Supervision and the Dynamics of Collusion

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Abstract:

In the United Kingdom, Serious Case Reviews and Inquiries undertaken over the last five decades continue to evidence that children are both silenced and rendered invisible as a result of parental behaviour and professional inaction. There have been recent calls for practitioners to enact greater *professional curiosity* in child protection practice, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that practitioners have less opportunity to be curious in overly bureaucratic and unsupportive environments. Good quality supervision may provide one mechanism to encourage professional curiosity, however supervision and the supervisory processes therein has received scant attention or scrutiny within such inquiries.

Whilst supervision can act as a conduit to encourage good practice, ensuring compliance with standards and promoting the positive well-being of individual practitioners, (the core conditions under which professional curiosity may flourish) we hypothesize that complex relational dynamics have the potential to disrupt such endeavours. In the discussion that follows, we shall first seek to explore the tenets of *good* supervision, before scrutinising the potential pitfalls, with a focus on how one specific factor, the *rule of optimism*, may be transposed on to the supervisory relationship, and as in front line practice, how it may stifle professional curiosity in the supervisory relationship.

Introduction

For the last five decades, a series of inquiries and reviews have catalogued failures by professionals to hear the voice of a child, with fatal consequences. From Dennis O'Neill (1945) and Maria Colwell (1974), to Victoria Climbie (2000), Khyra Ishaq (2008) and Daniel Pelka (2012), there has been a failure to capture the narrative accounts of these children's experiences; accounts which may have detailed the pain and suffering their abusers sought to conceal. Whilst at some points physically visible to the professional network, these children were simultaneously rendered *invisible* as a consequence of the behaviour

exhibited by their caregivers, and the responses this evoked in professionals. For Victoria Climbie and Daniel Pelka, professionals observed clear evidence of physical harm, yet failed to take protective action, or share their concerns with statutory services.

Research has suggested a failure to give primacy to the child's voice and their assessed needs, highlighting that professionals focus too readily on the needs of parents and carers (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2011, 2014) whilst the child becomes secondary; resigned to be the 'actors in someone else's play' (Britton, 1981, cited in Reder and Duncan, 1993). Harry Ferguson (2013:16) suggests that neglectful and abusive parents encourage this practice through 'unconscious pathological communication', where the message to workers is: *do not question, challenge or act* (2013:169). Yet, when armed with professional knowledge and experience, and a duty to protect children where harm is suspected, it remains concerning that professionals may not consciously identify or challenge such dynamics, or why upon reflection, they are not moved to take more authoritative action. This has resulted in recent calls for practitioners to enact greater 'professional curiosity' (CSCB, 2013).

Whilst Serious Case Reviews have sought to unpick how the multi agency approach to safeguarding failed these children, less attention has been paid to the supervisory context which supports practitioners to undertake such complex work; a supervisory context, which should be ideally placed to engender and model how professional curiosity can be achieved. The question therefore arises: does professional curiosity occur within the supervisory exchange? Or, are there factors which impede the supervisor's ability to demonstrate professional curiosity in the context of supervision?

Professional and Organisational Cultures:

Munro's (2011) systemic overview identified that in the organisational context of children's social care in contemporary England, record keeping, compliance and performance management had become all too dominant, skewing the focus away from the child, towards bureaucracy. She outlined a loss of quality and personalisation, an imbalance in the system, which for front line social work practitioners and managers, has meant they are under huge pressure to *comply* with performance indicators, which in theory should keep children safe. As highlighted by Ruch (2005:113) increasingly complicated policies and procedures have

been instituted to offer a degree of certainty and to reduce anxiety, yet paradoxically they contribute to the social workers already unmanageable task.

Despite this call for change from Munro (2011), concerns remain regarding bureaucratic stagnation. As highlighted two years later, in the Serious review into the death of Hamzah Kahn, practitioners remain unable to hear the concerns of children with sufficient 'curiosity, empathy and understanding' as their capacity is reduced by incongruent organisational demands (BSCB, 2013). Such blocks transcend frontline practice, affecting each tier of the management structure.

Coupled with prescribed officialdom, practitioners are required to devote a great deal of emotional investment to their daily practice. Social workers interface with the *troubled and the troubling* (Howe, 2008); encountering the pain and distress of others and this has the potential to impact on professional competence and erode emotional and physical well being. In their daily working life, practitioners on the front line witness such distress, and are often in the firing line as service users vent their frustrations. Nowhere is this more acute than front line child protection, where practitioners are tasked to assess and manage risk, and where failing to do so can result in fatal consequences. Within this professional context, it is entirely comprehensible that professionals may fall foul of attempts by parents to deceive the protective network and draw attention away from the vulnerable child.

