic processes and tasks, with a corresponding lack of emphasis on the role of emotions and professional decision-making within practice. This is supported by

Ruch and colleagues (2005) who argue that models of supervision have increasingly focused on 'rational' aspects of performance and task completion, paying less attention to workers' emotions and intuitive judgements.

Warner (2021) discusses how the wider political discourse on emotions in relation to social welfare also shapes the emotional climate within social work organisations and this is supported by Lavee and Strier (2018) and Grootegoed and Smith (2018) who identify changes in social worker attitudes in relation to neoliberal views of deserving and un-deserving individuals, with implications for worker empathy. Such organisational culture potentially undermines practitioners' emotional self-awareness and impacts their ability to sustain empathy, both for children and families, and for their colleagues and themselves.

De Rivera and Diaz's (2007; Martinez, 2017) concept of 'emotional climates' within organisations is a potentially helpful idea, proposing that such climates are created through the interaction of leaders and workers within an organisation, emphasising the role of the physical environment, supervisor feedback, peer interaction and leadership style. Mumby and Puttnam (1992:473) propose the concept of '*bounded emotionality*' as a potential model for shaping organisational climate, in which a recognition of the value and contribution of workers' emotions to their decision making and business practices is balanced with workers' genuine commitment to the aims of the organisation and a willingness to risk emotional openness and honesty. The authors argue such a climate supports the development of a sense of community and emotional reciprocity, in which the emotional experiences of employees are acknowledged and valued as a significant aspect of the organisation's activity. Such a climate which recognises the legitimacy of emotional expression and the creation of a supportive, non-

stigmatising support systems at both formal and informal levels seems essential in sustaining workers' capacity for empathic practice.

My findings suggest there is an urgent need to address the role of organisational leadership, as a key element in shaping a more conducive emotional climate that sustains workers emotionally and facilitates their own empathic practice with people using services. Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) provide a multi-level model of organisational emotions, which explores the interaction of emotions across five organisational levels, culminating with the role of leadership skills in shaping the overall emotional climate of the working environment. Specifically, they emphasise the relationship between organisational display rules for emotions and the quality of the emotional climate, emphasising the role of emotional intelligence in the leadership in creating a more open organisational culture. Over recent years, several authors have stressed the role of emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyzatis & McKee, 2013; Goffee & Jones, 2019) and emotional vulnerability (Brown, 2018) as central to forms of transformational leadership.

Recent research highlights the role of empathy in enabling leaders to attend to the emotions of their workers (Polychroniou, 2009), increasing job satisfaction and worker creativity (Kock et al 2019), and enhancing perceptions of leader effectiveness (Sadri, Weber & Gentry, 2011). Additionally, Kellet, Humphrey and Smith (2006) suggest empathic leadership supports both relational and performance aspects of worker performance, by attending to and valuing workers' emotions, enhancing motivation as a result. Arghode et al (2022) suggest that empathy supports the development of compassion within organisations, building reciprocal supportive relationships between workers and leaders.

Recently, West (2021) has proposed a model of '*compassionate leadership*' using empathic skills to ensure leaders listen to employees, acknowledge their emotions, convey understanding of their concerns and take action to address them. This description closely matches models of empathy in social work proposed by Gerdes and Segal (2011) and King (2011) emphasising the potential relevance of empathic practice throughout an organisation and in creating a conducive emotional climate for empathic practice. Among others, both Morrison (2007) and Howe (2008) identify the importance of social work leaders creating a climate which acknowledges and facilitates the discussion of workers' emotions in response to the challenges of everyday practice.

Throughout this discussion, I have suggested that the different elements of the participants' lived experiences of empathy within practice are inter-connected and reciprocal in character, with each one influencing the experience of the other elements. Workers' experiences of embodied 'felt' empathy will influence their ability to provide a balanced empathic response to children and families and this ability is in turn shaped by the character of the organisational environment and how leaders contain and sustain their workforce. I will explore this relationship within my concluding chapter.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I have discussed the findings of three research studies with different groups of social work practitioners. I have synthesised these findings with literature from contemporary sources to support my analysis of the lived experience of empathy in practice with children and families (See objective 2, page 16). Where relevant, I have differentiated the experiences of the three cohorts

based on the level of their post qualifying practice (See objective 3, page 16), to consider how empathic practice might vary according to experience. For example, developing confidence to express emotions openly as a professional, or being willing to work increasingly autonomously and to challenge organisational procedures. I will now move on to draw some conclusions and offer a model to support an understanding of empathy in social work.

Chapter 10: Conclusion - Sustaining empathy for social work practice

Chapter overview.

In this final chapter, I consider my original research aims and objectives through a discussion of potential implications from my research for wider social work practice. I also present a model which illustrates key aspects of my findings. I identify some strengths and limitations of my research and outline future possibilities for further research in this field. I summarise the distinctive contribution to knowledge from my research and outline potential opportunities for disseminating my findings. I also reflect on my own process of development throughout the research process.

My original aim for this research thesis (Page 16) was:

‘To explore the role of empathy within contemporary social work practice, by researching the lived experience of practitioners who work with children and families’.

I outlined four objectives to help me to achieve this overall aim and will consider these in turn

Objectives:

1. **To undertake a thematic synthesis of literature regarding the use of empathy in social work practice with children and families.** I have completed a thematic synthesis of relevant literature (Chapter 2B), highlighting key findings which further inform my own research. This review encouraged me to focus more explicitly on the embodied, felt aspects of empathy withing my own findings, and

strengthened my focus on the impact of organisational processes on empathic practice. It also highlighted the potential challenges of exercising empathy within statutory contexts and the dilemmas involved for social workers in doing so.

2. To explore how social workers describe their use of empathy within their practice with children and families.

3. To consider how level of practice experience affects workers' experience of empathy by exploring the different perceptions of 1) experienced workers, 2) newly qualified workers, 3) practice supervisors.

My research with three cohorts of social work practitioners (Chapters 6 – 8) builds on the findings from my research enabled me to address objectives 2 & 3 by shedding light on practitioners' experiences of using empathy within their practice and exploring the differences in the experiences of the three different cohorts. Within chapter 9, I identify aspects which are common to the experiences of empathy for all participants, including the embodied nature of empathic social work practice, the reality of managing emotional distress at work and the significance of working relationships with children and families built over time. Participants in each study describe needing to learn how to manage the balance between the use of empathy and authority, with more experienced workers and supervisors appearing to find this less challenging. The studies revealed that while experienced social workers appeared to develop strategies for managing their emotions and being able to separate their statutory role from their personal feelings – (self-other differentiation skills) this was more challenging for newly qualified social workers who expressed greater anxiety about their felt emotions and more ambivalence about seeking support from their supervisors or

organisations. My research also suggests that some experienced workers grow in professional autonomy and willingness to act independently within their organisations. However, all supervisors in study 3 described feeling emotionally isolated and unsupported within current organisational structures, highlighting potential difficulties in both supporting and managing more experienced staff.

4. To identify implications for the use of empathy within social work practice with children and families. My discussion in chapter 9 supports objective 4 by identifying the implications of using empathy within practice with children and families. I will highlight these implications more explicitly through the introduction of a model of empathy and identifying the implications of my research for social work practice.

A model of 'balanced empathy' in social work with children and families

Through my exploration of participants' experiences, I identified three interconnected elements which combine to capture a sense of participants' experiences of empathy in practice. In order to support my analysis, I develop a model, informed by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), to illustrate the process of how these distinct elements combine to shape individual worker's experiences.

In proposing such a model, I focus on the significance of '*horizons*' (Husserl, 1931:52) within which the worker is situated, shaping their experiences of empathy in practice. I am proposing that individual empathic practices must be understood within the context of personal and organisational horizons which shape the encounters between workers and families. From this model, I seek to identify implications for future strategies for social worker training and development that

will support empathy in practice. At the same time, I recognise the idiographic nature of interpretative phenomenology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) and the subjective nature of lived experience (van Manen, 2015), meaning that each individual's experience of empathic practice will be unique.

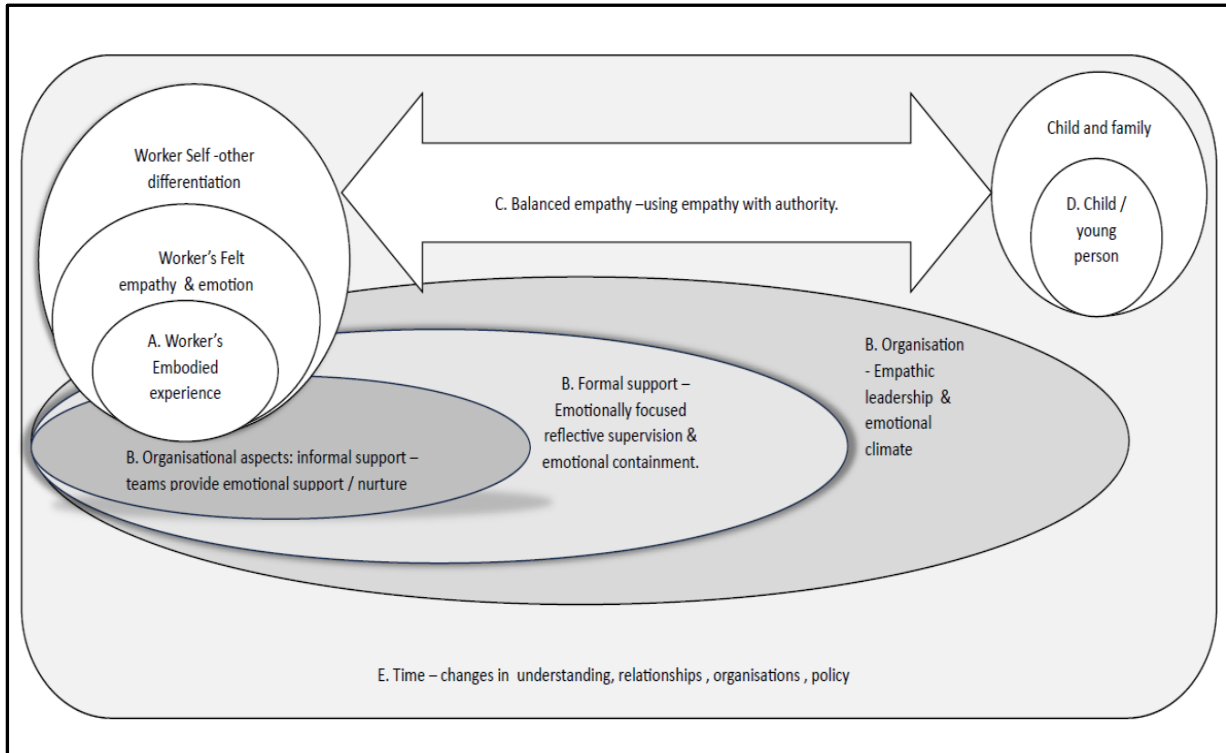


Figure 20: A model of balanced empathy in social work with children and families (Author's own creation, 2024).

Within the model, figure A. represents the horizon of participants' embodied empathic experience. The three nested circles highlight the role of physiological awareness at the core of participants' empathic experience (Van Rhyn, Barwick & Donnelly, 2021). This highlights that participants' ability to experience empathy, emerges from their awareness of their embodied responses and their subsequent ability to acknowledge and reflect on their 'felt emotions'. Across my studies, participants described the embodied nature of their experience and a need to manage a range of strong emotions on a routine basis. In turn these abilities

support their developing self-awareness, supporting self-other differentiation for the worker. As such figure A. integrates both affective and cognitive aspects of empathic experience (Davis, 1980) for the social worker.

These aspects of individual experience interact with figure B., representing the organisational horizon which provides context for participants' experiences. Figure A. rests firmly within, but distinct from these organisational levels of context, reflecting the inter-connected relationship between individual workers and the environment in which they practice. In this sense, empathy within social work is understood as being shaped by a wider collective experience of organisational systems. Participants across my studies emphasise the particular value of informal support networks as their primary source of emotional support, so this forms the immediate context around the practitioner.

In addition, I contend formal support structures, such as supervision and organised peer support have a vital role to play in sustaining worker's capacity for empathy, by containing their emotions and supporting self-other differentiation. However, current experiences of supervision vary significantly for participants, with many choosing not to share their emotions in supervision or feeling confident in their supervisors. Thirdly, the overall emotional climate of the organisations, and the skills of the organisational leaders, have direct impact on the cultural norms and emotional display rules within the organisation, with implications for empathic practice. In this way the quality of empathic leadership of the organisation can either help to sustain or constrain workers' empathic practice.

It is within this context of these two interconnecting systems that the worker develops their ability to communicate what I have termed '*balanced empathy*' –

represented by the reciprocal arrow of Figure C. in the diagram. Balanced empathy represents the worker's ability to communicate empathic understanding to the family, while also being honest and transparent about the nature of their involvement and the potential outcomes of their intervention. This sense of balance reflects workers' ability to convey emotional authenticity, whilst also being able to self-regulate and manage their emotions within their practice, and to engage empathically with both child and parent/ carers within the family.

Figure D. in the diagram acknowledges the relational nature of empathic communication, in which responses by one party can mutually influence responses by the other. My research highlights that some participants were more able to experience and communicate empathy for children and young people while struggling to sustain empathy for adult family members and this appears to be an ongoing challenge for many practitioners. This ambivalence within the social work relationship with children and their families is reflected in the two-way, reciprocal arrow in Figure C, recognising that both parties contribute to the character of an empathic working relationship.

Finally, within my model, all elements are affected by changes over time as a primary horizon for human experience, represented by Figure E. which envelops the other elements. Changes in the individual worker, child, family and / or organisational elements, affect workers' capacity for 'balanced empathy' within their practice. Such changes can be within the individual (Figure A) - for example due to the impact of compassion fatigue (Thomas, 2013) or burnout (McFadden, 2018) or due to changes in their personal circumstances which impact their capacity to respond to others. My findings highlight the significance of moving jobs for some workers (Liz, p.9/29; Bianca, p.17/1) while others emphasise maintaining

relationships with children beyond their statutory role, due to the significance of the relationships (Sally, P.7/5; Keith p.4/4). I also identify a preference by some staff for short term work, involving limited emotional connection, (Gillian, p.3/3) while others focus much more on the relationship and view it as a source of satisfaction and pleasure (Maggie, p15/1; Phil, p.13/9). There is a sense that the quality and duration of the relationship between the worker and child or parent directly affects the quality of the empathic interaction. My research suggests that length of practice experience may also play a role in supporting professional autonomy and confidence to integrate empathy within other aspects of practice, with important implications for social work education and post qualifying support.

The theme of change across time also highlights the dynamic and unstable nature of many social work environments, with high levels of staff turnover, changes in allocated worker and caseloads, frequent changes of team manager and leadership teams, which adversely affect the organisational environment and emotional climate. Similarly, I have identified how changing social policy and political discourse over time affect the nature of social work practice, with implications for the overall emotional tone of organisations and social work services.

Implications for social work training and practice

I identify several implications for practice (objective 4, page 16) from this analysis of my participants' experience, highlighting potential challenges and opportunities at three different levels of practice: practitioners, organisations, and professional discourse.

Facilitating practitioners' development

For practitioners, the findings emphasise the physiological, embodied nature of social work practice in this field, echoing earlier findings by Tempel (2007) and Ferguson (2010, 2011). Participants describe using empathy within a range of complex situations involving movement and uncertainty, with implications for their awareness of their own physiological and emotional responses. During such times of potentially heightened emotion, it seems particularly important that practitioners develop skills in self-awareness and self-regulation, to support their empathic practice.

Reith Hall and Montgomery (2023) identify limited evidence to support current educational approaches to teaching empathic skills for social work students, recognising the complexity of using traditional training approaches for contemporary social work contexts. Drawing on my discussion of participants' experiences, I suggest that students and newly qualified workers would benefit from access to training that provides opportunities for simulated practice, (Grant, 2014, Dupper, 2017 Mullins, 2011) using a combination of role play, virtual reality, and filmed scenarios to provide students and workers with opportunities to reflect on the emotional impact of such scenarios and to identify their physiological arousal. Simulated and theoretical learning can be transferred to practice placement experience, with practice educators needing to pay explicit attention to the emotional content of practice during observations, as well as modelling emotional self-awareness and self-regulation skills themselves, teaching by example. Use of creative methods to support reflection, such as mindfulness

(Thomas & Otis, 2010) and representation through movement (Bilson, 2007) as well as visual and symbolic methods (Ayling, 2012) can also support practitioners' growing awareness of their embodied responses.

In addition, practitioners could be provided with education and training around the role of emotion within decision making and the importance of self-awareness in relation to concepts such as emotional regulation (Gross, 2013) and emotional intelligence (Morrison, 2007). Psychodynamic and psycho-social models of practice which support workers' understanding of their unconscious defences and emotional reactions will also be important (Bower, 2005, Bower & Solomon, 2018, Ruch et al, 2018) in facilitating practitioner's developing self-awareness and self-other differentiation. Such training also needs to support workers to explore their emotional defences and counter-transference responses to children and / or parents and carers, to help staff to reflect on potential unconscious bias (Gair, 2010, 2013) or conscious preference for one or other individual, in order to support authentic empathic practice for all family members.

Practitioners and students also need to be supported to develop their understanding and practice of 'balanced empathy', to ensure that empathy is effectively integrated with statutory social work responsibilities. Findings from Lynch et al (2019) concluded that few children and families' social workers were assessed as using empathy within their practice, while Wilkins and Whittaker (2018) concluded that many workers felt their statutory role precluded the use of empathy and seemed dishonest for families. In my own findings, practitioners demonstrated a willingness and desire to use empathy within practice but varied in how they felt able to do so within the parameters of their statutory role. Grant (2014) suggests the use of practice examples from experienced practitioners -

video recorded or face-to-face in the classroom to help students to understand the challenges involved and reflect on how they might resolve such dilemmas themselves. Teaching that integrates a theoretical explanation for why empathy can be helpful in situations of conflict, (Greeno, et al, 2017) alongside a recognition of the dual roles of care and control within statutory social work (Platt, 2008), will be helpful here. Simulated skills sessions could progress from embedding basic empathy skills – for example, communicating understanding and reflecting feelings, non-verbal communications – to the more complex skills of balanced empathy – acknowledging feelings sensitively while also identifying professional responsibilities and the potential outcomes of intervention.

Students and newly qualified workers will need frequent opportunities to observe more experienced practitioners modelling their approach to balanced empathy and will benefit from explicit de-briefing about the role of emotions and use of empathic skills. Such development opportunities are likely to be best provided within practice placements and in observations during the Assessed and Supported year in Employment period but require a direct focus on empathic skills to ensure these are integrated within practice. My findings also suggest that practitioners who were able to integrate empathic skills with their own authentic style of practice grew in professional confidence and autonomy, potentially enhancing worker compassion satisfaction and sustaining career longevity.

Organisational responses to sustain empathic practice.

Within the organisational horizon, several aspects of organisational culture are relevant in shaping the practice of individual workers. Firstly, the emotional climate (de Rivera & Paez, 2007) of the wider organisation has a clear impact on

participants' capacity to manage their own emotions and demonstrate empathy for others. My findings echo those of other researchers (Ferguson, 2021, Barlow & Hall, 2007, Ingram, 2015) in identifying how participants' emotions are overlooked within social work organisations, particularly stigmatising emotional distress and causing workers to view emotions – both their own and other peoples – with caution. Within my findings, participants frequently felt unsafe to share their emotional distress with supervisors, or sometimes with colleagues, preferring to find external outlets for their feelings (Gillian, p.17/32, Keith, p.15/20). This is a worrying finding, given the complex and traumatic emotional material which participants described managing on a daily basis, including parental conflict, domestic abuse, non-accidental injury, child sexual exploitation and abuse, family separation, grief, and loss. This snapshot of a small group of participants' caseloads seems typical of children and families' practice, yet despite the emotional nature of the work, participants expressed ambivalence about sharing their emotional responses honestly, for fear of stigma or blame (Amanda: p36/13). In study 2, Melissa's use of a ghost symbol to represent the mood of 'anxiety' (p.14/13) throughout her organisation, captures the overall emotional 'mood' or climate powerfully.

It seems vital therefore that organisations pay greater attention to the style of emotional climate within which their staff are working, by addressing issues of empathic leadership and feeling display rules (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011) within the organisations. At an organisational level, I have suggested Mumby and Putnam's (1992) model of '*bounded emotionality*' offers a potential framework for practice, emphasising the relationship between acceptance of individual worker's emotional styles and needs, and a wider sense of community and cooperation

within an organisation. Mumby & Putnam (1992) highlight the importance of tolerating ambiguity within such a climate, acknowledging workers will have very different perspectives and modes of communication. However, they argue that acceptance of individuality and difference will in turn support the development of a community of employees who more willingly cooperate together to achieve the goals of the organisation. At the heart of this model is an emphasis on the recognition of human emotion as a fundamental aspect of work and organisational life. This approach resonates with social work texts which urge practitioners to '*reach for feelings*' (Shulman, 2016:190) or to '*feel with*' (Perlman, 1957:71) people accessing services.

I acknowledge particular challenges for such a model, in the context of current managerialist approaches to delivering public welfare (Garrett, 2009, Healy, 2022) which emphasise standardisation and bureaucratisation of practice (Featherstone, White & Wilson, 2014) while establishing emotional display rules that constrain workers' ability to express their emotions. However, I maintain that a shift to a more emotionally open and congruent organisational culture is essential to facilitate and sustain models of empathic social work practice.

In order to encourage a conducive emotional climate, the role of leadership within organisations seems vital (Ashkanasy, 2003). West's model of '*compassionate leadership*' (2021) is helpful, highlighting the centrality of empathic understanding and communication in shaping more authentically compassionate organisations. While recent research supports the role of empathy and emotional intelligence within transformational leadership models (Brown, 2018; Kock et al, 2019), my findings suggest that participants are not experiencing emotionally intelligent or empathic leadership as a norm within organisations. Indeed, the

majority of the supervisors in study 3 identify an organisational culture in which emotion is regarded primarily as a performance management issue (Amanda, p. 26/29; Gemma, p.18/25). Additionally, Maxine (p.11/18), from her position as a middle manager, questions whether some managers have the necessary emotional intelligence or empathy to attend to the emotions of their workers.

There is a need to challenge the prevailing narrative of managerialism (Munro, 2011) within organisational leadership and to offer an alternative discourse around the value of emotions and empathic practice. This suggests that an explicit focus within training around emotionally intelligent and empathic models of leadership is needed to support the transformation of social work organisational culture. For example, within a post-qualifying leadership programme at the University of Worcester, we have started to include training on emotions in leadership. A resurgence of interest in the role of emotion within social work practice (Grant & Kinman, 2014, Ingram, 2015, O'Connor, 2019, Dugmore, 2019) and the potential adverse effects of compassion fatigue (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2014, Otis, 2013) provides compelling evidence to support a renewed focus on emotion as a topic of relevance for social work leaders.

Within social work organisations, there is also a need to de-stigmatise emotional distress and to demonstrate acceptance that social work with children and families will evoke a wide range of emotions for practitioners. This in turn will support workers to be more authentic and congruent about their own emotions, reducing the risk of '*surface acting*' (Hochschild, 1983) and potentially limiting the harmful impact of emotional labour (Winter et al, 2019, Leeson, 2010). Leaders and supervisors have a responsibility to work to change the emotional display rules (Goffman, 1957) across organisations by modelling emotionally intelligent,

authentic emotion themselves and building an emotionally expressive culture at team and organisation levels.

Some participants identified a preference for separating case management and personal development aspects of supervision (Keith, p18/7) and for the provision of clinical group supervision (Kirsty, p14/4) to enable honest discussion of their emotions, without the threat of performance management. It was notable in study 3 that supervisors also identified an absence of emotional support (Trudie: p.22/31; Sharon: p.30/24), particularly following critical incidents involving serious injury or death (Laura, p.20/29). There is a need for supervisors' own emotional needs and responses to be accepted and supported. As discussed earlier, Wilkins (2017) proposes 'Schwartz rounds' (Cullen, 2016) as having potential relevance for social work organisations, as a formal organisational response that brings staff together to focus on their emotional responses to practice.

Ruch (2007, 2012, Ruch & Turney, 2017), in several papers, also highlights the benefits of group peer discussions for managers to reflect on the emotional content of safeguarding practice, informed by psychodynamic theory to explore links between emotions and decision making. These approaches also have the benefit of de-stigmatising emotions within organisations, gradually changing the display rules for emotional expressiveness in both formal and informal contexts. Arguably, such a shift will also support the use of a range of confidential support services within social work organisations that acknowledge the emotionally demanding nature of the work and provide forms of support, such as models of de-briefing, or access to counselling or peer-support models where appropriate.

Within social work organisations, supervision continues to play a key role in providing support and oversight for social workers in relation to their practice, despite an apparent gap between supervisors' aspirations and participants' experiences of supervision within my research. All the supervisors in study 3 viewed emotional containment as a fundamental aspect of their role. However, previous research on supervision suggests a managerial style continues to dominate within practice (Wilkins, Whittaker & Grant, 2017; Ruch, 2012).

Introducing a more explicit focus on workers' emotions will require an intentional shift by supervisors in terms of willingness and ability to engage emotionally with staff, while modelling emotional authenticity and acceptance of a range of emotions. Use of psychodynamic theory (Bower & Solomon, 2018) and models of relationship-based (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2018) and humanist models of practice (Payne, 2011) will support such a shift. My findings suggest that many workers may resist or remain suspicious of emotionally focused supervision, which may need careful negotiation over time. Social work training needs to ensure qualifying workers understand the emotionally charged nature of practice with children and families and embed reflection on emotions and development of emotional intelligence and empathic skills as central to their skills programmes. Identifying workers' emotions as one focus of supervision at the contracting stage would be helpful in this context. This will support workers to understand and accept the purpose of reflection on emotions within supervision.

Embedding empathy and emotion within the professional discourse.

Although empathy is briefly mentioned within the professional standards (SWE, 2019) and benchmarks for social work education (QAA, 2019) it is absent from the

Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW 2018) and Knowledge and Skills Statements (DfE, 2014) for children and families, which are used to assess qualifying and newly qualified stages of practice. Emotion is briefly mentioned in relation to identifying children's experiences of emotional abuse (KSS4, DfE, 2014) and a need for qualifying workers to demonstrate emotional resilience (PCF Domain 1, BASW, 2018) but with no reference to how such skills might be developed or embedded in practice. Arguably, this failure to acknowledge the role of emotions and empathy as a skill within social work standards, reflects the dominant paradigm of neo-liberal, managerialist approaches to training and education, under-stating the complexity of the social work task with children and families.

There is a need for the professional discourse and professional bodies (SWE, BASW), to clearly acknowledge the role of emotion within social work practice and to consider how skills of emotional intelligence, emotional regulation and empathic practice can be explicitly included within our professional standards and qualifying training and education curriculum. Making these changes would support the development of a professional discourse around the role of emotion and empathy in practice, with implications for supporting cultural change within social work organisations and training programmes. Arguably, the professional bodies have a crucial role to play in challenging current models of welfare delivery and advocating for the complexity of social work practice in situations of family crisis. I contend that such changes will also strengthen connections with traditional social work principles and values of empathic practice (Biestek, 1957; Perlman, 1957), emphasising relationship based and humane aspects of social work as a profession.

Reflection

As I conclude this thesis, I also reflect on my own development personally and professionally, during the process. From the start of this project, I was motivated by a belief in the value of empathy as an important quality for professional social work, arising from my experiences of working with children in care. At the same time, I hoped to do justice to participants' experiences and to the complexity of contemporary practice within my analysis. I have been encouraged and challenged by the diversity of their experiences and often moved by the commitment and empathy of participants for both children and families. This has supported my understanding of the dilemmas participants face in using empathy and informed my conclusions about potential implications for wider practice. I am mindful that my commitment to empathy as a necessary skill has continued to develop throughout the research, both in terms of my theoretical understanding of empathy as a concept, but also in terms of my own belief in the relevance of empathy as a skill within social work practice.

I have also grown in my understanding of interpretative phenomenology and my own role in interpreting the experiences of my participants. I have sought to represent aspects of my own experience and values that I recognise have shaped my interpretations throughout the thesis, with the intention of acknowledging both my 'thrown-ness' (Heidegger, 1951) in relation to my identity and world view, along with the 'fore-structure' (ibid) of my understanding in relation to empathic practice. Initially, I was reluctant to engage with Heideggerian philosophy directly, struggling to see its relevance to my research. However, as I persisted my understanding grew, and I was able to recognise the relevance of core ideas to support my analysis of themes within the research. In particular,

Heidegger's (1951) concept of the 'care structure' resonated for me, illuminating how experience of the present moment is shaped both by our histories and experiences, but also by our hopes, intentions, and aspirations for the future. I found this idea valuable both for my analysis of participants experiences, but also in relation to my own journey as a researcher.

Over the seven years of the research, I have grown in my understanding of my identity and indeed my mortality and reflected on the challenge of living more authentically as a professional and an individual. This has enhanced my confidence in my research process, enabling me to develop my own voice as a researcher and academic. As I began the research, I had a conviction that the integration of visual and interpretative phenomenological methods would enable me to engage deeply with participants' experiences. As I bring the thesis to an end, I have sensed a congruence between my chosen research methods and my identity as a researcher and feel that the process has supported me to become more confident in expressing my authentic self within the thesis.

Unique contribution of the research

This research makes several distinctive contributions to the knowledge base. I have offered an innovative research method by combining IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) with a specific form of, symbolic, three-dimensional image-making research – using a sand tray-based method of assessment (Lowenfeld, 2003) as a trigger for discussion. Staples, Watson & Riches (2021; 2024) use a similar creative approach, combining 'sandboxing' (Mannay et al, 2017, Mannay 2020) with thematic analysis in a study with fostering and adoption social workers and carers. However, my study is distinctive in engaging with safeguarding and

children-in-care social workers. Additionally, my study differentiates practitioners' levels of practice experience as a focus of interest. My approach to the sand tray activity also differs from that of Staples, Watson & Riches (2024) by asking participants to give a title to their image. This technique, derived from creative therapies, is used to further support participants in their reflective process during the interview and to offer an element of completion and emotional containment to the task (Duffy, 2014). I would argue that this multi modal method of research has enabled participants to explore their emotions within empathic practice in depth, evoking a real sense of their lived experience. I have also offered a distinctive, integrated approach to data analysis in order to combine findings from both the verbal and visual aspects of the analysis which I argue produces a holistic sense of the findings. Overall, this integrated approach has demonstrated potential as a research method for engaging with social workers' experience of practice phenomena in depth.

In addition, my research takes a distinctive approach to empathy in social work with children and families, by focusing on the lived experiences of participants, in contrast to other research which largely focus on the definition, performance and measurement of empathy as a skill (Gerdes & Segal, 2009, King, 2010, Grant & Kinman, 2014, Lynch et al, 2019). Using an interpretative phenomenological lens has enabled me to focus in depth on the complexity of participants' experiences, as they perceive them, and to reveal distinctive aspects of their experience, for example participants' experience of emotional distress and emotional commitment to particular children. I have proposed the skill of 'balanced empathy' to reflect the complexity of using empathy within a statutory practice context and to highlight the challenges involved in communicating authentic

emotion, alongside cognitive understanding, including balancing the needs of all family members.

I have also outlined a model of empathic social work practice with children and families, outlining three distinctive 'horizons' within my findings that contribute to the lived experience of empathy. I have drawn on both ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and interpretative phenomenological frameworks (van Manen, 2015) to help illuminate the contribution of each distinct system within the model and to explore the inter-dependent nature of elements of empathic practice. I would suggest that this model offers new insights into participants' lived experience of empathy within practice, with potential implications that have relevance for other practitioners.

Limitations of methodology and research findings

Several limitations of IPA are identified within the literature. Paley (2017) has argued that phenomenological research engages primarily with interpretations of meaning rather than revealing the meaning of phenomena in themselves while Tuffour (2017) notes that by focusing on participants' perceptions and experiences, IPA does not seek to find underlying explanations for the causes of such experiences. Throughout my thesis I acknowledge my commitment to a constructivist ontological position which emphasises the subjective nature of experience and values the role of interpretation and social construction in creating meaning. I have presented an interpretative methodology which aims to represent the views and experiences of participants, as understood, and interpreted through my own analysis and worldview. Biggerstaff & Thompson (2008) suggest that the emphasis on interpretation by the researcher of participants' experiences is a

critical aspect of IPA, requiring both researcher reflexivity and reflection to accurately distil key themes within the data. Within the thesis, I have integrated my reflections on aspects of my identity and professional practice which I believe have influenced my interpretations throughout the thesis. I have stated my belief in and commitment to using empathy within social work practice and have sought to limit the impact of my own views within my analysis through use of a reflective research journal and a process of reflection with my supervisory team.

Tuffour (ibid) also highlights a reliance on the role of language within IPA and suggests that such an approach may disadvantage people who are less articulate. I sought to address such concerns through the integration of a visual research method within my interviews and have argued that such a multi modal approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) supports participation and engagement with the research process for a range of participants.

Pringle et al (2011) suggest that an emphasis on interpretation within IPA can draw the researcher away from the idiographic individual perspectives of each participant. This is echoed by Brocki & Weardon (2006) who identify the potential for IPA to dilute the meaning of individual participants through the analytic process of identifying initial personal experiential (PETs) and then group experiential (GETs) themes, leading to a potential decontextualization of participants' perspectives. As a response to this, and in keeping with IPA practice (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) , I have provided transcript details for each quote from participants across the three studies and included examples of my data analysis and identification of group experiential themes (Appendices 10,11 & 12) to support the transparency of my analysis and provide a potential audit trail, linking my themes to their origin within each transcript.

In addition, I recognise that, in keeping with IPA studies, the sample sizes for each study are small cross-sections, representing a snapshot of participants' experiences at one point in time (Tracy, 2019). Sampling was purposive in order to identify the most relevant sample of participants possible, but this may mean that only participants with a particular interest in empathy and emotion came forward to participate, potentially limiting the findings.

During the research, the Covid 19 lockdown affected my data collection for study 3 and I moved to telephone interviews, losing the visual interview technique. Video conferencing technology was not widely available within local authorities at this early stage in the pandemic. Undoubtedly this changed the nature of the final four interviews in study 3, with some important visual data lost and the inclusion of discussion around the impact of the lockdown. I recognise that in using an interpretative phenomenological approach, I have also relied on the self-report of participants as the primary source of understanding, rather than seeking for more 'objective' measures of their experience. As interpretative phenomenological research, it is not my intention to claim the findings can be generalised to all children and families practice, but rather to represent the experiences of these groups of participants and highlight areas of potential relevance for other practice contexts.

Guidance from my supervisory team and ethics committee informed my decision to focus the research on the experiences of different groups of social workers within children and families' practice. By concentrating on the experiences of social work staff, I recognise that I have not engaged with the experiences of children or parents who work with children's services social workers. This is a limitation of my study. I hope to undertake future research to explore children and

parents' experiences of empathy with social workers, potentially using a similar interview method with both worker and child/parent to explore their shared perceptions and experiences. However, my intention with this study was to explore the views of social workers themselves and to identify the implications to support social work staff in their empathic practice.

A further limitation of the studies is that samples do not reflect the diverse population of England, with all the participants being of white ethnicity and only one participant identifying as having English as a second language. It would be valuable to undertake further research into the experience of empathy which included a more representative sample of participants in terms of ethnicity and culture, possibly by undertaking studies within areas of England with more ethnically diverse populations.

Future research opportunities and dissemination

I have already begun to engage in dissemination activities in relation to my research. I have presented early findings at two national / international conferences (Appendix 15) during the period of my research and provide a regular input onto a post-qualifying programme on leadership in social work, focusing on managing emotions within the leadership role. During November 2019, I collaborated with my Director of Studies to deliver a Masterclass on Empathy and Emotions within practice for a group of social work practitioners in a local authority children's services department. I anticipate undertaking further workshops with local practitioner organisations to support dissemination of my findings.

I anticipate several publications from this thesis, including a summary of my thematic synthesis and articles in relation to each separate study, as well as an

overview of the research as a whole and the model of balanced empathy I introduced. I also plan to submit an article on the distinctive aspects of my research method, combining a symbolic image-making activity with IPA. I also anticipate presenting my findings at future social work research conferences and to publish shorter articles based on my thesis within the social work press.

In terms of future research, I hope to do further research using this visual research method to explore the experiences of children in care and their perceptions of social work practice and to explore the views of parents and families regarding their experiences of empathic social work practice. I anticipate further opportunities for empathy research with social work students, possibly longitudinally during their degree training, to explore their developing understanding of empathy in response to their skills development and implementation within practice placements. Similarly, I hope to undertake further research with senior managers in social work services, to explore the challenges of developing supportive emotional climates and identifying potential barriers. I would like to undertake further qualitative research into the role of emotion and empathy within compassion satisfaction for social workers.

Final thoughts

This thesis has presented findings from my research into social workers' experiences of empathy within children and families' practice. I have identified a range of themes relevant for each group of participants as well as overarching themes which represent key shared aspects of experiences and some significant differences between the three groups. Drawing on these participants' shared experiences, I have proposed a model of 'balanced empathy' and identified some

potential implications which may hold relevance for wider social work practice. I have outlined a contribution to knowledge and suggested potential opportunities for disseminating my research.

In proposing an ongoing role for empathy within contemporary social work practice, I do not underestimate the challenges involved for practitioners when integrating empathic practice with statutory intervention with families. However, my research findings suggest that participants consider empathy to be relevant and helpful, despite the difficult, often traumatic situations with which they were involved. A quote from one of the participants captures the nature of this challenge for practice clearly:

*'what we deal with is **'we swim in darkness'** all the time, we deal with massive complex ideas erm and so we should be trained,' (Gillian: p.23/21).*

In this thesis, I have sought to capture the participants' lived experiences, whilst also suggesting that empathy has a role to play in illuminating the complexity of this area of practice, providing both practitioners and families with a significant resource. I have outlined potential implications for both social work education, supervision and peer support, organisational culture, and social work leadership, with the aim of creating practice climates which can support and sustain practitioner empathy and wellbeing. In proposing a model for empathic and humane practice, I hope to have demonstrated my belief in the continuing relevance of empathy for social work with children and their families.

Reference list

- Adams, R.E., Figley, C.R. & Boscarino, J. a. (2008) 'The Compassion Fatigue Scale: Its Use with Social Workers Following Urban Disaster.' In *Research on Social Work Practice*. 18 (3), pp238–250. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049731507310190.
- Agosta , L. (2010) *Empathy in the context of Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Agosta, L. (2011) 'A Heideggerian Approach to Empathy: Authentic Being with Others' in *Existenz: International journal In Philosophy*, (2011), 6(2) pp. 43-50,
- Agosta, L. (2014). 'A rumor of empathy: Reconstructing Heidegger's contribution to empathy and empathic clinical practice' in . *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17(2), 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-013-9506-0>
- Ahern, E. C., Sadler, L. A., Lamb, M. E., & Gariglietti, G. M. (2017). 'Practitioner Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation: Rapport Building with Young People.' *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 26(1), pps:78–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2016.1257529>
- Albaek, A. U., Binder, P. E., & Milde, A. M. (2020). 'Plunging Into a Dark Sea of Emotions: Professionals' Emotional Experiences Addressing Child Abuse in Interviews With Children.' *Qualitative Health Research*, 30(8), pps:1212–1224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318825145>
- Allen, R. E.S & Wiles, J. L. (2016). 'A rose by any other name: participants choosing research pseudonyms' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 13(2), pp149–165
- Arghode, V., Lathan, A., Algaraja, M., Rajaram, K., McLean, G.N. (2022) 'Empathic organizational culture and leadership: conceptualizing the framework.' in *European Journal of Training and Development*. 46 (1–2), pp239–256. Available from: doi:10.1108/EJTD-09-2020-0139.
- Ashkanasy, N.M. (2003) 'Emotions in Organisations: a multi-level perspective' in *Research in Multi-Level Issues*. Volume 2, pp.9–54. Available from: doi:10.1016/S1475-9144(03)02002-2.
- Ashkanasy, N.M. & Humphrey, R.H. (2011) 'Current emotion research in organizational behavior.' in *Emotion Review*. 3(2), pp214–224. Available from: doi:10.1177/1754073910391684.
- Ashworth, P.D. (2016) 'The lifeworld – enriching qualitative evidence' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 13:1, pps:20-32, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2015.1076917
- Aveyard, H., Payne, S. and Preston, N. (2021) *A postgraduates guide to doing a literature review in health and social care*: Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill.

- Axline, V. (1989) *Play Therapy* 1st edition. London: Churchill Livingstone
- Ayling, P. (2012) 'Learning through Playing in Higher Education: Promoting Play as a Skill for Social Work Students'. *Social Work Education*, 31:6, pp.764-777, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2012.695185
- Mary Baginsky, M., Moriarty, J, Manthorpe, J., Stevens, M., MacInnes³, T. & Nagendran, T. (2009) *Social Workers Workload Survey :Messages from the Frontline* Social Work Task Force/ DCSF. Available at [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/1945/1/SWTF%20Workload%20Survey%20\(final\).pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/1945/1/SWTF%20Workload%20Survey%20(final).pdf) (Accessed 8th November 2023)
- Bamford, T. (2015). *A contemporary history of social work: learning from the past*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Banks, M. and Zeitlyn, D. (2015) *Visual Methods in Social research*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.
- Barlow, C. & Hall, B.L. (2007) 'What about feelings?': a study of emotion and tension in social work field education.' *Social Work Education*. 26(4), pp399–413. Available from: doi:10.1080/02615470601081712.
- Bartoli, A. (2020) 'Every picture tells a story: Combining interpretative phenomenological analysis with visual research' in *Qualitative Social Work* 1–15. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325019858664.
- Barker, R. (2003) *The Social Work Dictionary*. 5th ed. Washington DC: NASW Press.
- Baron -Cohen, S (2012) *Zero Degrees of Empathy*. London: Penguin
- Barrett-Lennard, G. T. (1981). 'The empathy cycle: Refinement of a nuclear concept.' In *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 28(2), pps:91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0167.28.2.91>
- Barrett-Lennard, G. T. (1993). 'The phases and focus of empathy.' In *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 66, pps:3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.28.2.91>
- Barthes, R. (1957) 'Mythologies' cited in P. Ledin & D. Machin (2018) *Doing Visual analysis*. London: Sage.
- Batson, D (2011) 'These things called empathy – 8 related but distinct phenomena' in J. Decety & W. Ickes (2011) *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press
- Berndtsson, I., Claesson, S, Friberg, F. & Öhlén, J. (2007) 'Issues about Thinking Phenomenologically while Doing Phenomenology.' In *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* Volume 38, 256–277. Available from: doi:10.1163/156916207X234293
- Biestek, F (1957) *The Casework Relationship*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.