Ideally, supervision should provide the necessary oversight and safeguards to ensure that the emotional content of social work practice remains transparent and responded to. However for a social work supervisor, working within the same organisational context as the practitioner, the same bureaucratic and emotional stressors apply; therefore they are equally besieged by the same vulnerabilities. The discussion that follows will begin to explore the way in which the current organisational context for social work practice may impact on supervision and the relationships and dynamics therein; drawing on the 'rule of optimism' as outlined by Dingwall et al (1983) as one illustrative example.

In all fields of statutory social work practice, in Britain and elsewhere, practitioners sit at the interface between the personal and the political, the individual and the state; described by Morrison (2007:256) as 'dual accountabilities to both 'public and political agendas'. Serious case reviews have catalogued a host of failures, either at the individual practitioner

level in the form of professionals failing to undertake basic tasks proficiently, or at an organisational level, with poor structures, policies and procedures seen to be at fault. Yet failures in safeguarding responsibilities are rarely the fault of one individual practitioner or of an isolated, ill thought through, working practice. Instead, it concerns how these two factors may couple together to produce ineffective responses to highly complex situations, within the working context and culture.

Social work practice can bring intrinsic rewards and motivation (Wendt et al, 2011) yet it also brings challenge. Social workers enter into some of the most difficult and confrontational environments, addressing issues such as bereavement, loss, poverty, violence and aggression and problematic mental health. As highlighted by the inquiry into the death of Kimberley Carlile in 1987, complex and 'contagious' emotions are beamed out by troubled families, the potentially corrosive impact of which may not be immediately recognised by the workers themselves (Milton et al, 1987:193). Coupled with media scrutiny and challenging organisational constraints and demands (high vacancy rates, high caseloads) it is easy to see why practitioners may feel beleaguered on multiple fronts; recognised by Adamson et al (2004:525) as undergoing intense 'emotional and cognitive labour'.

Whilst Serious case reviews dictate that it is incumbent upon professionals to display 'professional curiosity', they equally acknowledge that 'people who are dealing with heavy workloads and have competing demands for their attention will have more limited opportunity to be curious, inquisitive and enquiring' (BSCB, 2013:7). As highlighted in inquiries such as Victoria Climbie, practitioners who are bombarded by unwieldy caseloads, with little opportunity to voice the emotional pressures inherent in such work, may feel little choice but to succumb to the demands of performance management (Ferguson, 2011), at times resulting in ineffective safeguarding practices.

Supervision has been identified as one mechanism by which some of the emotional and organisational pressures of practice may be buffered. As outlined by Browne and Bourne (1996), for practitioners to be effective, they require the support of an effective supervisor to assist them to share some of the feelings evoked by difficult practice encounters. Transparently processing such feelings in a safe and supportive environment can assist

workers to maintain, or regain equilibrium. Yet supervision is about much more than facilitating practitioners' emotional reflections, and working to develop future capability and capacity. Supervision does not 'operate in a vacuum' (Beddoe, 2010:1292) and just as the supervisee is accountable to both the organisation and the public, the supervisor also assumes a tenuous position of 'piggy in the middle', expressed eloquently by Jones (2004:12) as operating to 'satisfy organisational requirements while retaining licence for the exercise and moderation of professional judgement and support.' The supervisor therefore also adopts dual, if not triple accountability: seeking to promote positive practice for the benefit of service users, ensuring compliance with policies, procedures and values and accountability toward the worker, a duty of care. Whilst supervision has the potential to encourage and maintain good practice, there exists the potential for supervision to compound dynamics, further stifling critical reflection, professional curiosity and emotional release.

The tenets of effective supervision in social work:

> *If workers don't feel authoritative and safe, the strong likelihood is that the child*
> *is not safe either.'*

<div align="right">(Ferguson, 2011:179).</div>

Whilst it is widely agreed that the components of good quality supervision include aspects of managerial oversight and accountability, attention and responsiveness to practitioners' well being, and to the continuing professional development of the workforce, (Morrison, 1990; Brown and Bourne, 1996) it is also acknowledged that these elements may be weighted differently within different supervisory relationships, or in some cases, omitted altogether. These functions of supervision were highlighted by Carpenter et al (2013) who sought to offer direction for line mangers regarding the tenets of effective supervision. The authors further suggest that whilst the primary aim of supervision must be to ensure good quality services for the client group, through emphasising the roles and responsibilities of the organisation and of professionals; the secondary aim for agencies should be to ensure that practitioners are able to retain a sense of job satisfaction, given their duty of care to ameliorate some of the challenges the professional role may bring. In fact, quality services

and outcomes for service users cannot be achieved, unless supervisors have an accurate and realistic assessment of the workers competence (Morrison, 2005).