- Biggart, L. et al. (2017) 'The team as a secure base: Promoting resilience and competence in child and family social work.' in *Children and Youth Services Review*. Volume 83, 119–130. Available from: doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.031.
- Biggerstaff, D.& Thompson, A. R. (2008) 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(3) pp214-224,
- Bilson, A. (2007) 'Promoting compassionate concern in social work: Reflections on ethics, biology and love' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 37(8), pp1371–1386. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcl060.
- Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heine-mann
- Blattner, W (2006): *Heidegger's Being and Time*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press.
- Bloom, P (2018) *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. New York: Vintage.
- Bolton, S.C. & Boyd, C. (2003) 'Trolley Dolly or Skilled Emotion Manager? Moving on from Hochschild's Managed Heart' in *Work, Employment & Society*.17 (2), pp289–308. Available from: doi:10.1177/0950017003017002004.
- Boden, Z. & Eatough, V. (2014) 'Understanding More Fully: A Multimodal Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Approach.' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 11(2), pp160–177. Available from: doi:10.1080/14780887.2013.853854.
- Boden, Z., Larkin, M. & Iyer, M. (2019) 'Qualitative Research in Psychology Picturing ourselves in the world: Drawings, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and the relational mapping interview.:' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 16 (2), pp 218–236. Available from: <http://doi:10.1080/14780887.2018.1540679>
- Bonifas, R.P. & Napoli, M. (2014) 'Mindfully increasing quality of life: A promising curriculum for MSW students.' in *Social Work Education*. 33 (4), pp469–484. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.838215> .
- Booth, A., Sutton, A., Clowes, M, , Martyn-St James, M. (2022). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review*. London: Sage.
- Bohart, A.C. & Greenberg, L. (1997). *Empathy Reconsidered*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bourassa, D.B. (2009) 'Compassion fatigue and the adult protective services social worker.' In *Journal of gerontological social work*. 52 (3), pp215–29. Available from: <http://doi:10.1080/01634370802609296>.
- Bower, M. (Ed) (2005). *Psychoanalytic theory for social work practice: Thinking under fire*. Abingdon: Routledge

- Bower, M. & Solomon, R. (2018) *What social workers need to know: a psychoanalytic approach*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- British Association of Social Workers (2019) *BASW Research Policy*. Available at: <https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/research-policy.pdf> (Accessed 10th August 2022)
- British Association of Social Workers (2018) *PCF -Professional Capabilities Framework -end of last placement*. Available at <https://new.basw.co.uk/training-cpd/professional-capabilities-framework/end-last-placementcompletion> (Accessed 7th November, 2023)
- British Association of Social Workers (2021) *BASW Code of Ethics*. Available at <https://new.basw.co.uk/policy-practice/standards/code-ethics> (Accessed 7th November 2023)
- Brocki, J. M. & Wearden, A. J. (2006) 'A critical evaluation of the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in health psychology,' in *Psychology & Health*. 21(1) pp87-108.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, J. & King, N. (2017) *Applied Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Brotheridge, C.M. & Grandey, A.A. (2002) 'Emotional labor and burnout: Comparing two perspectives of 'people work' in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. 60(1), pp17–39. Available from: <http://10.1006/jvbe.2001.1815>
- Brotheridge, C.M. & Lee, R.T. (2003) 'Development and validation of the Emotional Labour Scale.' in *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. 76 (3), pp365–379. Available from: <http://doi.10.1348/096317903769647229>.
- Brown, B (2018) *Dare to lead*. London: Vermillion Publishing
- Bryman, A. (2016) *Social Research Methods*. 5th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carey, M. (2012) *Qualitative Research skills for social work: theory and practice*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.
- Carey, M. (2013). *The social work dissertation: using small-scale qualitative methodology*, 2nd edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.
- Carman, T (2008) *Merleau-Ponty*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018). *CASP Qualitative Studies Checklist*. [online] Available at: <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/qualitative-studies-checklist/> Date Accessed: 07.05.19

- Castonguay, L. & Beutler, L. (2006) 'Principles of therapeutic change: A task force on participants, relationships, and techniques' in *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2006) 62(6), pp631-638
- Chammas, G. (2020) 'The Insider-Researcher Status: A Challenge for Social Work Practice Research' in *The Qualitative Report*, (2020), 25(2), pp. 537-552.
- Chandler, D. (2002) *Semiotics: the Basics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chapman, M. V., Wu, S., & Zhu, M. (2017). 'What is a picture worth? A primer for coding and interpreting photographic data.' In *Qualitative Social Work*, 16(6), pps:810–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016650513>
- Charalambous, A., Papadopoulou, R. & Beadsmoore, A. (2008) 'Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology: An implication for nursing research' in *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*.22 (4), pp 637–642.
- Children's Commissioners Office (2019) *Children's Voices: Children's experiences of instability in the care system*. Available at: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2019/07/cco-childrens-voices-childrens-experiences-of-instability-in-the-care-system-july-2019.pdf> (accessed 3rd August 2023).
- Clancy, M. (2013) 'Is reflexivity the key to minimising problems of interpretation in phenomenological research?' in *Nurse Researcher*, (2013) 20(6), pp 12-16.
- Clark, A. J., & Butler, C. M. (2020). 'Empathy: An Integral Model in Clinical Social Work' in *Social Work (United States)*, 65(2), pps:169–177. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa009>
- Clark, A. & Morriss, L. (2015) 'The use of visual methodologies in social work research over the last decade: A narrative review and some questions for the future' in *Qualitative Social Work*. 0(0) pp1–16. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015601205>
- Conrad, D. & Kellar-Guenther, Y. (2006) 'Compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction among Colorado child protection workers' in *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 30 (10), pp1071–1080. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.03.009> .
- Cooke, A., Smith, D. & Booth, A. (2012) 'Beyond PICO' in *Qualitative Health Research*. 22 (10), pp1435–1443. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312452938> .
- Cook, L. L. (2020). 'The home visit in child protection social work: Emotion as resource and risk for professional judgement and practice' in *Child and Family Social Work*, 25, pps:18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12647>
- Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (2011). *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Coplan, A. (2011). 'Will the real empathy please stand up? A case for a narrow conceptualisation' in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49, 40–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00056>.
- Crawford, P. et al. (2013) 'The language of compassion in acute mental health care.' In *Qualitative health research*. Volume 23, pp719–27.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. London: Sage.
- Crist, J.D. & Tanner, C. (2003) 'Interpretation/analysis methods in hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology' in *Nursing research*. 52 (3), pp202–205. Available from: <https://doi:10.1097/00006199-200305000-00011> .
- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018) CASP Qualitative Research Checklist [online]. Available at <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/> (Accessed 28th October 2019)
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social research*. London: Research.
- Cuff, B., Brown, S., Taylor, L. & Howat, D.J. (2016) 'Empathy: a review of the concept' in *Emotion Review*. 8(2) pp144-153.
- Cullen, A. (2016) 'Schwartz rounds – promoting compassionate care and healthy Organisations' in *Journal of Social Work Practice* 30(2) pp. 219–228,
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2016.1168386>
- D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., and Melendez, S. (2007) 'Reflexivity, its Meanings and Relevance for Social Work: A Critical Review of the Literature' in *British Journal of Social Work* (2007) 37, pp. 73–90
- Dahlberg, K., Dahlberg, H., & Nystrom, M (2008) *Reflective Lifeworld Research*. 2nd Edition. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Davis, M.H (1980) 'Interpersonal reactivity index' in *JSAS Catalogue of Selected Documents in Psychology*, volume 10, pp14-15.
- Davis, M.H. (1983) 'Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach' in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44 (1) pp13-126,
- Davis, M.H. (2017) 'Empathy in twentieth century psychology' in H. Maibom (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- de Rivera, J. & Páez, D. (2007) *Emotional Climate, Human Security, and Cultures of Peace*. *Journal of Social Issues*. 63 (2). pp233-253
- de Vignemont, F., & Singer, T. (2006). 'The empathic brain: how, when, and why?' in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 10(10), 435–441.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2006.08.008>

- de Waal, F. (2011) *The age of empathy: Nature's lessons for a kinder society*. London: Souvenir Paperbacks.
- de Witt, L. & Ploeg, J. (2006) 'Critical appraisal of rigour in interpretive phenomenological nursing research' in *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 55(2), pp 215–229.
- Decety, J. & Jackson, P.L (2004) 'The functional architecture of human empathy' in *Behavioural and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews*. 3(2) pp71-100.
- Decety, J. & Lamm, C. (2006) 'Human Empathy Through the Lens of Social Neuroscience' in *The Scientific World Journal Volume* 6, pp1146–1163. Available from: <https://doi:10.1100/tsw.2006.221> .
- Decety, J. & Meyer, M. (2008) 'From emotion resonance to empathic understanding: A social developmental neuroscience account' in *Development and Psychopathology*. Volume 20, pp1053–1080.
- Denzin, N.K & Lincoln Y. S. (2011) *Sage handbook of qualitative research*. 4th Edition. Los Angeles: Sage
- Department for Education (2014) *Knowledge and skills statements for child and family social work*. Asset Publishing. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d7cd2e5274a676d5325cc/140730_Knowledge_and_skills_statement_final_version_AS_RH_Checked.pdf (Accessed 7th November, 2022)
- Department for Education (2023) *Children's social work workforce -reporting year 2022* Available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce/2022> (Accessed 3rd November, 2023)
- Dreyfus, H. (1991). *Being in the World*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press
- Dreyfus, H (2007). *Being and Time Online lectures, Harvard University*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laIWz_87Kz0&list=PLLQHcGVaP6vtDUDYgBLOFAMCu2DDsnN_Q (Accessed: 19th July 2020).
- Doel, M (2012) *Social work: The basics*. Abingdon:
- Dowling, M. (2007)' From Husserl to van Manen. A review of different phenomenological approaches.' In *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (2007) 44, pp.131–142.
- Doyle, S. (2013) 'Reflexivity and the capacity to think.' in *Qualitative Health Research*. 23(2), pp248–255.
- Duan, C. & Hill, C.E. (1996) 'The Current State of Empathy Research' in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. 43 (3), pp261–274.
- Dugmore, P. (2019) '*Acknowledging and bearing emotions: A study into child and family social work practice*'. Unpublished thesis, University of Sussex. Available from <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/> (Accessed, 23rd April 2023)

Duffy, C. A.(2014). 'Therapeutic stories and play in the sandtray for traumatised children' in Malchiodi, C.A. (2014) *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*. New York: The Guildford Press.

Dupper, D. (2017) 'Strengthening Empathy Training Programs for Undergraduate Social Work Students.' in *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*. Volume 22, pp31–41. Available from: doi:10.18084/1084-7219.22.1.31.

Eatough, V & Smith, J.A. (2006). "I was like a wild, wild person': Understanding feelings of anger using interpretative phenomenological analysis' in *British Journal of Psychology*. Volume 97, pp483-498

Edwards, R. (2020). 'Participant pseudonyms in qualitative family research: a sociological and temporal note' in *Families, Relationships and Societies* 9 (3) pp383–397.

Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P. A. (1987). The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors in *Psychological Bulletin*, 101(1), pp91–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.101.1.91>

Eisenberg, N., Wentzel, M., & Harris, J. D. (1998). 'The role of emotionality and regulation in empathy-related responding'. In *School Psychology Review*, 27(4), 506–521. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.1998.12085934>

Eisenberg, N. (2003). 'Empathy and sympathy' in M. Bornstein, L. Davidson, C. Keyes, and K. Moore *Wellbeing: positive development across the life-course*. Pp253-265 New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Eisenberg, N. and Eggum, N.D. (2011) 'Empathic responding: sympathy and personal distress' in J. Decety & W. Ickes in *The Social neuroscience of empathy*. Boston, Mass: MIT Press.

Eklund, J.H & Meranius, M. S. (2021). Toward a consensus on the nature of empathy: A review of reviews in *Patient Education and Counselling*, 104(2), pp300–307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2020.08.022>

Ekman, E, & Halpern, J,(2015) 'Professional Distress and Meaning in Health Care: Why Professional Empathy Can Help.0 in *Social Work in Health Care*, 54(7) pp633-650. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2015.1046575>

Elliott, R., Bohart, A. C., Watson, J. C., & Murphy, D. (2018). 'Supplemental Material for Therapist Empathy and Client Outcome: An Updated Meta-Analysis.' in *Psychotherapy*, 55(4), pp.:399–410. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst000175.supp>

Engelen, E.-M. & Rottger-Rossler, B. (2012) 'Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy' in *Emotion Review*. 4 (1), pp3–8. Available from: doi:10.1177/1754073911422287.

Englander, M. & Folkesson, A. (2014) 'Evaluating the Phenomenological Approach to Empathy Training' in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. 54(3), pp294–313. Available from: doi:10.1177/0022167813493351.

Engstrom, S. (2019) 'Interpersonal justice: the importance of relationships for child and family social workers.' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*. 33(1), pp41–53. Available from: doi:10.1080/02650533.2017.1400957.

Eriksson, K. & Englander, M. (2017) 'Empathy in Social Work' in *Journal of Social Work Education*. 53(4), pp607–621. Available from: doi:10.1080/10437797.2017.1284629.

ETHOS (2022). *British Library Database of Theses*. Available at:<https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do> (Accessed: 28th January 2022)

Fagerberg, I. & Norberg, A. (2009) 'Learning by doing' - Or how to reach an understanding of the research method phenomenological hermeneutics.' In *Nurse Education Today*. 29(7), pp735–739. Available from: doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2009.03.010.

Fazzi, L. & Nothdurfter, U. (2021) 'Why are you backing such positions? Types and trajectories of social workers' right-wing populist support.' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 51(2), pp636–654. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcaa199.

Featherstone, B., White, S. & Morris, K. (2014) *Re-imagining child protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ferguson, H. (2008) 'Liquid social work: Welfare interventions as mobile practices.' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 38 (3), pp561–579. Available from: <https://doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcl367> .

Ferguson, H. (2009) 'Driven to care: The car, automobility and social work' in *Mobilities*. 4(2), pp275–293. Available from: <https://doi:10.1080/17450100902906723> .

Ferguson, H. (2010) 'Therapeutic journeys: The car as a vehicle for working with children and families and theorizing practice.' In *Journal of Social Work Practice*. 24 (2), pp121–138. Available from: doi:10.1080/02650531003741553.

Ferguson, H., Disney, T., Warwick, L., Leigh, J., Singh, T., Beddoe, L., Ferguson, H., Disney, T., Warwick, L., Leigh, J., & Singh, T. (2020). 'Hostile relationships in social work practice: anxiety, hate and conflict in long-term work with involuntary service users' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 00(00), pp.:1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1834371>

Figley, C.R ed. (1995) *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Brunner/ Mazel.

Fineman, S. (Ed) (2000) *Emotions in Organisations*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

Fingfeld-Connett, D. (2018). 'Data Extraction, Analysis, and Theory Generation' in 'A Guide to Qualitative Meta-Synthesis' Abingdon: Routledge.pp31–61. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351212793-4>

Finlay, L. (2002) 'Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice' in *Qualitative Research*, (2002), 2(2) pp 209-230.

- Finlay, L. (2011) *Phenomenology for Therapists: researching the lived world*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Finlay, L. (2014) 'Engaging phenomenological analysis' in *Qualitative research in psychology*. Volume 11, pp121-141. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2013.807899
- Flick, U. (2018) *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J. H. (2003) 'The interview from structured questions to negotiated text' in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (2003) *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fook, J. (2016) *Social Work : A critical approach to practice*. 3rd Edition. London: Sage
- Forrester, D. et al. (2008) 'Communication skills in child protection: How do social workers talk to parents? ' in *Child and Family Social Work*. 13 (1), pp41–51. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00513.x.
- Forsberg, H. & Vagli, A. (2006) 'The Social Construction of Emotions in Child Protection Case-Talk' in *Qualitative Social Work*. 5(1), pp9–31. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325006061535.
- Freedberg, S. (2007)' Re-examining empathy: a relational-feminist point of view.' In *Social Work* (2007) 52(3) pp251-9.
- Gabriel, A.S., Diefendorff, J.M. & Grandey, A.A. (2023) 'The acceleration of emotional labor research: Navigating the past and steering toward the future.' In *Personnel Psychology*. Volume 76, pp511-545. Available from: doi:10.1111/peps.12576.
- Gadamer H. G. (1975) *Truth & Method*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- Gair, S. (2010) 'Social work students' thoughts on their (in) ability to empathise with a birth mother 's story Pondering the need for a deeper focus on empathy.' In *Adoption and Fostering*. 34 (4), pp39–49.
- Gair, S. (2011) 'Exploring Empathy Embedded in Ethics Curricula: A Classroom Inquiry.; in *Advances in Social Work*. 12 (2), pp329–344.
- Gair, S. (2012) 'Feeling their stories: contemplating empathy, insider/outsider positionings, and enriching qualitative research.' in *Qualitative health research*. 22 (1), pp134–43. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049732311420580.
- Gair, S. (2013)' Inducing empathy: Pondering students' (in)ability to empathize with an aboriginal man's lament and what might be done about it. 'in *Journal of Social Work Education*. 49 (1), pp136–149. Available from: doi:10.1080/10437797.2013.755399.
- Gallagher, S. (2017). 'Empathy and theories of direct perception' in H. Maibom (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Gardiner, E. & Jackson, C.J. (2012) 'Workplace mavericks: How personality and risk-taking propensity predicts maverickism' in *British Journal of Psychology*. 103(4), pp497–519. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.2044-8295.2011.02090. x.
- Garrett, P. M. (2009) *Transforming children's services? Social work, neoliberalism, and the modern world*. Maidenhead: Open University Press /McGraw-Hill
- Garrett, P. M. (2019). 'What are we talking about when we talk about 'Neoliberalism'?' in *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(2), pp.:188–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1530643>
- Gauntlett, D and Holzwarth, P (2006); Creative and visual methods for exploring identities' in *Visual Studies* 21(1) pp82-91
- Gearing, R. E. (2004). 'Bracketing in Research: A Typology.' In *Qualitative Health Research*. 14(10) pp. 1429 -1452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304270394>
- Gerdes, K.E. & Segal, E.A. (2009) 'A Social Work Model of Empathy' in *Advances in Social Work*. 10 (2), pp114–127.
- Gerdes, K.E., Segal, E.A. & Lietz, C.A. (2010) 'Conceptualising and measuring empathy.' In *British Journal of Social Work*. 40 (7), pp 2326–2343. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcq048.
- Gibbons, S.B. (2011) 'Understanding Empathy as a Complex Construct: A Review of the Literature.' In *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 39 (3), pp243–252. Available from: doi:10.1007/s10615-010-0305-2.
- Gilbert, P. (2009). *The compassionate mind*. London: Constable.
- Giorgi, A (2009) *The descriptive Phenomenological method in psychology: a Modified Husserlian Approach*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Glumbíková, K., & Mikulec, M. (2021). 'Reflexivity and strategies of emotions (re) construction in social work with families in the Czech Republic.' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 35(3), pp259–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1744115>
- Goffee, R. & Jones, G. (2019) *Why should anyone be led by you?* Boston MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- Goldman, A.L. (2011). 'Two routes to empathy: insights from cognitive neuroscience' in A. Coplan and P. Goldie (2017) *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goleman, D., Boyzatis, R. &McKee, A. (2013) *Primal leadership: unleashing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Gough, D., Oliver, S., Thomas, J. (2017) *An Introduction to Systematic Reviews*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

- Grandey, A.A. & Melloy, R.C. (2017) 'The state of the heart: Emotional labor as emotion regulation reviewed and revised.' In *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. 22(3), pp407–422. Available from: doi:10.1037/ocp0000067.
- Grant, L. & Kinman, G. (2014a) *Developing resilience for social work practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grant, L. (2014b). 'Hearts and minds: Aspects of empathy and wellbeing in social work students.' in *Social Work Education* 33(3) pp. 338–352.
<https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.805191>
- Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2012). 'Enhancing Wellbeing in Social Work Students: Building Resilience in the Next Generation.' in *Social Work Education*, 31(5), pp605–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.590931>
- Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2013). 'The importance of emotional resilience for staff and students in the 'helping' professions: developing an emotional curriculum.' *HEA Publication*, December.
- Grant, L., Kinman, G., Alexander, K., Grant, L., Kinman, G., & Alexander, K. (2014). 'What's All this Talk About Emotion: Developing Emotional Intelligence in Social Work Students.' In *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, March 2014, 37–41.
- Greeno, E. J., Ting, L., Pecukonis, E., Hodorowicz, M. & Wade, K. (2017) 'The role of empathy in training social work students in motivational interviewing' in *Social Work Education*. 36(7) pp794-808, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2017.1346071
- Grootegoed, E. & Smith, M. (2018) 'The Emotional Labour of Austerity: How Social Workers Reflect and Work on Their Feelings towards Reducing Support to Needy Children and Families.' In *The British Journal of Social Work*. Volume 48, pp1929–1947. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcx151.
- Gross, J.J. (2013) 'Emotion regulation: Taking stock and moving forward.' in *Emotion*. 13 (3), pp 359–365. Available from: doi:10.1037/a0032135.
- Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research' in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, (1994) *Sage handbook of qualitative research*. 1st edition. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Guillemin, M. & Drew, S. (2010) 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies' in *Visual Studies*. 25(2), pp175–188. Available from: doi:10.1080/1472586X.2010.502676.
- Hall, J. & Schwartz, R. (2019) 'Empathy, present and future' in *The Journal of Social Psychology* 159(3) pp225-243.
- Halpern, J (2001) *From detached concern to empathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halpern, J. (2003). 'What is clinical empathy?' in *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 18(8), pp670–674. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1525-1497.2003.21017.x>

Halpern, J. (2014). 'From idealized clinical empathy to empathic communication in medical care.' in *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17(2), pp301–311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-013-9510-4>

Hansen, E.M. et al. (2018) 'Does Feeling Empathy Lead to Compassion Fatigue or Compassion Satisfaction? The Role of Time Perspective' in. *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*. 152(8), pp630–645. Available from: doi:10.1080/00223980.2018.1495170.

Harris, J & White, V (2018) *Oxford Dictionary of Social work and Social Care*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hartwig, E.K. and Bennett, M. M. (2017) 'Supervision Four Approaches to Using Sand tray in Play Therapy Supervision' *International Journal of Play Therapy*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pla0000050>

Harvey, A. & Henderson, F. (2018) 'Reflective supervision for child protection practice: Researching beneath the surface' in M. Bower & R. Solomon (2018) *What social workers need to know: a psychoanalytic approach*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hatfield, E. Rapson, R. & Yen-Chi, L. (2011) 'Emotional contagions and empathy' in J. Decety and W. Ickes (2011) *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Healy, K. (2022) *Social work theories in context: creating frameworks for practice*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Practice.