To separate out the aims and functions of supervision may be considered reductionist in light of the fact that such agency accountabilities can be mutually compatible and interlocking with individual professional accountabilities. In teams where social workers are supported to be 'emotionally aware' and identify pathological communication from parents, exploring their own thoughts, feelings and concerns, this can act as a barometer for children's experiences; offering an insight into how they may perceive parental responses and the care they are afforded (Ferguson, 2011). Ferguson draws on the work of Ruch (2007) who advocates that supervision should provide an 'emotionally informed thinking space', where attention is paid to the act of *doing* social work, to what thoughts and feelings are evoked from interacting with challenging situations and challenging individuals therein, and the consequences this may have for practitioners. Within this context, the supervisor should strive to adopt a privileged position of independence and objectivity. As highlighted by Wosket and Page (2001:13) supervisors are ideally placed to offer a more 'detached' perspective than the case holder, with the potential to 'pick out the detail that hovers at the supervisee's peripheral vision... [that] which is not always clearly seen'. Not only can the supervisor adopt a position of objectivity themselves, they can engender such self-awareness in their supervisees (Gadsby Waters, 1992).

Ruch (2007) contends that such *spaces* provide social work practitioners with an opportunity to process negative and sometimes frightening emotions, and transform them into a 'resource for practice,' which can underpin subsequent intervention. Indeed, within psychotherapy, development born of out engagement with one's emotional intensity has been heralded as a helpful outcome (Dutta, 2010). Cooper (2005:8) suggests that without such oversight and reflection on the 'doing' element of practice, there is the potential for practitioners to fail to identify situations where they may have overlooked or underestimated the level of risk in a given circumstance; although he cautions that such facilitative conversations have been sidelined within the current context of child protection practice. This is supported by research undertaken by Manthorpe et al (2013) who found that whilst newly qualified social workers valued the educative function of supervision for

underpinning their fledgling practice, there was a lack of attention paid to reflection and reflexivity when encouraging continued professional development.

So, how may such facilitative and supportive *space*s be configured? Just as *relationship* has been placed at the core of the 'practitioner – service user' interaction and intervention, *relationship* is also central to the formation of safe and confidential spaces to explore difficult emotions in both formal and informal supervision. Yet Ruch (2012) highlights the paradox inherent in that whilst relationship based practice is attracting increasing attention in front line practice, it holds a fragile, potentially overlooked place within supervision.

At a broader team level, Ferguson (2010:197) suggests that practitioners benefit from having a 'secure base' of colleagues to return to from visits out in the community, from whom they can gain immediate and ongoing support. On an individual 'supervisor to supervisee' level however, this more intimate relationship should mirror that which workers seek to achieve in their practice with clients: a relationship which is based upon mutual trust, confidentiality, support and empathy (Noble and Irwin, 2009); offering a template from which practitioners may model their interactions with others.

Both Ruch (2005) and Howe (1998) advocate for relationship based practice as medium through which to reduce anxiety and achieve containment; with Ruch (2007) suggesting this can be achieved through encouraging reflective practice. She suggests that through exploration of uncertainty, even without immediate solutions, workers may feel better able to manage the tensions they are experiencing with greater surety.

Carpenter et al (2012:7) suggest that for a supervisor to be able to effectively respond to practitioner stress and confusion, and assist them to maintain their sense of self efficacy, it requires competent communication: attentive listening, empathy, confidentiality and a place where practitioners can feel contained and safe. This is in keeping with research conducted by Beddoe (2010) who found that the focus of good quality supervision should be on *process* not content. As espoused by Ferguson (2011:198) 'central to organizational containment is the provision of supervision that gives workers the space to talk openly, think, be still, to process their feelings, and to enable them to *know* their experiences and make sense of what is reverberating within them'. Conversely, supervision which emphasises the manager's bureaucratic responsibilities may be undermining to confidence

and impede future practice. This does not devalue the need for managerial oversight and compliance with standards and procedures, but places such focus on an equally important footing. As outlined, by Gadsby Waters (1992:100) supervision should assist workers to 'behave effectively' which is subtly different from 'behaving correctly'.

Supervision has the potential to safeguard those safeguarding others, assisting practitioners to navigate uncertainty, and identify and respond to adversity as a consequence of engagement with emotive and complex environments. Supervision has the potential to give transparency to worker's reactions and responses to challenging situations and to reflect upon whether the right choices were made then, and for the future. In addition, research also demonstrates that for the practitioner, effective supervision can buffer the impact of burn out (Hair, 2013) and improve job satisfaction overall (Carpenter et al, 2012). Yet concerns remain about the consistency to which the process of supervision is valued for these aims, and the effectiveness of its delivery in busy social care teams.