Health Research Authority (2017) *UK Policy Framework for health and social care research*. Available at <https://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-research/policies-standards-legislation/uk-policy-framework-health-social-care-research/uk-policy-framework-health-and-social-care-research/> (Accessed 10th August, 2022)

Heidegger, M. (1953) *Being and Time*. Tübingen: Max Neimeyer Verlag / [2010] Albany: State University of New York Press.

Heidegger., M (1975) *The basic problems of phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hennessey, R. (2011) *Relationship skills in social work*. London: Sage.

Hochschild, A. (1979) 'Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure' in *American Journal of Sociology*, (1979), 85(3) pp. 551-575,

Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart; Commercialisation of human feeling*. Los Angeles: CA: University of California Press.

Hoffman, M (2000) *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for caring and justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Hoffman, M (2011) 'Empathy, Justice and the law' in A. Coplan and P. Goldie. (2011). *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hogan, R (1960) 'The Development of an empathy scale' in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 33(3) pp307-319
- Hojat, M. (2016) *Empathy in health professions: education and patient care*. Heidelberg: Springer International.
- Hollis, F. (1968) *Casework: a psychosocial theory*. New York: Random House.
- Holroyd, A. E. M. (2017). 'Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding' in *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7(2), pp1-12, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2007.11433946>
- Homeyer, L. E. & Sweeney, D. (2011) *Sand-tray therapy: a practical manual* 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge
- Horrigan-Kelly, M., Millar, M. & Dowling, M. (2016) 'Understanding the Key Tenets of Heidegger's Philosophy for Interpretive Phenomenological Research' in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (December), p1–8. Available from: doi:10.1177/1609406916680634.
- Houston, S. & Mullan-Jensen, C. (2011) 'Towards depth and width in Qualitative Social Work: Aligning interpretative phenomenological analysis with the theory of social domains' in *Qualitative Social Work*. 11(3), pp266–281. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325011400484.
- Howe, D. (2013). *Empathy – what it is and why it matters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Howe, D. (2019). 'Empathy, respect and dignity in social work.' In M. Payne & E. Reith-Hall *The Routledge Handbook of Social Work Theory*, pp109–121. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315211053-10>
- Hruby, G. (2001) 'Sociological, Postmodern, and New Realism Perspectives in Social Constructionism: Implications for Literacy Research' in *Reading Research Quarterly*, (2001)36(1), pp. 48-62,
- Husserl, E. (1931) *Ideas; general introduction to pure phenomenology* London: Routledge.
- Husserl, E. (2001) *Logical Investigations*. Ed. Dermot Moran. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Hutton, D (2004) 'Test of time: Margaret Lowenfeld's World technique' in *Clinical Child Psychology & Psychiatry* 9(4) pp605-612
- Ife, J. (2018) 'Right-wing Populism and Social Work: Contrasting Ambivalences About Modernity.' in *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. 3 (3), pp121–127. Available from: doi:10.1007/s41134-018-0064-5.

- Ingram, R. (2013) 'Emotions, social work practice and supervision: an uneasy alliance' In *Journal of Social Work Practice*. 27(1), pp5–19. Available from: doi:10.1080/02650533.2012.745842.
- Ingram, R. (2015) 'Exploring emotions within formal and informal forums: Messages from social work practitioners.' In *British Journal of Social Work*. 45 (3), pp896–913. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct166.
- Ingram, R. (2015) *Understanding emotions in social work*. Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill.
- Institute for Government (2023) ' *Timeline for Covid*' Available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf> . (Accessed 7th November 2023).
- Jackson Foster, L. J., Deafenbaugh, L., & Miller, E. (2018). 'Group metaphor map making: Application to integrated arts-based focus groups.' in *Qualitative Social Work*, 17(2), 305–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016667475>
- Jardine, J. and Szanto, T. (2017). 'Empathy in the phenomenological tradition' in H. Maibom, (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jesson, J.K., Matheson, L., and Lacey, F.M. (2011). *Doing your literature review – traditional and systematic techniques*. London: Sage.
- Kadushin, A. and Kadushin G (1997) *The social work interview* 4th Ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kahn, E., & Rachman, A. W. (2000). 'Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut: A historical perspective' in. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 17(2), pp294–312. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0736-9735.17.2.294>
- Kahn, W.A. (1993) 'Caring for the Caregivers: Patterns of Organizational Caregiving' in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 38(4), pp539–559. Available from: doi:10.2307/2393336.
- Kalff, D. M. (2020) *Sand-play: A Psychotherapeutic Approach to the Psyche*. London: Analytical Psychology Press / Taylor and Francis.
- Kapoulitsas, M. & Corcoran, T. (2014) 'Compassion fatigue and resilience: A qualitative analysis of social work practice.' in *Qualitative Social Work*. 14 (1), pp86–101. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325014528526.
- Keefe, T. (1976). 'Empathy: The critical skill' in *Social Work (United States)*, 21(1), pp10–14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/21.1.10>
- King, M. (2001) *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*. Albany: State university of New York Press.
- King, S.H. (2011) 'The Structure of Empathy in Social Work Practice' in *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. 21 (6), pp679–695. Available from: doi:10.1080/10911359.2011.583516.

King Jr., S. & Holosko, M.J. (2012) 'The Development and Initial Validation of the Empathy Scale for Social Workers.' In *Research on Social Work Practice*. 22 (2), pp174–185. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049731511417136.

Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2016). 'Enhancing empathy in the helping professions.' In D. F. Watt & J. Panksepp (Eds.), *Psychology and neurobiology of empathy*. New York: Nova Science.

Kinman, G. & Grant, L. (2017) 'Building resilience in early-career social workers: Evaluating a multi-modal intervention' in *British Journal of Social Work*, (2017),, 47(7) pp. 1979-1998,

Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2021). 'Emotional demands, compassion and mental health in social workers.' In *Occupational Medicine*, 70(2), pp89–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OCCMED/KQZ144>

Kirkham, J.A., Smith, J.A. & Havsteen-franklin, D. (2015) 'Painting Pain: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Representations of Living with Chronic Pain' in *Health Psychology*. 34(4), pp398–406.

Kiteley, R and Stogdon, C. (2014) *Literature reviews in social work*. London: Sage.

Kock, N. et al. (2019) 'Empathetic Leadership: How Leader Emotional Support and Understanding Influences Follower Performance.' In *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*. 26 (2), pp217–236. Available from: doi:10.1177/1548051818806290

Krznicaric, R (2014). *Empathy -a handbook for revolution*. Albury: Rider Books/ Albury Publishing.

Kvale, S. (1983) 'The Qualitative Research Interview: A Phenomenological and a Hermeneutical Mode of Understanding' in *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* (1983), vol.14, pp.:171-196.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/156916283X00090>

Kvale, S. (2006). 'Dominance through interviews and dialogues' in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), pp480–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406286235>

Lahman, M. K. E., Rodriguez, K.L., Moses, L., Griffin, K. M., Mendoza, B. M. and Yacoub, W. (2015). 'A Rose by Any Other Name Is Still a Rose? Problematizing Pseudonyms in Research' in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(5) pp445–453

Lahman, M.K.E., Thomas, R., and Teman, E.D (2023). 'A good name: pseudonyms in research' in *Qualitative Inquiry*. 29(6) pp678-685
Langdridge, D. (2007) *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research, and method* London: Pearson Education Ltd.

Lanzieri, N. et al. (2021) 'Virtual Reality: An Immersive Tool for Social Work Students to Interact with Community Environments' in *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 49(2), pp207–219. Available from: doi:10.1007/s10615-021-00803-1.

- Lanzoni, S (2018) *Empathy: a history*. Newhaven, Connecticut: Yale University Press
- Larkin, M., Watts, S, & Clifton, E. (2006) 'Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis' in *Qualitative research in psychology (2006) Volume 3 pp101-120*
- Larkin, M. & Thompson, A. (2011) 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Mental Health and Psychotherapy Research' in *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and psychotherapy* by D. Harper & A. Thompson (2011) Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Laurent, S. M. & Myers, M. W. (2011) 'Empathic merging of selves: perspective taking and self -other overlap' in D. J. Scapaletti (2011) *The Psychology of Empathy*. New York: Nova Science Publishers
- Lavee, E. & Strier, R. (2018) 'Social workers' emotional labour with families in poverty: Neoliberal fatigue?' in *Child and Family Social Work*. 23 (3), pp504–512. Available from: doi:10.1111/cfs.12443.
- Lawn, C. (2006). *Gadamer – a Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- Ledin, P. & Machin, D. (2018) *Doing Visual analysis*. London: Sage
- Leeson, C. (2010) 'The emotional labour of caring about looked-after children.' in *Child and Family Social Work*. 15 (4), pp483–491. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00704. x.
- Leigh, J., Morriss, L. & Morriss, M. (2020) 'Making visible an invisible trade: Exploring the everyday experiences of doing social work and being a social worker. 'in *Qualitative Social Work*. 19(2), pp 267–283. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325018824629.
- Lewis, M.L. and King, D.M (2019) 'Teaching self-care: The utilization of self-care in social work practicum to prevent compassion fatigue, burnout , and vicarious trauma' in *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, 29(1) pp96-106.
- Liberati, A. et al. (2009) 'The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: Explanation and elaboration' in *PLoS Medicine*. 6 (7) pp1-28. Available from: doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1000100.
- Lietz, C. A., Gerdes, K. E., Sun, F., Geiger, J. M., Wagaman, M. A., & Segal, E. A. (2011). 'The Empathy Assessment Index (EAI): A Confirmatory Factor Analysis of a Multidimensional Model of Empathy.' in *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 2(2), pp104–124. <https://doi.org/10.5243/jsswr.2011.6>
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1986) 'But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation' in *New Directions for Evaluation* (1986) Issue 30 Pp.: 73-84.

- Lincoln Y.S, Lynham, S A & Guba, E. G (2011) 'Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences: Revisited' In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, (2011) *Sage Handbook of QL research*. 4th edition Los Angeles: Sage
- Lindebaum, D. (2012). 'I Rebel-Therefore We Exist: Emotional Standardization in Organizations and the Emotionally Intelligent Individual.' In *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 21(3), pp262–277.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492611430125>
- Lishman, J. (2012) *Communication in social work*. .2nd edition Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Litvack, A., Bogo, M. & Mishna, F. (2010) 'Emotional Reactions of Students in field Education: An Exploratory Study.' in *Journal of Social Work Education*. 46 (2), 227–243. Available from: doi:10.5175/jswe.2010.200900007.
- Lohvansuu, J., & Emond, R. (2020). '“Everyday ” Scottish and Finnish child protection work in an age of austerity : A practitioner perspective.' in *Child and Family Social Work*, 25, pp576–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12729>
- Lopez, K.A. & Willis, D.G. (2004) 'Descriptive Versus Interpretive Phenomenology: Their Contributions to Nursing Knowledge.' in *Qualitative Health Research*. 14 (5), pp726–735. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049732304263638.
- Lopez, S.H. (2006) 'Emotional labor and organized emotional care: Conceptualizing nursing home care work.' In *Work and Occupations*. 33 (2), pp133–160. Available from: doi:10.1177/0730888405284567.
- Lowenfeld, M. (2003) *Understanding Children's Sand-play: Lowenfeld's world technique*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Ludvigsen, M.S. et al. (2016) 'Using Sandelowski and Barroso's Meta-Synthesis Method in Advancing Qualitative Evidence' in *Qualitative Health Research*. 26 (3), pp320–329. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049732315576493.
- Lynch, A., Newlands, F. & Forrester, D. (2019) 'What does empathy sound like in social work communication? A mixed-methods study of empathy in child protection social work practice.' In *Child and Family Social Work*. 24(1), pp139–147. Available from: doi:10.1111/cfs.12591.
- Lynch, R. & Garrett, P.M. (2010) 'More than words': Touch practices in child and family social work' in *Child and Family Social Work*. 15 (4), pp389–398. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00686. x.
- Lynn, N. & Lea, S.J. (2005) 'Through the looking glass: considering the challenges visual methodologies raise for qualitative research.' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2(3), pp213–225. Available from: doi:10.1191/1478088705qp039oa.

McCann, L and Pearlman, L.A. (1990) 'Vicarious Traumatization: A Framework for Understanding the Psychological Effects of Working with Victims' in *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 3 (1) pp131-149

McDonald, J. (2009) 'Beyond Professional Boundaries: The Reflective Practitioner, Identity and Emotional Labour in Social Work.' Unpublished Thesis: University of Leicester. Available from:
https://lra.le.ac.uk/bitstream/2381/7425/1/mcdonaldjp_DOC_Soc_Sci_for_LRA_JUNE_8th.pdf.

McFadden, P., Cambell, A & Taylor, B. (2015) 'Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systemic literature review' in *British Journal of Social Work* vol. 45, pp1546 -1563.

McFadden, P. (2018) 'Two sides of one coin? Relationships build resilience or contribute to burnout in child protection social work: Shared perspectives from Leavers and Stayers in Northern Ireland.' In *International Social Work*. Available from: doi: 10.1177/0020872818788393.pp1-13

McLaughlin, H. (2011) *Understanding social work research*. London: Sage

MacAlister, J. (2022) *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care*. Available at
https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf (Accessed 8th November, 2023)

Maclsaac, D.S. (1997) 'Empathy: Heinz Kohut's contribution' in A.C. Bohart & L. Greenberg (1997). *Empathy Reconsidered*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Magri, E and Moran, D (2017). *Empathy Sociality and personhood: Essays on Edith Stein's phenomenological investigations*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Maibom, H (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. Abingdon: Routledge

Main, A., Walle, E. A., Kho, C., & Halpern, J. (2017). 'The Interpersonal Functions of Empathy: A Relational Perspective.' in *Emotion Review*, 9(4), pp358–366.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073916669440>

Maiter, S., Palmer, S. & Manji, S. (2006) 'Strengthening Social Worker-Client Relationships in Child Protective Services: Addressing Power Imbalances and 'Ruptured' Relationships' in. *Qualitative Social Work*. 5(2), pp161–186. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325006064255.

Malekoff, A. & Papell, C.P. (2012) 'Remembering Hull House, Speaking to Jane Addams, and Preserving Empathy.' in *Social Work with Groups*. 35 (4), pp306–312. Available from: doi:10.1080/01609513.2012.673086

- Mannay, D. (2016). *Visual, Narrative, and creative research methods: application, reflection, and ethics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Mannay, D., Staples, E., Edwards, V., Mannay, D., Staples, E., & Edwards, V. (2017). 'Visual methodologies, sand and psychoanalysis: employing creative participatory techniques to explore the educational experiences of mature students and children in care.' In *Visual Studies*, 32(4), pp345–358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2017.1363636>
- Mannay, D. (2020). 'Artefacts, Third Objects, Sandboxing and Figurines in the Doll's House'. In L. Pauwels & D Mannay (2020) *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (pp. 322–332). <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417015.n20>
- Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J. Hussein, S., Stevens, M. & Sharpe, E.(2015) 'Content and Purpose of Supervision in Social Work Practice in England: Views of Newly Qualified Social Workers, Managers and Directors' in *British Journal of Social Work*. Volume 45, pp 52–68.
- Margolis, E. & Pauwels, L. (2001) *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, London: Sage.
- Martínez, Tatiana, (2017) "Social climate in social work training: the influence of the learning environment on the emerging social worker's professional identity as an agent of social justice" *Master's Thesis*, Smith College, Northampton, MA. Available at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1904>
- Matravers, D (2017) *Empathy: key concepts in Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Matthews, E. (2002) *The philosophy of Merleau Ponty*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Mayer, J.D. & Salovey, P. (1997) 'What is emotional intelligence?' in P. Salovey & D. J. Sluyter (eds) *Emotional development and emotional intelligence*. New York: Basic Books
- Mayes, C., Mayes, P.B. & Williams, E. (2007) 'Messages in the sand: sand tray therapy techniques with graduate students in an educational leadership program' in *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7(3), pp257-284, Available from: doi:10.1080/13603120410001694540.
- Mehrabian, A. & Epstein, N. (1972) 'A measure of emotional empathy.' in *Journal of personality*. 40(4), pp525–543. Available from: doi:10.1086/521907.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). 'Designing Your Study and Selecting a Sample'. In S.B. Merriam *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (pp. 1–14). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons
- Messmer, H. (2019). 'Doing emotion. Emotion management in German child-care planning conferences.' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33(4), pp403–418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2019.1681949>

- Methley, A. M., Campbell, S., Chew-graham, C., McNally, R., & Cheraghi-sohi, S. (2014). 'PICO, PICOS and SPIDER: a comparison study of specificity and sensitivity in three search tools for qualitative systematic reviews.' in *BMC Health Services Research* 14(579) pp1-10 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-014-0579-0>
- Moesby-Jensen, C.K. & Nielsen, H.S. (2015) 'Emotional labor in social workers' practice.' In *European Journal of Social Work*. Volume 1457 (April), pp1–13. Available from: doi:10.1080/13691457.2014.981148.
- Moran, D. (2000) *An Introduction to phenomenology*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Moran, D. & Mooney, T. (2002) *The Phenomenology Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Morrison, T (2007) 'Emotional intelligence, emotion and social work: Context, characteristics, complications and contribution'. In *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(2) pp. 245-263.
- Mullins, J. (2011) 'A Framework for Cultivating and Increasing Child Welfare Workers' Empathy Toward Parents' in *Journal of Social Service Research*. 37 (3), pp242–253. Available from: doi:10.1080/01488376.2011.564030.
- Munro, E (2010) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Part one: A systems analysis*. London: The Stationary Office. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81e8a5e5274a2e8ab567a9/TheMunroReview-Part_one.pdf (Accessed 8th November, 2023)
- Munro, E (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report – A Child Centred System*. London: The Stationary Office. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b455ee5274a34770ea939/Munro-Review.pdf> (Accessed 8th November 2023)
- Mumby, D.K. & Putnam, L.L. (1992) 'The Politics of Emotion: A Feminist Reading of Bounded Rationality.' in *Academy of Management Review*. 17(3), pp465–486. Available from: doi:10.5465/AMR.1992.4281983.
- Murphy, D., Duggan, M. & Joseph, S. (2013) 'Relationship Based Social Work and Its Compatibility with Person-Centered Approach: Principled versus Instrumental Perspectives.' In *British Journal of Social Work*. 43 (4), pp703–719. Available from: doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcs003.
- Nakao, H. & Itakura, S. (2009) 'An integrated view of empathy: Psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience.' In *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*. Volume 43, pp42-52. [Online] Available from: doi:10.1007/s12124-008-9066-7.
- Newell, J and MacNeill, G. (2010) 'Professional Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Compassion Fatigue: A Review of Theoretical Terms, Risk Factors, and Preventive Methods for Clinicians and Researchers' in *Best practice in mental health*. 6(2). Pp57-68

Nizza, I. E., Farr, J., & Smith, J. A. (2021). 'Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality.' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp369–386.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854404>

Noble, C. & Ottmann, G. (2018) 'Nationalist Populism and Social Work.' in *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. 3 (3), pp112–120. Available from: doi:10.1007/s41134-018-0066-3.

Noblit, G & Hare, R. (1988) *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*. London: Sage

Norton, C.L. (2011)) 'Developing empathy: a case study exploring transference and countertransference with adolescent females who self-injure' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 25(1), pp95-107,

Nulty, T.J. (2006) 'Davidsonian Triangulation and Heideggerian Comportment.' in, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 14(3) pp443-453,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550600858387>

O'Connor, L. (2019) *Emotions as Practice: An Ethnographic Study of How Children and Families Social Workers Construct and Use Their Emotions in Practice*. Unpublished thesis. University of Bristol. Available at: Explore Bristol Research, <http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk> (Accessed: 24th April 2023)

Ortega-galán, Á. M., Ortiz-amó, R. N. R., & Ruiz-fernández, M. D. (2021). 'Compassion and empathy in community social workers: A qualitative study in Spain.' In *Health and social care in the community* 29(5) pp1349-1358.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13175>

Osborn, M & Smith, J.A. (2008) 'The Fearfulness of Chronic Pain and the Centrality of the Therapeutic Relationship in Containing It: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(4),pp276-288, DOI:10.1080/14780880701826143

Osborn, M & Smith, J. A (2015) 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' in J.A. Smith in *Qualitative Psychology: a practical guide to research methods*. 3rd Edition. London: Sage.

Paley, J. (2017) *Phenomenology as Qualitative Research: a critical analysis of meaning attribution*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Palmer, S., Maiter, S., & Manji, S. (2006). 'Effective intervention in child protective services: Learning from parents.' in *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(7), pp812–824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2005.08.010>

Patton, W.Q. (2015) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Payne, M. (2011) *Humanistic Social Work -Core Principles in Practice*. London: Lyceum Press.