Problematic Supervisory Dynamics and the Rule of Optimism:

'...the assumption is that uncomplaining staff are coping'

(Morrison, 1990:262).

Research undertaken by Gibson et al in 1989, found that supervision was not perceived as offering support by the majority of social care workers/participants interviewed in their study. In fact, only 18% of respondents saw supervision as an effective tool to combat stress. Participants reported feeling that managerial staff were aware of both the climate of stress and distress, yet abdicated their responsibility to address these issues; indicating that 'hidden dynamics' may exist in the work place, which hamper tackling complex emotions (Morrison, 2007:257). The study also found that 10% of practitioners reported feeling more stressed by colleagues than by service users, extending to 35% when considering 'some' but not all colleagues (Gibson et al, 1989:8). Additionally, research undertaken by BASW in 2010 indicated that almost 70% of participants in their online study, felt that emotional issues were not adequately addressed within supervision, suggesting that issues were either not discussed or they left unresolved (BASW/CoSW, 2012).

These findings are supported by other studies undertaken in relation to the impact of supervision and the sources of stress for practitioners within social care teams. Indeed, Gibbs (2001) found that practitioners used her research interviews as a *rare* opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and feelings; the implication being that they were not able to do so within the practice setting. Furthermore, both Jones (2001) and Morrison (1990) reported that exhaustion and stress were more likely to be attributed to conflict with management and agency policy, rather than interactions with their client group.

There are a number of factors which impact on the way in which support systems are perceived, activated, undertaken and accessed. We now turn our attention to one potential dynamic: the rule of optimism, and consider whether it may be relevant in the supervisory relationship, and if so, how this may hamper effective practice.

The recent serious case review into the death of Daniel Pelka, called for workers to 'think the unthinkable', to consider the harsh reality that some parents may intentionally harm their children. Adopting such a position of healthy scepticism however, sits in contradistinction to the approach known as the' rule of optimism', highlighted by Dingwall et al in 1983. These authors suggest that practitioners are 'required if possible, to think the best of parents' (p79) and that this approach is formulated on evidence of two distinct factors: cultural relativism and natural love. The former, relates to the professional and societal toleration of harmful behaviour, on the basis that such behaviour is prevalent within a particular society (physical child neglect in impoverished communities, for example). The latter, relates to the belief that all parents have an instinctive drive to protect their children from harm and that if attachment behaviour can be observed between parent and child, this provides such a protective factor, reducing the likelihood of harm. The rule of optimism then, acts as a psychological defensive mechanism to justify inaction or a lack of *professional curiosity* in case work, failing to identify and address concerns and risk due to the mistaken belief that the child/ren will not come to any harm.

The hypothesis ventured here, is that the rule of optimism can also develop in the context of the supervisory relationship due to the interplay of two similar factors: *organisational relativism* and *assumed professional competence,* reducing the likelihood that the social work supervisor will be *professionally curious* about the practice of his/her supervisee. The

term *organisational relativism* is used here to define the way in which the organisational context and culture of any given agency (and individuals therein) adjust to the bureaucratic demands placed upon them. Both managers and workers within such settings become accustomed to resource shortfalls, target driven practice and the high vacancy rates which have resulted from the neo-liberal practices of the 1970s and 1980s; there is an acceptance that this is *how it is*, as these factors have ubiquitously dogged the social work profession for decades and persist in contemporary social work practice (Jones, 2001; Ferguson, 2014; Parton, 2014).

The second factor, *assumed professional competence*, relates to a belief by line managers that 'somehow… professionals will cope, and that that is part of being professional' (Morrison, 1990:258), akin to the presumption that because a parent has a biological link to a child, they will automatically develop a protective attachment. Dingwall et al (1983) suggest that once the professional has presupposed an inherent 'love' between parent and child, there is a reduced likelihood that practitioners will interpret evidence to the contrary in an accurate manner. Transposing this to the supervisory relationship, we suggest there may be a potential for supervisors to assume competence because of professional status or experience, therefore failing to identify contra-indicators to this within the supervisee's presentation. Such presuppositions have been identified by Gadsby Waters (1992:31) who suggests that the emotional impact of safeguarding work has received limited attention on account of the view that 'to be 'professional' is not to be involved or suffer any emotional reaction as a result of contact with human suffering'. She highlighted that workers considered to have greater experience were less likely to be challenged regarding their professional opinions; accompanied by the assumption that such workers would proactively seek help and support if required.