- Payne, M. (2020) *Modern social work theory* 5th Edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press.
- Perlman, H. H (1957). *Social Casework: a problem-solving approach*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Perlman, H. H. (1979). *Relationship -the Heart of Helping people*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Pernecky, T. (2016). *Epistemology and metaphysics for qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Pfeifer, J. H. and Dapretto, M. (2011) 'Mirror, mirror in my mind' in J. Decety and W. Ickes (2011) *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Pinkney, S. (2011) 'Participation and emotions: Troubling encounters between children and social welfare professionals.' in *Children and Society*. 25(1), pp37–46. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00261. x.
- Platt, D. (2008) 'Care or control? The effects of Investigations and initial Assessments on the social worker– Parent relationship' *Journal of Social Work Practice*. 22 (3) pp. 301–315. DOI: 10.1080/02650530802396643.
- Preston, S.D. & de Waal, F.B.M. (2002) 'Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases.' in *The Behavioral and brain sciences*. 25(1), pp1–20; discussion 20-71. Available from: doi:10.1017/S0140525X02000018.
- Polychroniou, P. V. (2009) 'Relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership of supervisors: The impact on team effectiveness.' in *Team Performance Management*. 15 (7), pp343–356. Available from: doi:10.1108/13527590911002122.
- Pringle, J. et al. (2011) Interpretative phenomenological analysis: a discussion and critique.' in *Nurse researcher*. 18(3), pp20–24. Available from: doi:10.7748/nr2011.04.18.3.20.c8459.
- Prosser, J. & Loxley, A. (2007) 'Enhancing the contribution of visual methods to inclusive education.' In *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* • V 7(1) pp55–68. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1471-3802.2007.00081. x.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2019) *QAA Subject Benchmark for Social Work*. 4th Edition. Available at https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-social-work.pdf?%20sfvrsn=5c35c881_6 (Accessed 6th November, 2023)
- Raatikainen, E., Rauhala, L.A. & Mäenpää, S. (2022) 'An educational intervention focused on teaching Qualified Empathy to social work students in Finland. 'in *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*. 14 (1), pp409–423. Available from: doi:10.1108/JARHE-11-2020-0404.

- Raines, J.C. (1990) 'Empathy in clinical social work.' In *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 18 (1), pp57–72. Available from: doi:10.1007/BF00759070.
- Rambaree, K. et al. (2023) Enhancing Cultural Empathy in International Social Work Education through Virtual Reality.' In *Education Sciences*. 13 (5), pp1-19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13050507>
- Rauvola, R.S., Vega, D.M. Lavigne, K.N. (2019) 'Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Vicarious Traumatization: a Qualitative Review and Research Agenda' in '*Occupational Health Science*' vol. 3. pp297–336
- Reavey, P. (ed) (2011) *Visual methods in psychology: using and interpreting images in qualitative research*. Hove: Routledge Psychology Press.
- Reimer, E. C. (2013). 'Relationship-based Practice with Families Where Child Neglect is an Issue: Putting Relationship Development under the Microscope.' in *Australian Social Work*, 66(3), pp455–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2013.814694>
- Reith-Hall, E., & Montgomery, P. (2023). 'Communication skills training for improving the communicative abilities of student social workers: A systematic review.' In *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 19(1) <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1309>
- Ricoeur, P. (1970) *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Cited in J.A. Smith (2004) 'Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology,' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), pp39-54.
- Richards, S., Ruch, G. & Trevithick, P. (2005) 'Communication skills training for practice: The ethical dilemma for social work education.' in *Social Work Education*. 24 (4), pp409–422. Available from: doi:10.1080/02615470500096928.
- Roberts, E, Elmer, S. Cable, E., Silvestre Gerardou, F. (2017) 'Conference paper -Sand play for problem solving' in *Playful Learning Conference - Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom. 12.07.2017-.14.07.2017*. Available at: <https://research.leedstrinity.ac.uk/en/publications/sand-play-for-problem-solving> . (Accessed 14th August 2022).
- Rocha, J., & Carvalho, I. P. (2019). 'The Influence of Professionals' Empathy on Parents' Anxiety in Cases of Juvenile Criminology' in *Social Work (United States)*, 64(3), pp242–252. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swz012>
- Rogers, C. R. (1951) *Client-Centred Therapy*. London: Constable & Company
- Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change in *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21(2), pp 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045357>
- Rogers, C.R. (1959) 'A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centred framework' in S. Koch (1959) '*Psychology: A Study of a Science. Study 1, Volume 3: Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*'. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp184-256

- Rogers, C.R. (1980) *A Way of Being*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company
- Rogers, M., Whitaker, D., Edmondson, D., & Peach, D. (2017) *Developing skills for social work practice*. 1st Edition. London: Sage.
- Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rose, G (2016) *Visual Methodologies*. 4th Edition London: Sage.
- Rose, S., & Palattiyil, G. (2020). 'Surviving or thriving? Enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in their organisational settings.' in *Journal of Social Work*, 20(1), pp23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017318793614>
- Ross, L. E. (2017). 'An Account From the Inside: Examining the Emotional Impact of Qualitative Research Through the Lens of " Insider " Research' in *Qualitative Psychology* . 4(3), pp326–337. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000064>
- Ruch, G. et al. (2020) 'From communication to co-operation: Reconceptualizing social workers' engagement with children.' in *Child and Family Social Work*. 25 (2), pp430–438. Available from: doi:10.1111/cfs.12699.
- Ruch, G. (2014) 'Helping children is a human process: Researching the challenges social workers face in communicating with children. 'in *British Journal of Social Work*. 44 (8), pp2145–2162. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct045.
- Ruch, G. (2007a) 'Reflective practice in contemporary child-care social work: The role of containment' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 37 (4), pp659–680. Available from: doi:10.1093/bisw/bch277.
- Ruch, G. (2007b) 'Thoughtful' practice: Childcare social work and the role of case discussion. 'in *Child and Family Social Work*. 12 (4), pp370–379. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00466.x.
- Ruch, G. (2012) 'Where Have All the Feelings Gone? Developing Reflective and Relationship-Based management in child-care social work' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 42, 1315–1332. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr134 .
- Ruch, G. Turney, D, Ward A.(eds) (2018) *Relationship based practice: getting to the heart of practice*. 2nd Edition. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Ruch, G., Winter, K., Morrison, F., Hadfield, M., Hallett, S., & Cree, V. (2020). 'From communication to co-operation: Reconceptualizing social workers' engagement with children.' in *Child and Family Social Work*, 25(2), pp 430–438. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12699>
- Rushton, A. & Nathan, J. (1996) 'The supervision of child protection work.' in *British Journal of Social Work*. 26 (3), pp357–374. Available from: doi: 10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011100.
- Russell, A.C. & Diaz, N. D. (2011) 'Photography in social work research: using visual image to humanize findings' in *Qualitative Social Work* 12(4) pp433-453. DOI: 10.1177/1473325011431859

Sadri, G., Weber, T.J. & Gentry, W.A. (2011) 'Empathic emotion and leadership performance: An empirical analysis across 38 countries.' in *Leadership Quarterly*. 22 (5), pp 818–830. Available from: doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.07.005.

Sandelowski, M. (1993). 'Rigor-or-Rigor-Mortis? The problem of rigor in qualitative research revisited' in *Advances in Nursing Science*, 16(2), pp1–8.

Sangganjanavanich, V.F. & Magnuson, S. (2011) 'Effective Techniques Using Sand Trays and Miniature Figures to Facilitate Career Decision Making' in *Career Development Quarterly*. Volume 59 (March), pp 264–274.

Savin-Badin, M. & Wimpenny, K. (2014) *A practical guide to arts-related research*: Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Schwandt, T. A. (2003). 'Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism' in N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Schwandt, T. A., Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2007). 'Judging interpretations: But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation.' In *New Directions for Evaluation*, (114), pp11–25. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.223>

Seden, J (2005) *Counselling skills in social work practice*. 2nd Edition. Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.

Segal, E.A., Wagaman, M.A. & Gerdes, K.E. (2012) 'Developing the Social Empathy Index: An Exploratory Factor Analysis.' In *Advances in Social Work* 13 (3), 541–560.

Senreich, E., Straussner, S.L.A. & Steen, J. (2018) 'The Work Experiences of Social Workers: Factors Impacting Compassion Satisfaction and Workplace Stress.' In *Journal of Social Service Research*. Advanced online access 0 (0), pp1–17. Available from: doi:10.1080/01488376.2018.1528491.

Sharpe, D., & Faye, C. (2009). 'A Second Look at Debriefing Practices: Madness in Our Method?' in *Ethics & Behavior*, 19(5), pp 432–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508420903035455>

Sharpe, M. (2018). 'On Reading Heidegger — After the “Heidegger Case” ?' in *Critical Horizons*, 19(4),pp334–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2018.1520514>

Shlein, J. (1997) 'Empathy in psychotherapy' in A.C. Bohart & L. Greenberg (1997). *Empathy Reconsidered*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Shulman, L. (2015) *The Skills of Helping Individuals, Families, Groups, and Communities*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Siegel, D. J. (2020) *The Developing mind: how relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. 3rd Edition. New York: Guildford Press.

Singer, J. Cummings, C, Moody, S.A. & Benuto, L.T. (2020) 'Reducing burnout, vicarious trauma, and secondary traumatic stress through investigating purpose in life in social workers' in *Journal of Social Work*, 20(5) pp620-638

Singer, T. & Klimecki, O.M. (2014) 'Empathy and compassion.' in *Current Biology*. [24(18), pp 875–R878. Available from: doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054.

Singer, T. & Lamm, C. (2009) 'The social neuroscience of empathy.' In *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. Volume 1156, pp81–96. Available from: doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04418. x.

Simpson, J.E., Haider, S. & Giddings, L. (2023) 'Development of a virtual reality simulation for practitioners' in *Social Work Education*. Advanced online access 0(0) pp1-15. Available from: doi:10.1080/02615479.2023.2258136.

Sloane, S. (2016). 'The inspired maverick: Dirty Harry lives on the edge.' in *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 5(1), pp72–86.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-01-2016-0003>

Smeeton, J. & O'Connor, P. (2020) 'Embodied Social Work Practice Within Risk Society' in *Journal of Social Work*. 20 (5), pp 673–691. Available from: doi:10.1177/1468017319860800.

Smythe, E. & Spence, D. (2020) 'Reading Heidegger.' in *Nursing Philosophy*. 21 (2), pp 1–9. Available from: doi:10.1111/nup.12271.

Social Work England (2019) *SWE Professional Standards*. Available at <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/> (Accessed 7th November 2023)

Social Work Task Force (2009) *Building a Safe confident workforce*. London: DCSF publications. Available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/10625/1/01114-2009DOM-EN.pdf> (Accessed 8th November 2023)

Social Work Reform Board (2010) London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-a-safe-and-confident-future-progress-report-from-the-social-work-reform-board> *accessed 8th November, 2023)

Spalding, S. (2017). 'Cognitive Empathy' in H. Maibom, (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Spencer, S (2011) *Visual research methods in the social sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Smeeton' J. & O'Connor, P. (2020) 'Embodied Social Work Practice Within Risk Society' in *Journal of Social Work*. 20 (5), pp673–691. Available from: doi:10.1177/1468017319860800.

Smith, J.A. Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. 1st Edition. London: Sage.

- Smith, J.A. Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2022) *Interpretative Phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A. (2004) 'Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology,' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), pp39-54.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088704qp004oa>
- Smith, J. & Osborn, M. (2008) 'Interpretative phenomenological Analysis' in J.A. Smith (2008) *Qualitative psychology: a practical guide to research methods*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.
- Smith, J. A. & Nizza, I. E. (2022) *Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Smythe, E., & Spence, D. (2020). 'Reading Heidegger.' in *Nursing Philosophy*, 21(2), pp1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12271>
- Spence, D.G. (2017) 'Supervising for Robust Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Reflexive Engagement Within Horizons of Understanding.' in *Qualitative Health Research*. 27 (6), pp 836–842. Available from: doi:10.1177/1049732316637824
- Spinelli, E. (2005). *The Interpreted World: An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.
- Stabler, L., Wilkins, D., & Carro, H. (2020). 'What do children think about their social worker? A Q - method study of children' s services.' In *Child and Family Social work* Volume 25, pp118–126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12665>
- Stanley, S. & Bhuvaneshwari, M.G. (2018) 'Personality Attributes of Social Work Students: An Assessment of Empathy, Emotional Intelligence and Resilience' in . *Social work Chronicle, India*. 7(1), pp85–110.
- Staples, E.M., Watson, D & Riches, K (2024) 'Being, becoming, belonging: Negotiating temporality, memory and identity in life story conversations with care-experienced children and young people' in *Qualitative Social Work*, 2024, 23(1) pp41–57.
- Stark, M.D., Frels, R.K. & Garza, Y. (2017) 'The Use of Sand tray in Solution-Focused Supervision' in *The Clinical Supervisor* 30(2) pp277-290. Available from: doi:10.1080/07325223.2011.621869.
- Stein, E (1989) *The collected works of Edith Stein, Volume 3: On the problem of Empathy*. 3rd Edition. Washington DC: ICS Publications
- Stickle, M. (2016) 'The expression of compassion in social work practice.' In *Journal of Religion and spirituality in social work*.35(1-2) pp120-131. Available from: doi:10.1080/15426432.2015.1067587.
- Stietz, J., Jauk, E., Krach, S., and Kanske, P. (2019) 'Dissociating Empathy from Perspective-Taking: Evidence From Intra- and Inter-Individual Differences Research' in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2019) Volume 10:126

- Stueber, K.R. (2010) *Rediscovering Empathy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Svenaesus, F. (2016) 'The phenomenology of empathy: a Steinian emotional account.' In *Phenomenological cognitive science*. Volume 15, pp227–245. Available from: doi:10.1007/s11097-014-9411-x.
- Taylor, S.J. (2015). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Taylor, W.C. & LaBarre, P. (2006) *Mavericks at work: why the most original minds in business win*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Thomas, J. (2013) 'Association of Personal Distress with Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction Among Clinical Social Workers' in *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39(3) pp365-379, DOI: 10.1080/01488376.2013.771596
- Thomas, J. & Harden, A. (2008) 'Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews.' In *BMC Medical Research Methodology*. 8 (1), pp4257-271. Available from: doi:10.1186/1471-2288-8-45.
- Thomas, J. & Otis, M. (2010) 'Intrapsychic Correlates of Professional Quality of Life: Mindfulness, Empathy, and Emotional Separation' in *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*. 1(2), pp83–98. Available from: doi:10.5243/jsswr.2010.7.
- Teater, B. (2010) *An introduction to applying social work theories and methods*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill
- Tempel, L.R. (2007) 'Pathways to the clinician's experience of empathy in engaging single mothers at risk for physical abuse of their children.' in *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 35(4), pp257–265. Available from: doi:10.1007/s10615-007-0106-4.
- Theodosius, C. (2006) 'Recovering emotion from emotion management.' in *Sociology*. 40(5). pp893–910. Available from: doi:10.1177/0038038506067512.
- Thomson, I. (2007). 'Heidegger and National Socialism' in H.L. Dreyfus & M.A. Wrathall (2007) *A companion to Heidegger*. pp32–48. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons
- Thompson, N. (2020) *Anti-Discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice: 7th Edition*. London: Red Globe Press.
- Thrana, H. M., & Fauske, H. (2014). 'The emotional encounter with child welfare services: the importance of incorporating the emotional perspective in parents' encounters with child welfare workers.' In *European Journal of Social Work*, 17(2), pp221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2013.798628>
- Todres, L. (2007) *Embodied enquiry - phenomenological touchstones for research, psychotherapy, and spirituality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Tracy, S.J. (2019) *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. 2nd Edition. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell
- Trevithick, P (2012) *Social Work Skills and knowledge: a practice handbook*. 3rd Edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.
- Truax, C. B., Carkhuff, R. R., & Kodman, F. (1965). 'Relationships between therapist-offered conditions and patient change in group psychotherapy.' in *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 21(3), pp327–329. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679\(196507\)21:3<327::AID-JCLP2270210341>3.0.CO;2-R](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679(196507)21:3<327::AID-JCLP2270210341>3.0.CO;2-R)
- Tsang, N.M. (2017) 'Otherness and empathy—implications of Lévinas ethics for social work education'. *Social Work Education*. 36 (3), pp312–322. Available from: doi:10.1080/02615479.2016.1238063.
- Tuffour, I. (2017) 'A Critical Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach' in *Journal of Healthcare Communications* 2(4:52) pp1-5
- Turner, B. A. (2004) *The Handbook of Sand-play Therapy* Chicago: Independent Publishers Group.
- Turner, D., Elizabeth, J., Callaghan, M., & Gordon-Finlayson, A. (2016). 'Being the Other: A Creative exploration of the experience of being the Other.' In *British Journal of Play Therapy 2016 Volume 12*. pp22-34. Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315686028>
- Turner, D. (2021) *Social work and Covid 19: lessons for education & practice*. St. Albans: Critical Publishing.
- University of Worcester (2022) *Research Ethics Policy*. Available at <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/documents/Ethics-Policy-version-5.0-Oct-2018.pdf> (Accessed 8th August 2022).
- van Leeuwen, T. & Jewitt, C. (2001) *Handbook of visual analysis*. London: Sage.
- Van Manen, M. (2015) *Researching Lived Experience*. 2nd edition. Abingdon: Routledge
- van Rhyn, B., Barwick, A. & Donnelly, M. (2021) 'Embodiment as an Instrument for Empathy in Social Work' in *Australian Social Work*. 74(2), pp146–158. Available from: doi:10.1080/0312407X.2020.1839112.
- Vickary, S., Young, A. & Hicks, S. (2017) 'A reflective journal as learning process and contribution to quality and validity in interpretative phenomenological analysis.; in *Qualitative Social Work*. 16 (4), pp550–565. Available from: doi:10.1177/1473325016635244.
- Walter, O. & Shenaar-Golan, V. (2018) 'Sensory language (SDM) to foster empathy in social work students' in *Social Work Education*. 37(5) pp633-651.

- Warner, J. (2021) 'Politics as Social Work: A Qualitative Study of Emplaced Empathy and Risk Work by British Members of Parliament.' In *British Journal of Social Work*. 51 (8), pp 3248–3264. Available from: doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcaa167.
- Watson, T., Hodgson, D., Watts, L., & Waters, R. (2022). 'Historiography of empathy: Contributions to social work research and practice.' in *Qualitative Social Work*. 21(4) pp714-730 <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211033012>
- Watson, D. L., Staples, E., & Riches, K. (2021). 'We need to understand what's going on because it's our life': Using sandboxing to understand children and young people's everyday conversations about care. In *Children & Society*, 35(5), 663-679.<https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12432>
- West, M.A. (2021). *Compassionate Leadership: sustaining wisdom, humanity and presence in health and social care*. www.swirlingleafpress.com: The Swirling Leaf Press
- Willig, C. (2001) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 1st Edition. Abingdon: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.
- Wilkins, D., Forrester, D., & Grant, L. (2017). 'What happens in child and family social work supervision?' in *Child & Family Social Work*, volume 22, pp942-951. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12314>
- Wilkins, D. (2017) Does reflective supervision have a future in English local authority child and family social work? In *Journal of Children's Services*. 12 (2–3), pp.164–173. Available from: doi:10.1108/JCS-06-2017-0024.
- Wilkins, D., & Whittaker, C. (2018). 'Doing child-protection social work with parents: What are the barriers in practice?' in *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(7), 2003–2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx139>
- Wilson, K., Ruch, G., Lymbery, M. & Cooper, A. (2011) *Social Work: An introduction to Contemporary Practice*. 2nd Edition. Harlow: Longman.
- Winter, K., Morrison, F., Cree, V., Ruch, G., Hadfield, M., & Hallett, S. (2019). 'Emotional Labour in Social Workers' Encounters with Children and Their Families.' In *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(1) pp217-233 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy016>
- Wisp, L. (1986). 'The Distinction Between Sympathy and Empathy. To Call Forth a Concept, A Word Is Needed.' in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(2), pp314–321. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.50.2.314>
- Woodcock Ross, J. (2011) *Specialist communication skills for social workers: focusing on service users' needs*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Wrathall, M. (2005) *How to read Heidegger*. London: Grant Books.
- Yardley, L. (2000) 'Dilemmas in qualitative health research' in *Psychology and Health*, 15(2), pp215-228, DOI: 10.1080/08870440008400302

Yin, R. Y. (2016) *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York: Guildford Press.

Young, R. & Collins, A. (2004) 'Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field' in *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, (2004), 64(3), pp. 373-388

Zahavi, D. (2010) 'Empathy, Embodiment, and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lip. to Schutz' in *Inquiry*, 53(3), pp285-306, [Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201741003784663>]

Appendices

Appendix 1: Thematic synthesis search results table	Page 381
Appendix 2: Thematic synthesis article list	Page 385
Appendix 3: Example of completed CASP form	page 387
Appendix 4: Briefing document for gatekeepers	Page 389
Appendix 5: Gatekeeper consent emails	Page 391
Appendix 6: Participant information leaflet	Page 395
Appendix 7: Participant consent form	Page 398
Appendix 8: Interview schedule / amended for Covid	Page 400
Appendix 9: List of objects for image making task	Page 406
Appendix 10: exemplar of transcript 1 analysis	Page 407
Appendix 11: exemplar of visual analysis template	Page 409
Appendix 12 exemplar table of PETs and GETs.	Page 412
Appendix 13: Ethical approval for 3 studies	Page 416
Appendix 14: Participant De-briefing document	Page 422
Appendix 15: Abstracts from conference presentations	Page 424

Appendix 1: Thematic synthesis literature search – results table

Date	database	Search term	Returned articles	Identified for review	Total duplicates	Total remaining for review
04.01.22	CINAHL	Empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services January 2000 – December 2021	407 hits	67		
04.01.22	APA PsycINFO	empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services January 2000- December 2021 +peer reviewed	972	133		
04.01.22	Academic Search Complete	Empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services	1, 028 hits	95		
05.01.22`	APA PsycINFO	Empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services and children	425 hits	40		
05.01.22	Academic Search Complete	Empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services and children	280 hits	31		
05.01.22	CINAHL	Empathy and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services and children	92 hits	23		

05.01.22	CINAHL	Emotion and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services	1114 hits	82		
05.01.22	Academic search complete	Emotion and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services +subject terms filter	471	52		
07.01.22	Social Care Online	Empathy and social work	1036	98		
08.01.22	Academic Search Complete	empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services + abstract filters	1873	124		
08.01.22	CINAHL	empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services + abstract filters	1203	78		
08.01.22	PsycINFO 4	empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring and social work or social workers or social work practice or social services + abstract filters Plus, date 2000-2021	1886	163		

16.01.22	PsycINFO	PICO empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring + social work or social workers or social work practice or social services +experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views or feelings +qualitative research or qualitative study or qualitative methods or interview +children or adolescents or youth or child or teenager	418	21		
16.01.22	Academic Source Complete	PICO empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring + social work or social workers or social work practice or social services +experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views or feelings + +children or adolescents or youth or child or teenager	889	46		
16.01.22	CINAHL	PICO empathy or compassion or sympathy or caring + social work or social workers or social work practice or social services +experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views	288	29		

		or feelings + +children or adolescents or youth or child or teenager				
Total articles at each stage			12,382 initial articles	1,072 identified as potentially relevant	653 duplicates removed	Total remaining – 420

Appendix 2: Thematic synthesis Final article list.

Number	Authors	Title	Journal	CASP appraisal rating
1	Wilkins, David; Whittaker, Charlotte	Doing Child-Protection Social Work with Parents: What Are the Barriers in Practice?	British Journal of Social Work, Oct2018; 48(7):	3 good
2	Rose, Sarah; Palattiyil, George	Surviving or thriving? Enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in their organisational settings.	Journal of Social Work, Jan2020; 20(1): 23-42.	3 good
3	Grootegoed, Ellen; Smith, Mark	The Emotional Labour of Austerity: How Social Workers Reflect and Work on Their Feelings towards Reducing Support to Needy Children and Families.	British Journal of Social Work, Oct2018; 48(7):	3 good
4	Lynch, Amy; Newlands, Fiona; Forrester, Donald	What does empathy sound like in social work communication? A mixed-methods study of empathy in child protection social work practice.	Child & Family Social Work, Feb2019; 24(1): 139-147.	4 very good
5	Stabler, Lorna; Wilkins, David; Carro, Hester	What do children think about their social worker? A Q-method study of children's services.	Child & Family Social Work, Feb2020; 25(1): 118-126.	3 good
6	Eriksson, Karl; Englander, Magnus	Empathy in Social Work.	Journal of Social Work Education, Oct-Dec2017; 53(4): 607-621.	3 good
7	Ortega-Galán, Ángela-Maria, Ruiz-Fernández, María-Dolores & Ortíz-Amo, Rocío.	Compassion and empathy in community social workers: A qualitative study in Spain.	Health Soc Care Community. August2020; 00:1-10	3 good
8	Ruch, Gillian	'Helping Children Is a Human Process': Researching the Challenges Social Workers Face in Communicating with Children.	British Journal of Social Work, Dec2014; 44(8): 2145-2162.	3 good
9	Forrester D; Kershaw S; Moss H; Hughes L	Communication skills in child protection: how do social workers talk to parents?	Child & Family Social Work, Feb2008; 13(1): 41-51.	4 Very good
10	Lynch R; Garrett PM	'More than Words': touch practices in child and family social work.	Child & Family Social Work, Nov2010; 15(4): 389-398.	2 satisfactory
11	Tempel, Lorraine R.	Pathways to the Clinician's Experience of Empathy in Engaging Single Mothers at Risk for Physical Abuse of their Children.	Clinical Social Work Journal. Dec2007, Vol. 35 Issue 4, p257-265.	3 good
12	Reimer, Elizabeth Claire.	Relationship-based Practice with Families Where Child Neglect is an Issue: Putting Relationship Development under the Microscope.	Australian Social Work. Sep2013, Vol. 66 Issue 3, p455-470.	4 Very good
13	Lohvansuu, Jenni; Emond, Ruth;	'Everyday' Scottish and Finnish child protection work in an age of austerity: A practitioner perspective.	Child & Family Social Work. 2020; 25:576-584	3 good
14	Rocha, Juliana; Palmares- Carvalho, Irene;	The influence of professionals' empathy on parents' anxiety in cases of juvenile criminology.	Social Work, Vol 64(3), Jul 2019 pp. 242-252.	3 good
15	Ahern, Elizabeth C.; Sadler, Leslie A.; Lamb, Michael E.; Gariglietti, Gianna M.	Practitioner Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation: Rapport Building with Young People.	Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, Jan2017; 26(1): 78-91.	3 good
16	Maiter S; Palmer S; Manji S	Strengthening social worker-client relationships in child protective services: addressing power imbalances and 'ruptured' relationships.	Qualitative Social Work, Jun2006; 5(2): 167-186.	2 satisfactory
17	Glumbíková, Kateřina; Mikulec, Marek	Reflexivity and strategies of emotions (re)construction in social work with families in the Czech Republic.	Journal of Social Work Practice, Sep2021; 35(3): 259-271.	2 satisfactory
18	Cook, Laura L.	The home visit in child protection social work: Emotion as	Child & Family Social Work, Feb2020; 25(1): 18-26.	4 very good

		resource and risk for professional judgement and practice.		
19	Moesby-Jensen, Cecilie K.; Nielsen, Helle Schjellerup	Emotional labor in social workers' practice.	European Journal of Social Work, Nov2015; 18(5): 690-702.	3 good
20	Messmer, Heinz	Doing emotion. Emotion management in German childcare planning conferences.	Journal of Social Work Practice, Dec2019; 33(4): 403-418.	2 satisfactory
21	Lavee, Einat; Strier, Roni	Social workers' emotional labour with families in poverty: Neoliberal fatigue?	Child & Family Social Work, Aug2018; 23(3): 504-512.	3 good
22	Ferguson, Harry; Disney, Tom; Warwick, Lisa; Leigh, Jadwiga; Cooner, Tarsem Singh; Beddoe, Liz	Hostile relationships in social work practice: anxiety, hate and conflict in long-term work with involuntary service users.	Journal of Social Work Practice, Mar2021; 35(1): 19-37.	3 good
23	Forsberg H; Vagli Å	The social construction of emotions in child protection case-talk.	Qualitative Social Work, Mar2006; 5(1): 9-31.	2 satisfactory
24	Winter, Karen; Morrison, Fiona; Cree, Vivienne; Ruch, Gillian; Hadfield, Mark; Hallett, Sophie	Emotional Labour in Social Workers' Encounters with Children and Their Families.	British Journal of Social Work Volume 49, Issue 1, 1 January 2019, Pages 217-233	3 good
25	Ruch, Gillian; Winter, Karen; Morrison, Fiona; Hadfield, Mark; Hallett, Sophie; Cree, Viv	From communication to co-operation: Reconceptualizing social workers' engagement with children.	Child & Family Social Work, May2020; 25(2): 430-438.	3 good
26	Pinkney, Sharon	Participation and Emotions: Troubling Encounters Between Children and Social Welfare Professionals.	Children & Society, Jan2011; 25(1): 37-46.	2 satisfactory
27	Thrana, Hilde Marie; Fauske, Halvor	The emotional encounter with child welfare services: the importance of incorporating the emotional perspective in parents' encounters with child welfare workers.	European Journal of Social Work, May2014; 17(2): 221-236.	2 satisfactory
28	Albaek, Ane, Ugland; Binder, Per-Einar; Milde, Anne Marita	Plunging Into a Dark Sea of Emotions: Professionals' Emotional Experiences Addressing Child Abuse in Interviews with Children.	Qualitative Health Research, Jul2020; 30(8): 1212-1224.	3 good
29	Engstrom, Sandra J	Interpersonal justice: the importance of relationships for child and family social workers.	Journal of Social Work Practice, Mar2019; 33(1): 41-53.	2 satisfactory
30	Leeson C	The emotional labour of caring about looked-after children.	Child & Family Social Work, Nov2010; 15(4): 483-491.	2 satisfactory
31	Palmer, S Maiter, S Manji s,	Effective intervention in child protective services: Learning from parents	Children and Youth Services Review 28 (2006) 812-824	2 Satisfactory

Appendix 3: CASP form – exemplar of completed form

CASP Checklist for Qualitative research – Simple version

(CASP Critical Appraisal Skills Programme)

Referencing: we recommend using the Harvard style citation, i.e.: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018). CASP (insert name of checklist i.e., Qualitative) Checklist. [online] Available at: URL. Accessed: Date Accessed 07.05.19

Title of Article:		Empathy in social work		Authors: Eriksson, Karl; Englander, Magnus	2017
Question	yes	Can't tell	no	Comments	
Section 1		Are the results of the study valid?			
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	x			The purpose of the present study was to take a critical, phenomenological stance toward Gerdes and Segal's adoption of simulation theory as a theoretical foundation of empathy in the field of social work. Explore through research what experience of empathy was in relation to forced migration	
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	x			QL interviews with 5 workers about forced migration practice	
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	x			Critical phenomenological design using Davidson's 4 step design for descriptive phenomenology – epoche and reduction	
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	x			Maximum variation sampling in keeping with trying to devise structure of empathy through reduction	
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	x			Semi structured interview – subjects asked I advance to choose examples where empathy was skey	
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?		x		No discussion	
Section B		7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?			
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?		x		No discussion but PhD student so assume has been	
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	x			Clear discussion of how analysis was done using Davidson's 4 step model and explanation given	
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?				Yes, essential structure presented - sense of agency and interest in the other, a presence	

				<p>to the other as other, careful attendance, being present in an embodied way and listening.</p> <p>3 core themes :</p> <p>Empathic presence: sympathising as salient act , motivated to listen, to focus on the other, to convey presence by attending attendance to the other is the universal in the data.</p> <p>Professional stance: become a professional role, striving for objectivity, not taking things personally, limiting connection, focused on interests of the other.</p> <p>Recognition of the other: emphasis on shared communal human experiences and feelings, whilst recognising limits of emotional understanding</p>	
Section C		Will the results help locally?			
10. How valuable is the research?					
Overall rating	Very good / 4		Good /3	Satisfactory /2	Poor /1

Appendix 4: Gatekeeper research brief – exemplar for xxx

Briefing – Social work Research proposal for xxxxxx (name removed) County Council.

Title: Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Background: This briefing outlines a proposed research project by Peter Ayling, Senior Lecturer in Social work at the University of Worcester. The project constitutes the core of Peter’s Doctoral studies.

Practice Context: The study seeks to contribute to the ongoing professional discourse around emotional resilience and relationship-based practice, by focusing on the workers’ use of empathy within their practice with children.

Study Aims:

- To explore the emotional impact of social workers’ interaction with children and young people and examine their use of empathy as a specific skill within their practice.
- To compare the experiences of newly qualified and advanced practitioners to explore how approaches to practice change over time.
- To consider the role of supervision in supporting workers’ emotional wellbeing and practice with children
- To design, deliver and evaluate a training workshop for newly qualified social workers to support their emotional resilience and relationship-based practice with children.

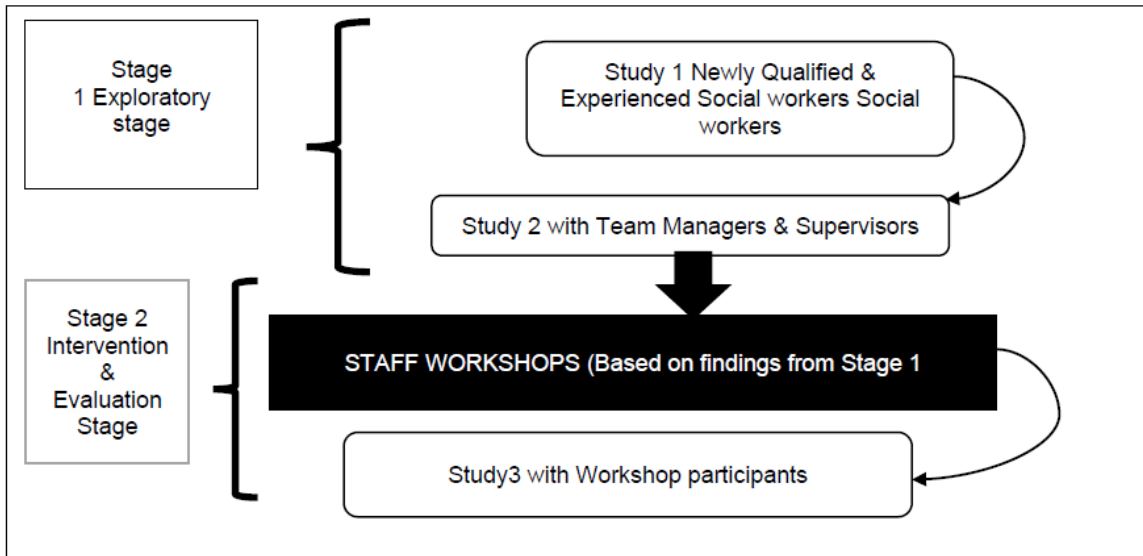
Proposed Studies:

Study 1: – semi structured 60-minute interviews with 5 workers completing ASYE and 5 social workers with 3 years + practice experience. Proposed Timescale – January – June 2018.

Study 2: - Interviews with 8 Supervisors/ principal social workers & team managers. Proposed timescale – September –December 2018.

Study 3: – Delivery of ASYE workshops on Emotional resilience and relationship-based practice with children, followed by Evaluation of workshops. Proposed Timescale – January – June 2019

Fig. 1 Diagrammatic Representation of the Study:



Benefits of Proposal:

- The study aims to support emotinal wellbeing and enhance resilience of frontline staff and contribute to practice improvement.
- Study will seek to highlight best practice amongst current social work practitioners and supervisors, as well as identify principles for practice improvement.
- Time commitment for participatns is minimal -- Participants in study 1 and 2 will only need to attend for one 60 minute interview.
- The study has an incremental design in which each stage will inform the design and content of the next stage.
- Results from each Study will be made available to the participating authority at completion of each stage, to support practice improvement.
- Proposal includes provision of direct staff training for local authority ASYE participants to underpin best practice principles and supprot emotional wellbeing for worker longevity.
- The study could be used to contribute to staff development and service enhancement generally.

Ethics and Supervision: The proposal is subject to approval by the University of Worcester Insitute of Health Ethics Committee. Each study will recieve Ethical approval in advance. Confirmation of approval by the Ethics committee can be provided for the authority. The researcher is supervised by Dr Helen Scott and Dr Derek Farrell, experienced Clinical psychologists and researchers within the University.

About Peter Ayling: Peter is an experienced Children and Families Social worker, who has worked within Safeguarding, family support, mental health and fostering and adoption settings. He is also a social work academic and has previously undertaken reseach into newly qualified social worker’s experience of transition to practice. Peter would be pleased to meet with local authority representatives to discuss the project further.

Date; 25.10.2017

Appendix 5: Gatekeeper consent e mails

Consent from XXXXX (name removed) County Council: 13.12.2017.

E mail trail from XXX Learning & Development Manager

Wed 13/12/2017 10:14

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxx @ xxxxxx. Gov.uk (name and e mail removed)

RE: re SW Research project University of Worcester

Hi Pete,

I am pleased XXX will be involved with this and wish you well with it.

I would suggest you contact XXXX and XXXXX to take this forward once approved by Ethics committee.

Best wishes

(name removed)

[e mail trail removed]

Gatekeeper Consent from xxxxxxxx Council 14.11.2017

E mail trail from xxxxxx (Council) Practice Learning Facilitator:

From: xxxxxx (name and e mail removed)
Sent: 14 November 2017 09:28
To: Peter Ayling <p.ayling@worc.ac.uk>
Subject: Ph. D research response

Hi Peter,

I'm really pleased to hear that Children's xxxxxxxx would like to contribute to your Ph.D research - see the email below from xxxxxxxx (name removed), Head of Service for Looked After Children. Xxxxxxxx (name removed) is Head of Fieldwork.

What are the next steps?

Kind regards,

(name removed)

Xxxxxx (name removed)

Practice Learning Facilitator

From: xxxxxxxx (name removed)
Sent: 13 November 2017 12:43
To: xxxxxx (name removed)
Subject: RE: Ph. D research offer

Hi xxxxxx (name removed)

I've spoken with xxxxx and we've both consulted with our teams and agreed that we would like to take part in this. The research looks interesting and could be helpful to us.

Thanks

(name removed)

Xxxxxxxx (name removed)

Head of Looked After Children

Email xxxxxxxx (e mail removed)

[e mail trail removed]

Appendix 6: Participant Information sheet – example from study 1.



Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: *Social workers' empathy and emotional responses to children.*

Invitation

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Your employer has given us permission to approach you about this project, which focuses on the emotional responses of social workers towards children in their care. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why we are doing the research and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and ask the researcher if you have any questions. Talk to others about the study if you wish. You will have at least 7 days to decide if you want to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

- This study aims to understand the emotions that social workers experience within their work.
- In particular, it seeks to explore the emotional responses of social workers to their interaction with children in their care and to explore how workers' emotions may affect the decisions that they make.
- It will also try to consider how social workers understand and respond to the emotions of children.
- Finally, it will seek to understand what affects social workers' ability to manage and respond to children's emotions within their work.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have received this invitation because you are a social worker who works with children. We are hoping to recruit 10 participants for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study or not. . In addition, to ensure your wellbeing you should not volunteer to participate if you are currently receiving support from occupational health services. Please take your time to decide. We will contact you again after 7 days to ask you for your decision. You can decide not to take part or to withdraw from the study for up to 14 days after participating in the interview. If you decide you

wish to have your data withdrawn, please contact the researcher with your participant number and we will remove your interview data from the study. If you do decide to take part, we will ask you to sign a consent form.

What will happen to me if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part:

- You will be invited to participate in an interview.
- During the interview, we will discuss your experiences of working with children generally and have a case discussion about your work with one specific child of your choice. The interview will focus on the emotions that you experience in relation to your work.
- During the interview, you will also be invited to use some symbols and materials to help you to explore your experiences and emotions about your work with children. This use of visual research methods is intended to help participants to reflect further on their experiences. .
- The interview will take place in a private, mutually agreed location at a time convenient for you.
- The interview will take up to 60 minutes.
- The interview will be audio-recorded using digital recording equipment. We will photograph any images produced during the discussion using a digital camera.

Are there any disadvantages/ risks to taking part?

- There are no significant risks associated with the research.
- The interview may involve reflecting on some emotionally challenging experiences associated with your work – these might include both positive and more difficult feelings.
- If you experience emotional distress during or following participation in the research, the researcher will discuss this with you and seek to offer appropriate advice and support in the first instance.
- Following the interview, you will be able to make contact with the researcher to discuss any ongoing needs arising from the interview. The researcher will discuss these needs with the Agency learning & Development Worker. If appropriate, the researcher may also signpost you to an alternative support service, if you agree together that this would be beneficial.

Will the information I give stay confidential?

Everything you say is confidential unless you say something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm. The interviewer would discuss this with you before telling anyone else. The information you give, and any images produced during the interview will inform the final research report, but it will not be possible to identify you from our research report or any other dissemination activities. Any personal identifiable information (e.g., name

and contact details) will be securely and separately stored for up to 14 days after the research interview and it will then be disposed of securely. The research data (e.g., interview transcripts and images) will be securely stored in a password protected data repository throughout the life of the research project and for a minimum of 10 years after the project, and then destroyed. If you do not wish it to be kept after completion of the study, you can indicate this on the Project consent form.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

This research forms part of a Doctoral study at the University of Worcester. The findings of this study, including extracts from interview transcripts and images will form part of the researcher's dissertation and may be published in academic journals or at academic conferences. The researcher will provide general feedback about the research findings to participating agencies. The findings will also be used to develop some training materials for newly qualified social workers.

If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings, please contact the researcher who will be happy to share them with you.

Who is organising the research?

This research has been approved by the Health and Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of Worcester.

What happens next?

Please keep this information sheet. If you would be interested in taking part in the study, please contact the researcher, Peter Ayling, using the details below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study please contact one of the research team using the details below.

PhD researcher: Peter Ayling p.ayling@worc.ac.uk
--

Supervisor:
Dr Helen Scott
h.scott@worc.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact Dr John-Paul Wilson at the University of Worcester, using the following details:

John-Paul Wilson
Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research
Graduate Research School
University of Worcester, Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ. Tel: 01905 542196, j.wilson@worc.ac.uk

Appendix 7: Participant Consent form – exemplar from study 1

Participant Consent Form



Title of project: *Social workers' empathy and emotional responses to children*

Participant Identification Number for this study:

Name of Researcher: Peter Ayling

Please initial

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I confirm that I have had sufficient time to consider whether I want to take part in this study.

I understand that if the researcher has concerns about the safety or wellbeing of myself or anyone else during the interview, they will discuss this with me and agree a course of action.

I understand that I do not have to take part in this research and I can change my mind at any time. I understand that I may withdraw my data by contacting the researcher with my participant number within 14 days.

I understand that my interview data will be securely stored for the life of the project. My personal information will be kept until 14 days after the interview and will then be destroyed.

Following the completion of the project, I agree that my interview data can be stored for a further period of 10 years.

I agree to the digital recording of the research interview and images.

I agree to my interview data, including anonymised quotations and images, being used in publications, reports, and conferences.

I confirm that I am aware that support services are available if I need them.

I know who to contact if I have any concerns about this research.

I agree to take part in the study.

Name of participant _____

Date _____ Signature _____

Name of person taking consent _____

Date _____ Signature _____

Appendix 8: Interview schedule protocols

Appendix 8A

Study 1 & 2: Schedule agreed by Ethics committee January 2018

Research Questions:

Introduction:

(Rapport) I am Peter Ayling, a social work lecturer and researcher from the University of Worcester. I am carrying out some research as part of my PhD studies.

(purpose) I am interested in the emotions social workers experience when working with children, and also your responses to children's emotions. I hope to talk about your experiences working with children generally and also to think in more depth about your work with one or two particular children. During the interview, with your agreement, I will ask you to make an image about your work with children, using the objects provided,

(Timescale) The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. Does that sound Ok?

(Ethics) Have you had the opportunity to read the information sheet about the study and to sign the consent form? Please note that you are not obliged to participate in the study and can withdraw from the interview at any time if you wish to do so. You can also decide not to answer any specific questions if you so prefer. If you wish to withdraw your data after the interview, you can contact me on the e mail address provided up until (ENTER DATE). I will be audio recording the interview and transcribing the results word for word. I will also take a photograph of the image you create for the research.

(Wellbeing) The interview will focus on your experiences of working with children as a social worker, and we will talk particularly about emotions you may have experienced within your work and what helps you manage these emotions. This might include a range of both positive and challenging experiences. It is important to state that you are able to decide what you are willing to talk about and do not need to talk about anything that might cause you distress. You are also able to stop the interview, or withdraw from the interview at any point, if you wish (amendment 1)

(Confidentiality). After the interview has been transcribed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The transcripts will be anonymised and given a number, which means that I will not be able to identify you from the transcript. The photo will be given the same number. Please be aware that if you share any information that causes me to have concern for a child's wellbeing or safety, I may need to share this with the appropriate authorities, but I will discuss this with your directly. Do you have any questions? Are you happy to start?

(Demographic questions) A few context questions to begin with:

- How would you describe your age and identity? How long have you been working as a social worker?
- What is your job title and what sort of practice context do you work in?

(Orienting questions on emotion at work) How would you describe your feelings about your work generally?

- What are the most positive aspects of your work with children?
- What are the more challenging aspects?
- What role, if any, does emotion play in your day-to-day work?
 - Can you give me some examples of situations that have provoked specific emotions for you?
 - What do you understand is your role in relation to responding to children's emotions in your work?
 - How do you approach this task?

(Child specific questions) Can you think of times when your work with a specific child has had an emotional impact on you?

- Can you explain your emotional responses during these events? Afterwards? What helps during such experiences?

(Image making activity)

- I would now like to ask you to think about one child in particular from your caseload – current or past – that you feel you know well.
- Using the objects and symbols on this table, please create an image in the tray that conveys something about this child, their situation and how you think they felt while you were working with them. Can you also include objects to represent your own role with the child, the work you did with them and how you feel about it?
- I will let you create the image in silence and will ask you to talk to me about the image when you have finished. You will have up to 10 minutes for this task. The image can be whatever comes to your mind as you think about how you both might have felt/ be feeling?
- (once complete) Looking at the image, can you tell me about what you notice about the image you have made?
 - What feelings come to mind? What do you think the child was feeling at this point? How did you feel at the time?
- What interests you or surprises you about the image that you have created? What emotional response do you have to it now?
- What influenced your practice with the child at that point? Looking back on it now, is there anything you could have done differently.
- What title would you give the image?

- I am now going to take a photo of the image and will use the title you have given in my research.
- Looking at the image is there anything you would like to change about it now? How else might a social worker help this child?

(Sources of support questions) What affects the way you respond to the emotions of children in your work?

- Do you consider this a key part of your job. Please explain your answer
- What support do you receive to help you respond to the emotions of children in your care?
- What support mechanisms are in place for you?
 - How do you discuss your emotional responses within supervision?
 - What else would help you in relation to the emotion you experience at work?

(Closing) During the interview we have talked about the emotional aspects of social work practice with children. Is there anything else you would like to say about your job?

- What are your hopes and expectations for the children you work with? What are your plans for your career as a children's social worker?

(Any questions) Do you have any questions for me?

(Action) Thank you for taking part in this interview today. Just to remind you that you can withdraw your data up until (FIND DATE). **I have prepared this Research de-brief document (hand them De-brief – appendix 4) to help you understand the purpose of the research project. The document also signposts you to other sources of information about this topic and identifies some local sources of support that may be of relevance to you. However, you are also welcome to contact me directly using the contact information provided, and I will be able to signpost you to an appropriate service or resource. Thankyou. (Amendment 2).**

Appendix 8B

Study 3: Interview schedule agreed by Ethics Committee November 2019

Research Questions:

Introduction:

(Rapport) I am Peter Ayling, a social work lecturer and researcher from the University of Worcester. I am carrying out some research as part of my PhD studies

(purpose) My research is about the emotions which social workers experience in their work with children and in how those emotions impact their responses to children. For this interview I am particularly interested in how you experience emotions within the supervisory relationship with social workers and how these impact your own emotions and responses. I would like to ask you generally about the emotional aspects of your work and also focus on one situation where emotion played a significant role in your supervisory relationship. During the interview, with your agreement, I will ask you to make an image about this particular experience,, using the objects provided.

(Timescale) The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. Does that sound Ok?

(Ethics) Have you had the opportunity to read the information sheet about the study and to sign the consent form? Please note that you are not obliged to participate in the study and can withdraw from the interview at any time, if you wish to do so. You can also decide not to answer any specific questions if you so prefer. If you wish to withdraw your data after the interview you can contact me on the e mail address provided within the next 14 days.. I will be audio recording the interview and transcribing the results word for word. I will also take a photograph of the image you create for the research.

(Wellbeing) **During the interview we may discuss a range of emotions, both positive and potentially challenging, related to your work as a supervisor. It is important to state that you are able to decide what you are willing to talk about and do not need to talk about anything that might cause you distress. You are also able to stop the interview, or withdraw from the interview at any point, if you wish**

(Confidentiality). After the interview has been transcribed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The transcripts will be anonymised and given a number, which means that I will not be able to identify you from the transcript. The photo will be given the same number. Please be aware that if you share any information that causes me to have concern for a child's wellbeing or safety, I may need to share this with the appropriate authorities, but I will discuss this with your directly. Do you have any questions? Are you happy to start?

(Demographic questions) A few context questions to begin with:

- Can you tell me your age and how long have you been working as a social worker? And how long in a supervisory capacity?
- What is your job title and what sort of practice context/ team do you work in?

(Image making activity)

- I would like start by asking you to think about one particular supervisory situation with a social worker where emotions seemed particularly important or significant for either the worker or yourself. It might be related to their work with a specific child or a more general situation.
- Using the objects and symbols on this table, please create an image in the tray that conveys something about this situation for the worker, the child (if appropriate) and for yourself as their supervisor. You can include objects to represent the supervisory relationship, other people or aspects of the experience that you think might be relevant.
- I will let you create the image in silence and will ask you to talk to me about the image when you have finished. Please take as long as long as you need for this task. The image can be whatever comes to your mind as you think about how you both might have felt/ be feeling?
- (once complete) Looking at the image, can you tell me about the image that you have made and about the situation that you are thinking about?
- What do you notice about the image you have made? **What ideas does it convey about the role of the supervisory relationship?**
 - What feelings come to mind? What do you think the worker was feeling at this point? How did you feel at the time?
- What interests you or surprises you about the image that you have created? What emotional response do you have to it now?
- What influenced your practice and your response at this point? Looking back on it now, is there anything you could have done differently.
- What title would you give the image?
- I am now going to take a photo of the image and will use the title you have given in my research.
- Looking at the image is there anything you would like to change about it now? How else might a supervisor support a worker in this situation? (Second photo optional)

thanks for doing that.

(Orienting questions on emotion at work)

I would now like to ask you some general questions about emotions and the use of empathy in social work with children and in supervision.

- What role does emotion play within your supervisory relationships with social workers? When might emotions emerge within supervision discussions?
- How do you see your role as a supervisor when responding to workers' emotions about their work with children? About work within the wider organisation?

- What role, if any does empathy play in social work practice with children? Within Supervision? How do you identify when workers might be struggling in their ability to be empathetic for children?
- What are the most positive aspects of your supervisory role with social workers? What are the more challenging aspects?

(Relationship focused questions)

- Can you think of times when your supervisory role with social workers has had a particular emotional impact on you? Can you tell me more about this?
- How did you respond in this situation? How do you think the worker was feeling?
- Can you explain your emotional responses during these events? What helps during such experiences?
- How openly might you express feelings with workers in supervision?

(Sources of support questions)

- What influences the way you work with emotions within your supervisory relationships? Do you consider this a key part of your job. Please explain your answer
- What support do you receive to help you respond to the emotions of your workers?
 - What support mechanisms are in place for you? What helps in terms of your own emotions within work and your own emotional responses to children's distress?
 - What else might help you in relation to the emotion you experience at work?

(Closing) During the interview we have talked about the emotional aspects of social work practice with children and the supervisory relationship. What motivates you as a supervisor / manager for this team? Is there anything else you would like to say about your job?

(Any questions) Do you have any questions for me?

(Action) Thank you for taking part in this interview today. Just to remind you that you can withdraw your data any time during the next 14 days (FIND DATE). **I have prepared this Research de-brief document to help you understand the purpose of the research project. The document also signposts you to other sources of information about this topic and identifies some local sources of support that may be of relevance to you. However, you are also welcome to contact me directly using the contact information provided, and I will be able to signpost you to an appropriate service or resource. Thankyou.**

Appendix 9: Exemplar list of visual image-making objects and symbols:

Source: Sangganjanavanich, V. F & Magnuson, S (2011)

Category and Subcategory

People - Diverse ethnic and cultural groups, diverse ages, diverse workers, people with diverse skin colours, Infants, children, adolescents, adults

Occupations - Mechanics, soldiers, firefighters, doctors, teachers,

Animals - Domestic animals - Dogs, cats, camels

Farm animals -Cows, horses, pigs, sheep

Wild animals - Tigers, lions, bears, zebras

Prehistoric animals - Tyrannosaurus rex, Triceratops

Birds - Pigeons, eagles, penguins

Sea animals -Starfish, sea horses, whales, seals, dolphins, sea turtles

Insects - Spiders, grasshoppers, ladybugs

Reptiles - Frogs, cobras, garden snakes, lizards

Buildings: Houses, barns, Farms, factories, schools, hospitals Lighthouses, jails.

Fences & Bridges - Wood fences, stone bridges

Natural world - Rocks, mountains, rainbows, trees, evergreens, shrubs, tropical trees, flowers

Weapons: Guns and swords, knights, hulk, soldiers, monsters.

Religious figures - priests and nuns, imams, Buddha, and god figures

Mystical creatures -Pegasus, unicorns, wizards, tricksters, clowns

Death symbols -Coffins, skeletons, knights, treasure chests, zombies

Vehicles -airplanes, cars, ambulances, school buses, motorcycles, boats


Household items- Kitchenware, hourglass timers, rocking chairs,

Appendix 10 – Example of IPA transcript analysis - 2 pages, transcript 7

Perception of vulnerability Child's anger	R: yes, it was... I am going to talk about this particular girl (points) but it was a sibling group of three. It was... she is 12 years old and she has been sexually abused by mums partner, and by a step sibling when she was seven, the partners abuse was recant. Mum chose to remain in the relationship and allowed him back in the house, I took over this family from another colleague and we were arranging a PLO. Thins have kind of escalated quite quick because mum was not following our advice and the man was arrested in the property, she tried to hide him. So when I met this girl, this was on the day of how we removed the children, the day we had the court order. This girl, presented as a little girl at times, quite vulnerable and you can see the little girl in her, she is very angry like her face, she was always saying things she doesn't like this, always had something to say about professionals at stuff, so when I started to work with her, a t times she also presents as really grown up, she has these behaviours, kind of look at me I am out there, you know and she knew more than he should obviously, but I could see she was really troubled, s these three figures(points to Scream goblin and devil) represents her demons I'd like to say in terms of how she was feeling, and there is a little bit of time when she was a really nice and sweet girl and she could be really...so I spent a lot of time with her in the house, about twice a week sometimes more often, I so building up a really good picture of her	12 year old girl, sexual abuse Quick escalation Seeing the little girl in her. Angry feelings , angry with professionals Presents as grown up – nterpreting her presentation Represents child's underlying feelings Seeing llots of sides to child Visiting a lot Trying to build trust Sibling overlooked Feels overwhelming for worker Needing to prioritise which child Different children different needs Verbal abuse from child
Troubled child		
Trying to build trust		
overlookedd the older sibling		
prioritising which child to focus on	I: yes trying to to get to understand her to get her to trust me and to get her to know me really. And she had her brother who was older and who was also presented like her, but he kind of got shut, he shutted himself away and even now, reflecting back, I should have really taken more time to get to know him, which I did, but it was kind of after we removed them because things escalated really quick, ll really didn't , and I was faced by all this, you know (points at the image)	
verbal abuse from child	I yeah hmmm	
avoidance of child due to aggression	R: you almost like have to take a step back and I thought who can I work with, who can I work with first, it was not possible, there was a little baby as well (points) the sibling, so three children together, totally different, with different needs, it was really difficult to kind of engage him (points to brother) he would always used to tell me to F off and he didn't have time for me	

disclosure is disturbing	I: how old is he R: 14 I: right	Worker fear – avoidance of the child
traumatic experience of removal	R: 14 – 15 next month, so I was always kind of almost, don't want to use the word scared, but it was like that but I never took the time to get to know him, what was behind that and I guess because of this abuse, her needs almost overtaken first, I guess so I get to know her and she starts to share you know some quite disturbing things which she experienced which was you know I guess good because she is starting to trust a bit, and we were trying to hope to get to the point of help them out and that was my role, not to continue to go to court, but then mum erm they found the guy and arrested him in the property. SO anyway on the day of the hearing, on the day which was quite a traumatic one which I will remember for a long time, because, I went, because when we made the application, it was an emergency application, so I went...(hesitates) I went in the house and, erm, I wanted to take the papers to mum myself and I wanted to explain to the children what was happening, about us going to court, and then, rather than going and taking them out without having no clue of what is happening, so I went to mum and said 'So this has happened and we need to make an application' - she knew, she was quite upset so, understandably, but then the children heard it from her and I said look I want to speak to the children, so that they know what is happening, so I did that and they knew they will be taken into care, so anyway she (the child) broke down when I was telling her. And she was at first shouting, you know F off and that, and then everybody went and it was just me and her, she stood there and cried and said to me we are going into care aren't we? Nd, I said well I don't know really but I am really worried about you. And she said, well she then said something that was even more concerning, that mums partner, which is also a relative to the children, her cousin, well she said 'well he's only human isn't he' so she almost justified it	Trying to prioritise one child's needs – having to decide. Disturbing things – building trust Family events disrupt relationship Remembers the day as traumatic Disjointed account of difficulties
nature of account is disjointed		
wants to retain control over events		
giving children information		Quite traumatic account – worker is impacted by recounting this?
anger and distress		
sharing concern honestly		
shocked at child's understanding		Sharing concern and worries about the child with the child
child excusing the adult		Concerned by child's response
court timescales don't support her planning	I she is making excuses for him R: yes she is making excuses for him which really worried me because we have got to a point where that is actually normalising that, saying tis OK. So I tried to speak to her and she kind of understood said she wasn't going to go to school.	Child is normalising abuse
plans foiled		Upset when plans for telling the children didn't work – disrupted by court timescales

Appendix 11: Example of visual analysis template – Study 1 Transcript 1.

<p>Title of image</p>	<p>A COMPLICATED CROWD</p> 
<p>Denotative description</p>	<p>Child is presented as a fierce dinosaur, a football player -these images are what have moved through placements with him - she associates them with him.</p> <p>Car- represents movement through placements.</p> <p>Twins and Luke Skywalker – siblings – distant.</p> <p>Family in corner with princess – previous carers who chose to keep girl rather than him.</p> <p>Mum with sister and new baby.</p> <p>Dad is pirate with police and behind bars in prison.</p> <p>Idealises men – Foster carer – Hulk and Mr Incredible.</p> <p>Sully -represents worry about what is happening to contact with siblings and mother.</p> <p>Heart – wants love and belonging – link to respite carer who knits.</p> <p>Stuck in the middle – no one wants him, been replaced.</p> <p>Prefers men to women as carers – looks to strength not nurture. Social workers describe self as grasshopper jumping in and out, and police coming in as authority figure power and car f or moving places - stone don't worry be happy reassurance.</p> <p>24 symbols used - very crowded tray - no room for child? Complexity of relationships no process or ending in sight?</p>
<p>Connotative analysis and links to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Colour - Archetypes and myths - Spacing, positionality and setting of image 	<p>-24 symbols used - very crowded tray - no room for child? Complexity of relationships no process or ending in sight?</p> <p>complexity, crowded, complicated - 'could go on forever' – there is something overwhelming about this boys story 'well it's hard for us to hold it never mind him being 7 and it to actually be your life in the middle of it all.'</p> <p>: It makes you feel how complicated his world is because obviously there is a lot of people, and this isn't everybody this is just a little but of the</p>

<p>- Actions, feelings, and thoughts described in image.</p> <p>People, characters, perspectives</p>	<p>representation of those people and trying to hold those people in mind or think about how those people might hold him in mind I think would be really difficult.</p> <p>Whirlwind -: I think he's been in a whirlwind for a good while, not knowing what's going on, round and round and round and round and up and down, just feeling.</p> <p>Child But what I've done instead of putting a character to represent him, instead I've used his two favourite things in the world, which are dinosaurs(large dinosaur)... and football (shows football player)</p> <p>KNOWLEDGE OF CHILD – MASCULINE TROPES – DINOSAURS AND FOOTBALL</p> <p>Child is on their own – lack of connection in the tray – so many people around but not anchored anywhere – whirlwind.</p> <p>Floating – LACK OF CONNECITON TO THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM, NOT ANCHORED, And I've chosen the car because there's lots of driving around and there are all those things in his world floating about that he talks about you know, that are relevant to him all the time, yeah.</p> <p>Masculine traits - Hulk, superhero – Luke Skywalker – older brother – idolises males. Father violent – Pirate, prison, bars. Police car.</p> <p>Emotions in the image</p> <p>Physicality – moving – constantly moving – car.</p> <p>Grasshopper, jumping in and out, feels impermanent but powerful.</p> <p>Worker regret:</p> <p>I feel bad because I was away for, I was on leave for the final week before he moved as well, when that decision was actually made and everything hit crisis and it fell apart, those last few days of that week I was away, so you don't feel like you were there when they needed you to be there as well, somebody had to go out on duty and that's another person in all of this, we keep adding layers to all these people who are in and out of his life</p> <p>: yes, I wish I had been stronger in.</p> <p>I would have fought harder to not use that placement I think purely because, a perfectly good placement but just not a good match for him. I just knew, I just knew it wasn't going to work, and everyone said no its different it's not the same as little princess here (previous placement) I just knew for him, knowing him quite well that it wasn't probably going to work, so you feel like you've added to all the loss and complexity again on another level.</p> <p>Child's response:</p> <p>and then I had to tell him I was leaving which was really difficult.</p> <p>I: how was that for him and for you?</p>
--	--

R: quite.... Horrible, just horrible really. He was quite chatty about it at the time. So, when I told him I was leaving his face just fell.

that's the hope for him to settle and things to go forward, so it is very hard being the one person who has done all the moves, done the respite, I was the one that picked him up, put the stuff in the car with him, I've been through all that with him and then.

I: so, you have been through all the disruption.

R: yes, and then again, somebody is leaving him

Workers sinking feeling.

it is the same pattern again and you feel like you are adding onto an already very disrupted pattern of loss and separation, which was quite hard. I am glad I had a colleague and carers there so obviously you wouldn't want to be upset in front of him, but it was quite hard getting back into the car afterwards, it was like that sinking sort of feeling inside.

I; yeah

R: absolutely

I: your own sadness

Child sees men as superheroes – dominant powerful , respects sw role of power but ambivalent about nurture – one soft symbol of love with a temporary carer. Images whirlwind, floating – suggest disconnection.

Appendix 12: Examples of personal and group Experiential themes (PETs and GETs)

Study 1: examples of group experiential theme - social work on the move.

Examples of responses to the experience of removing children from placement.
' I was the one that picked him up, put the stuff in the car with him, I've been through all that with him and then' (Liz, p.10/11)
'you get times when you're working in Child protection, and it is difficult, but you know that. I removed a couple of kids one Christmas eve – best thing I did that Christmas ' (Phil, p.10/1)
'so, I had to come back from annual leave and go back to court to get a Recovery order, to get the police to come and physically remove him from the property, which was just obviously a horrendous experience, (Kirsty, p. 5/24)
'it took all day, him breaking things, shouting at me , before we could get him to go and do a visit, and then when we did the visit he was refusing to get out of the car, becoming quite abusive, so that was exhausting' (Keith, p.7/4)
'It's funny, when I have to remove children from their homes I don't get upset, because I know if we have to remove them then things are really bad and that is the best thing for the child at the time, so I don't get upset then' (Sally, p.6/5)
' but any time you remove a child from their parent it is dramatic, because you are cutting, even if only temporarily, you are cutting a bond that on a primordial level we don't think should be cut' (Gillian, p.15/15)
'I was outside and said make sure you are in the car ready, so my car is outside, when they start coming in, you be in the car and ready to go', I thought, this is not, this is not what I was planning (voice rises in tone) to happen, to be on the run with the children, and trying to take them off' (Bianca,p.10/8)
'Having to turn up at a placement there and then, tell a young person you're moving, 'by the way get in the car, were leaving in 10 minutes; no...' (Maggie,p.6/16)

Study 2: Examples of group experiential themes – Naming feelings & meaning making

Naming feelings	page	line	extract
Naming feelings for the child	18	32-34	I say ' this is really sad, this isn't Ok, and my job is to keep you safe and so this is what we are going to do to keep you safe, to stop that from happening, (Laura)
Naming feelings	18	21-28	you have to give them permission that it is really horrible what they have gone through. Because if you are just like 'oh yes that must be awful' that is sort of allowing them, expecting them to keep it in but if you are expressing, modelling that it is Ok, this is absolutely terrible, I yes, R: then they can sort of own that a bit more and feel a bit more comfortable with it I have found, but people just have some horrible lives, and you have to acknowledge that and not accept it as normal (Laura)
Naming feelings directly	9	6-8	I would address it, I address it so I would say to them, I don't say I know how that feels because I don't, but I would say, absolutely that would be a really scary thing to feel, and I understand why you feel like that (Susan)

Naming feelings supports action	10	16-19	hat Ill tend to do is with children and adults, is just try and name it and help them to explore why they are feeling like that, and that actually we need to look at how we can move past that to work together essentially, (Susan)
Asking about emotions – not naming	4	14-15	When I first went in, I wanted to ask him about his emotions, Oh are you feeling angry today? And he would not, he was just a brick wall (Melissa)
Awareness of child's story – meaning making			
Awareness of child's story	3	12-18	he is a 12-year-old boy, who has experienced bereavement, serious bereavement and is now considered to be at risk of self-harm and is aggressive as well in the home. and erm, the family conditions are really emotionally closed down and there is a lot of rejection there, you get the sense that people who are supposed to be there for him are quite rejecting of him actually and he doesn't really seem to be getting any support for this bereavement that I've mentioned. (Melissa)
Aware of risk of self-harm	8	30-31	well, he has told his friends at school that he wanted to kill himself, so it is in there (Melissa)
Evaluating the impact of experiences	5	17-22	So, he lost his mum, by all account she was very close to his mum, and she died tragically, she was actually pregnant at the time, and he was in the house, and he was only 8 and he witnessed her die, I oh god R: and he was the one calling for services ,, he has had trauma, and his dad , who he now lives with, was brought up in care, seems quite disengaged (Melissa)
Acknowledging the child's story	5	1-5	mum was a heroin user, and it was significant, so they would be like they would just be left while she was injecting and grandad was using cocaine, as a pick me up ,so it wasn't the same level ,it was different type in terms of the severity and the frequency, but because of the connotations of it, (Susan)
Indicating that is aware of the child's story	9	9-15	and allude to that I Know what has happened with mum, I wouldn't say the details, but I would say that I know what has happened to them so that they know that I'm not just, that I don't have any idea. I so you are making a connection with experiences that you know they have had and they ,they now know you know, which is helpful. R: yeah so, they are not then having to think if I have to explain my whole story to her again (Susan)
Knowing the child's story	5	4-17	prior to that it had been held by others only one social worker, at CP but stepped down to CIN and allocated to me. And when I got on board I sort of made it clear that we weren't looking for diagnoses anymore because he is as he is and we have clearly ruled out quite a few complex options that haven't been evidenced or able to be

			substantiated so we are leaving that one and we are thinking about how we can help him live in his world and keep him safe and keep him happy, . but that was rejected and continues to be rejected and since becoming looked after, the catalyst for him becoming looked after was a meeting when mother disclosed that he had been tying ropes around his neck and seeking to strangle himself. And we thought you know that she had had an opportunity before to engage with the psychologist before but not engaged with it and we couldn't keep him safe, and so she made a very brave decision to allow us to find him a therapeutic placement (Laura)
--	--	--	--

Study 3 – examples of Group experiential themes - containing feelings.

Containing workers emotions	Trained to contain workers emotions,	4 /21	at the same time, I am trained to contain her emotions, the workers emotions, at the unfairness and the injustice of this separation and manage my own emotions, because I have recently had a baby also, (Laura)
Containing emotions	Managing feelings is vital	17/30	because if they can't manage their emotions, then they are not going to be able to manage the families they are working with, it absolutely sits hand in hand so for me, it is completely vital. (Gemma)
Containing workers emotions	Workers will open up if are contained	13 / 8	you know some of the children are more positively engaged than others with the workers, so yeah, I think workers, providing they feel safe and contained within the supervision, I think they will open up about those feelings, and they do ,certainly within my supervision they do feel able to do that, (Trudie)
Containing feelings	Bringing it to feelings each time	8 / 28	again, being there for her, helping her to try and understand how each family member was feeling, bringing it to feelings each time and trying to get her to put herself in the child's shoes if you like (Trudie)
Workers emotions with child	Empathy in action	25 / 17	the social worker had really got what was going on for her, had really understood this really chaotic situation and was able to verbalise that and articulate that so well, that it felt real, and I think like I was like 'you could put yourself in that little girl's shoes' and so that I suppose is empathy on a number of levels (Sharon)
Managing worker emotions	Don't go home with difficult feelings	25 / 5	I wouldn't want any workers and I have always said this to all the social workers that I have had, I do not want you to go home, with those feelings, that internal because you have just been to a visit and it has hit a note with you, I

			would rather you ring me up and offload rather than going home and sleeping on that, I want you to (Amanda)
Emotional containment	Helping the worker to manager her feelings and make decisions	17 / 4	I could help the worker to actually manage that and to understand where she was coming from...erm, and how to talk, the sort of things to say to her (mother) that would help her to make the decision that yes, she did need help (Amanda)
Worker emotions	Our worker is scared and wants off the case	6/ 8	so, the worker, our worker, is very scared, and has been trying to get taken off the case. From the start of it (Maxine)

Appendix 13 – Confirmation of ethical approval: Study 1 & 2 15.12.2017



HUMANITIES, ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
(HASSREC) PROPORTIONATE REVIEW OUTCOME

15 December 2017

HASSREC CODE: HCA17180024

Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Dear Peter

Thank you for your application for proportionate review ethical approval to the Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee on the 5 December 2017.

Your application has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and in compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures for proportionate ethical review.

The outcome of the review is that the application be approved subject to minor amendments being made to the satisfaction of the Chair as outlined on the following page. Please address the points raised and resubmit the revised documentation.

In a response to amendments document, please identify against each numbered amendment where changes or responses have been made to the application. When providing the revised application and associated documents please clearly identify where the changes have been made using **bold** font. Please name your documents clearly as **HCA17180024-R**.

Please submit your revised application to ethics@worc.ac.uk **from a University of Worcester email address** with the following details in the subject line: **HCA17180024-R**.

Yours sincerely

Xxxxx (name removed)

Chair - Proportionate Review Committee

SREC CODE: HCA17180024

Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Required amendments:

a. Revisions to accompanying documents.

Proposed interview schedule: The applicant describes how the LDO will 'screen' potential participants for their suitability to participate. Can you outline how this will be done? Is it possible that there will be cases where the LDO cannot make an accurate assessment of potential vulnerability (e.g., information not available)? To mitigate this, it would be beneficial to insert into the opening script of the interview schedule, one or two sentences describing the nature of the topics to be considered and making clear that if at any point the participant experiences distress, they can stop the interview.

b. Requests for additional documents

This is a well-considered application. However, as the subject matter of the interview could lead to significant levels of emotional distress for participants, it would be good to see a formal debrief document that can be distributed to all participants after completion of the interview. It is important to consider that some participants may feel unable to contact the researcher to 'admit' that they have been impacted by the subject matter and need further support. Offering a universal debrief to all participants may go some way to mitigate this issue. The debrief should recap the purposes of the study and then signpost the participant to relevant sources of support. The applicant should also make sure there is support available within the local organisation (as this may relate to occupational stress) and offer details of this.

c. Requests for clarification

The applicant states that initial contact with potential participants will be via the LDO (distributing information sheets). As this is a (senior?) member of the organisation, this may compel some participants to take part in the research (perceived coercion). Is it possible for the researcher to make first contact about the research through face-to-face group/team meetings to introduce the study and distribute information? This would help to circumvent the issue.

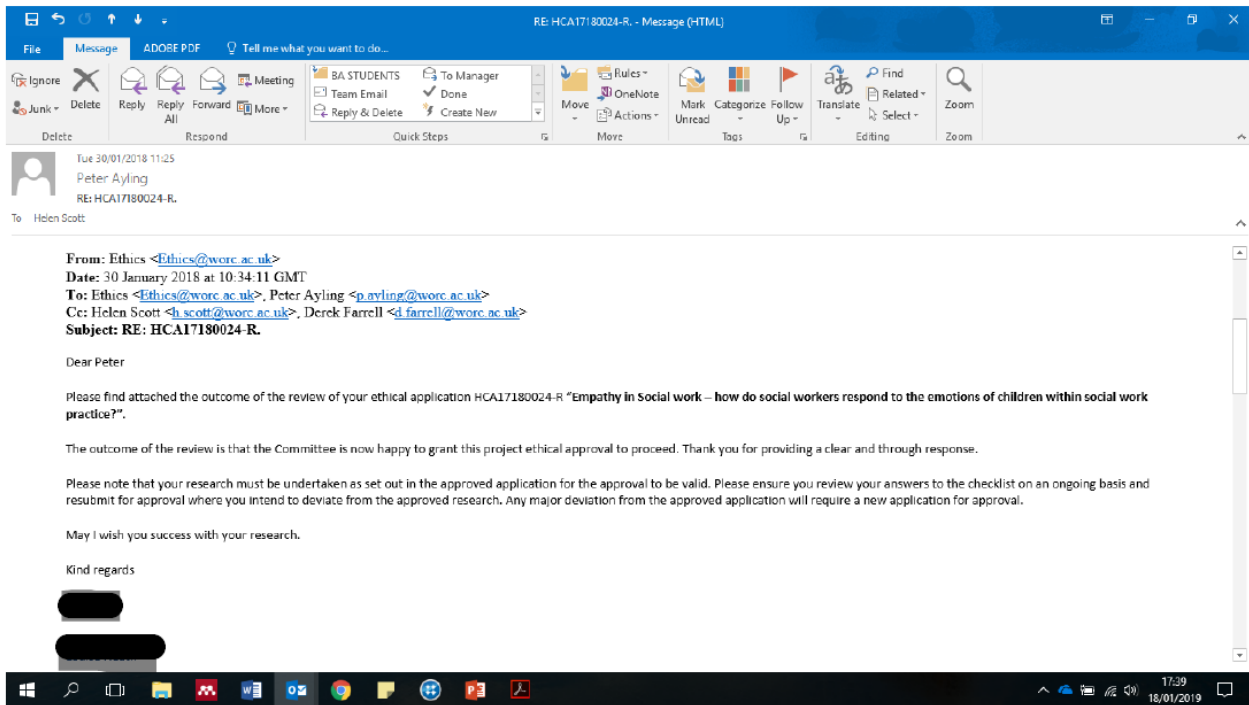
d. Areas of specific concern and how these should be addressed.

Awareness of psychological risk to participants made clear at point of interview (as detailed above).

Provision of full debrief (as detailed above)

Clarify extent for coercion and ways to mitigate this on application form (as detail

Confirmation of amendments: 30.01.2018



Confirmation of Ethical Approval Study 3: 30.10.2019.



COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, PSYCHOLOGY

AND SPORT RESEARCH ETHICS

PANEL (CBPS REP)

PROPORTIONATE REVIEW
OUTCOME

30th October 2019

REP CODE: CBPS18190007-R

Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your application for proportionate review ethical approval to the College of Business, Psychology and Sport Research Ethics Panel (CBPS REP) on the 24th of September 2019 and revised application on 24th October 2019.

Your application has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and in compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures for proportionate ethical review.

The outcome of the review is that the application be approved subject to minor amendments being made to the satisfaction of the Panel as outlined on the following page. Please address the points raised and resubmit the revised documentation and a response to amendments document.

In the response to amendments document, please identify against each numbered amendment where changes or responses have been made to the application. When providing the revised application and associated documents please clearly identify where the changes have been made using **bold** font. Please name your documents clearly as CBPS18190007-R2.

In addition to the information/revisions requested, please consult the information on Research Ethics Blackboard page relating to the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), which came into effect on 25 May 2018. It is your responsibility to ensure that your research (and all relevant documentation) adheres to these regulations.

Please submit your revised application to ethics@worc.ac.uk with the following details in the subject line: CBPS18190007-R2.

Yours sincerely,

Xxxxxxx (name removed)

Chair - College of Business, Psychology and Sport Research Ethics Panel (CBPS REP) Ethics@worc.ac.uk

REP CODE: CBPS18190007-R

Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Required amendments:

It is acknowledged that you have addressed all concerns in great detail. There are only two sections that need just a little bit of adjustment:

a. Revisions to accompanying documents.

1. CBPS1920007 requested amendment: *Your application suggests participants can choose not to have their data kept for 10 years but there is no mention of this in the PIS or the consent form (or debriefing sheet).*

Response: after consulting with my head of Studies, I have removed the 10-year timescale in the application itself as this has not been specified in the University research data management policy itself. I have added information to the PIS (Section E, Subsection: Confidentiality) the consent form (Item 5 has been added) and the debriefing sheet (Section on Confidentiality) to inform participants of their right to request that their research data is destroyed at the end of the research project and does not remain in the archive.

CBPS19200007-R Revision Required: This is fine, but I suggest adding a deadline, e.g., two weeks after data collection, for participants to request their data to be discarded. After that timeframe data cannot be destroyed.

2. CBPS1920007 requested amendment - *The PIS also needs slightly amending regarding situations where you might have to disclose a practice/SG issue – the wording in the consent form is clearer.*

Response: I have amended the section on the PIS and used the wording from the consent form to support clarity (PIS, Page 3 Section: What will you do with my information?) it now reads ‘*The exception to this is where you tell us something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm. If the researcher has concerns about the safety or wellbeing of yourself or anyone else as a result of the interview, they will discuss this with you and agree a course of action.*’

CBPS19200007-R Revision Required: Given that this is a postgraduate research project, if there are issues as stated above, you need to get in touch with your supervisory team who will advise the best course of action, and this needs to be reflected in the PIS.

Notification of amendments due to Covid19 – E mail trail with Research Ethics Team, 24.04.20.

Hi Peter

Thank you for notifying us of the change. I will make a note and save your email with the approved documentation from your original ethics review.

Kind regards

Xxxxxxxx(name removed)

Research Knowledge Exchange Facilitator
College of Health, Life and Environmental Sciences
Secretary – CHLES Research Ethics Panel
Interim Secretary – CBPS Research Ethics Panel

Research Office
St John's Campus
University of Worcester

Office: 01905 54 2767| Main reception: 01905 855000

From: Peter Ayling <p.ayling@worc.ac.uk>
Sent: 24 April 2020 09:02
To: Ethics <Ethics@worc.ac.uk>
Subject: FW: CBPS18190007-R

From: Peter Ayling
Sent: 24 April 2020 09:00
To: 'Ethics' <Ethics@worc.ac.uk>
Cc: Helen Scott <h.scott@worc.ac.uk>
Subject: CBPS18190007-R

Dear Ethics,

In line with the updated guidance for Doctoral researchers in response to Covid19, I am e mailing to advise you that following discussion with my Director of Studies, I have changed my method of interviewing for my third study from face-to-face interviews to electronic interviews using either phone or video conferencing software. I have amended my study documentation accordingly. I have not made any other changes to the study.

Thankyou
Pete Ayling

Peter Ayling

Senior Lecturer in Social Work
Course Leader BA Social Work
School of Allied Health and Community
University of Worcester
St John's Campus, Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
Tel: 01905 542753



University
of Worcester



the
SOCIAL WORK
TEACHING PARTNERSHIP
West Midlands

Appendix 14: Debriefing document for participants.



Appendix 4 – De-briefing form for Research Participants.

Study Title: Empathy in Social work – how do social workers respond to the emotions of children within social work practice?

Purpose of study: Thank-you for participating in this study, which is part of a larger research project exploring the role of emotions in social work with children. We hope that your interview will contribute to our understanding of how social workers work more effectively with children and how to support social workers in training to prepare them for their role.

During this study, you took part in an in-depth interview, and we specifically focused on issues relating to your emotional reactions to your work with children and your use of empathy skills. We also used a visual research method, using symbols, which aimed to help participants to reflect on their experiences in a different and complementary way. You may find that you continue to recall some of the feelings and content from the interview once it is over. This is common when discussing emotional aspects of our experiences.

Confidentiality: Your participation in the study will remain confidential, and while some of your interview data may appear within the study results, it will not be possible to identify you as a participant in the study. If you wish to withdraw your interview from the study, you can do so within the first 14 days after the date of your interview, by contacting the researcher by e-mail (see details below) and requesting that they destroy your interview data.

Summary of Final Report: If you would like to have a summary of the final report from this study, please feel free to contact us.

Recommended Reading: If you are interested in this topic, you might wish to undertake some further reading:

David Howe (2012) 'Empathy: What it is and why it matters'. Palgrave Macmillan

Richard Ingram (2015) 'Understanding Emotions in Social work: Theory, Practice and Reflection.' Open University Press.

Useful contact information:

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study please contact one of the research team: Researcher: Peter Ayling p.ayling@worc.ac.uk or Research Supervisor Dr Helen Scott. h.scott@worc.ac.uk.

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact Dr John-Paul Wilson at the University of

Worcester, using the following details: John-Paul Wilson, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research j.wilson@worc.ac.uk Tel: 01905 542196

If you feel upset or concerned following the interview process, it may help to talk to an appropriately qualified person. The Learning and Development Officer (Insert name and contact information) for your agency will be able to identify any support services and resources available within the agency. If you are a member of the British Association of Social workers, you may be able to identify sources of support via <https://www.basw.co.uk/about/>. If feelings persist, you might also find it helpful to contact a professional counsellor. You can access professionals with appropriate qualifications by consulting the relevant website for BACP <http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists> where you will find relevant professionals in your area. If you would like to talk through alternative sources of support, please contact the researcher, Peter Ayling, who will seek to signpost you to an appropriate service. If you continue to feel significantly distressed or unwell, please make contact with your general medical practitioner or occupational health service.

Please keep a copy of this form for future reference. Once again, thank you for participating in this research project.

Appendix 15: Abstracts for Conference presentations:

1. *Abstract for Poster Presentation: European Conference for Social work Research, Belgium, April 2019*

'Swimming in darkness' – a phenomenological study exploring social workers' lived experience of emotion within their work with children. By Peter Ayling

Context of study: This poster presentation will highlight emerging findings from an initial study which seeks to capture the lived experience of social workers in their use of empathy and their emotional responses to the children with whom they work. The use of empathy as a skill and the worker's ability to regulate their own emotions have been identified as important indicators of their ongoing emotional resilience. (Grant & Kinman, 2014)

Method: The project utilises a multi method exploratory approach combining Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Visual Research methods to support the participants' exploration of their own experiences. Participants engage in a projective, image creation task using small world objects, which seeks to capture emotional aspects of their practice with a specific child. They then participate in a semi-structured interview to discuss their image and associated thoughts and feelings about their work. This innovative study design, informed by the researcher's therapeutic practice with children, seeks to support participants to step back from their everyday practice in order to approach their experiences from a more reflective, externalised position (Mannay, 2010). Visual methodologies have been proposed as particularly useful when exploring complex, multi-dimensional experiences such as emotions (Kara, 2015). The research design seeks to offer a synergy between the methods used and the focus of the study on the exploration of emotion. Examples of these will be presented in the poster.

Sample: Participants were recruited from 2 Children's Services departments in England during the summer of 2018. The sample includes 8 experienced social workers (defined as having three years or more experience) and a smaller comparison group of 3 newly qualified social workers (less than 18 months experience).

Data analysis and Findings: The Data analysis is ongoing at time of writing. Emerging findings from the study will be presented, through both key Superordinate and sub-ordinate themes emerging from the IPA analysis and an analysis of the visual symbols and themes emerging from the image creation task. Findings include the extent of workers' emotional commitment to children, the use of touch and authentic sharing of emotion with children, the relationship between empathy and action in social work, the specific emotional impact of removing children from their birth family or placement and the emotional impact of organisational structures and procedures.

Implications of study: It is anticipated that the findings from this study will contribute to our understanding of supporting emotional resilience and practitioner wellbeing. Implications for the education of social work students in relation to empathy skills with children will also be considered. The presentation will also seek to consider the potential benefits and limitations of integrating IPA and visual research methods.

References:

Grant, L. and Kinman, G. (2014) *Developing Resilience for Social Work Practice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kara, H. (2015) *Creative methods in the social sciences*. Bristol: Policy Press

Mannay, D (2010) 'Making the familiar strange: can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible?' in *Qualitative Research*. 10:1 p.91–111

Dawn Mannay, Eleanor Staples & Victoria Edwards (2017) Visual methodologies, sand, and psychoanalysis: employing creative participatory techniques to explore the educational experiences of mature students and children in care, in *Visual Studies*, 32:4, 345-358,

2. Joint Social Work Education Conference, Manchester, September 2019

Abstract for Individual Presentation: JSWEC 2019

Presented by Peter Ayling, Senior Lecturer, University of Worcester.

'Looking at the stars': a visual and phenomenological study of empathy in social work practice with children.

Context of study: This presentation will highlight initial findings from a doctoral research study which seeks to capture the lived experience of social workers in their use of empathy and their emotional responses to the children with whom they work.

Method: The project utilises a multi method exploratory approach integrating visual research methods and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to extend participants' exploration of their own experiences. This innovative study design seeks to support participants to reflect on their practice and emotions through the use of an image creation task, using small world objects and symbols as a trigger point for a semi-structured interview process. Visual methodologies have been proposed as particularly useful when exploring complex, multi-dimensional experiences such as emotions (Kara, 2015).

Sample: Using a purposive, non-random sampling method, 11 participants were recruited from 2 Children's Services departments in England during the summer of 2018. The study aims to compare the experiences of 3 participants completing their ASYE and 8 experienced (3 years qualified) social workers, within a variety of children and families contexts.

Data analysis: The Data analysis is ongoing at time of submission. Data includes both visual images created by the participants, recorded in the form of photographs and the textual data from interview transcripts. A thematic analysis of the visual data has been undertaken following guidelines by Rose (2016) to allow exploration of both individual symbols used and the thematic content of images produced by participants. Textual data analysis has utilised IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) as a framework to explore the lived emotional experiences of participants within their work with children.

Findings: Early findings from the study will be presented, using both key visual themes and the themes emerging from the IPA textual analysis. Themes include:

Focus on the child's emotion: workers' awareness of and response to children's emotions; the nature of empathic responses and the impact of practice context; putting children's emotion into wider context.

Focus on the worker's emotion: emotional self-regulation and self-awareness; the emotional impact of removing children from home; sustaining relationships with distressed children; the role of touch and authenticity; ending relationships.

Focus on emotions within organisations: feeling rules within organisations, sources of support within organisations; managers as emotional containers; managing defences creatively.

The implications for social work education and post qualifying training will be considered.

References:

Kara, H. (2015) *Creative methods in the social sciences*. Bristol: Policy Press

Smith, J., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*. London: Sage.

END