Ruch (2005:112) suggests that the context in which social work is couched has encouraged practitioners to ignore potentially irrational and emotional aspects of human functioning, instead assuming individuals to be rational and logical beings. We can transpose this to the supervisory relationship, where the supervisor may also make the convenient assumption that their staff member is able to function in a rational and logical manner, in spite of the emotional labour to which they are exposed.

Practitioners may collude with this standpoint, concealing evidence that they are struggling to fulfil their duties, or that the context of their practice and pressure therein, are affecting their wellbeing, for fear that it will negatively influence how they are perceived. In situations where supervisees do not feel able to talk through their difficulties, they may stage manage their presentation within supervision, through *performance.* Such behaviour was highlighted in research undertaken by Gadsby Waters, with one worker acknowledging that in relation to emotional toll, 'I'm quite skilled at keeping it hidden away well. It's safer to take it home where I'm not being judged' (1992:95). Arguably, there are parallels here to the identified phenomena of disguised compliance in safeguarding work with parents; where parents and carers may present a veneer of coping or conformity, to offset negative professional judgement and potentially, the need for more intrusive intervention. Likewise, on the surface the practitioner may appear to be managing their workload, undertaking visits and completing concrete tasks, which may belie the fact that they are failing to engage with complexity and the *unknown.* For the supervisor, *managing* the concrete, perceptible actions of an individual and adopting a sanguine outlook regarding their performance, provides a defence mechanism which justifies avoiding the more complex interpersonal dimensions of practice.

Morrison (1990:255) suggests that clear 'survival messages' have been conveyed to staff: 'don't feel, be strong, don't admit mistakes and coping is professional', the implication being that to share feelings and ask for help is reflective of weakness and lacking professional capability. This is supported by research undertaken by Hair (2013:1579) which indicated that particularly where supervision was linked to performance evaluation, staff members hid their vulnerability as to not raise concerns regarding their competence.

The supervisory 'rule of optimism' then, may lead the supervisor to adopt an optimistic outlook of the workers capacity to undertake their job in a climate of challenge, complex case work and agency demands, rather than to ask probing questions. This stance may align itself with the 'quiet life syndrome' identified by Browne and Bourne (1996:95), in which the supervisor fails to explore whether an issue is impacting on a supervisee to avoid the necessity to address it, waiting for more explicit evidence to arise; particularly where there are no overt indications that problems exist i.e. a fall in standards of work. Gadsby Waters (1992) suggests that such avoidant behaviour signifies a failure on behalf of the supervisor

to fulfil the 'professional' element of supervision, a theme unearthed in her research, which found that supervisors were indeed reluctant to ask about the emotional impact of the work, preferring instead to take a much less proactive stance – addressing issues only if they were identified by the social worker first. This sits in contradistinction to promoting *professional curiosity* as a supervisor, taking the initiative and encouraging the practitioner to seek help (Jones et al, 1987).

Just as Ferguson (2011) highlighted that practitioners may fail to ask to see a child or fail to look around a house due to the fear of what may uncovered, supervisors then, may fail to ask practitioners how they are managing with the current demands of their workload, for fear that they may unearth concerns to be addressed. Drawing parallels with Victoria Climbie, when workers simultaneously 'saw but did not see what was in front of their eyes' (Cooper, 2005:8), supervisors may also fall foul of seeing but failing to ask practitioners about their emotional well being, therefore rendering concerns invisible.

Research undertaken by Rushton and Nathan (1996) offers one such example, whereby supervisors commented on the difficulties inherent in responding to emotional and distressed supervisees, with one reporting:

> 'if they tell you what they're feeling, what the hell can I do about it? Maybe some of my holding back (from the staff member) is because I think if they tell me all this, what can I do except say, well, you've got to carry on, hold on' (p. 364).

Brown and Bourne (1996) suggest that when stress or burn out is identified it can be tackled by reducing caseloads, training or reallocation of work, yet for many agencies working in a climate of unfilled vacancies and elevated referral rates, this may not be possible. Consequently, feelings and emotions may not be acknowledged as legitimate conversational topics within supervision, directing the focus back to tangible issues requiring concrete solutions, with which the supervisor can address and engage. The danger here is that problematic feelings are suppressed, and as Brown and Bourne warn, as workers stress levels elevate, they may themselves start to work more bureaucratically, demonstrating less empathetic understanding towards the service users they are charged with supporting, and potentially less curious.

Breaking the cycle: Reflective and personal centred supervision:

We have seen the potential managerial, educational and cathartic benefits of supervision and suggested one potential pitfall in practice: the rule of optimism. It may be helpful to remind ourselves of a point touched upon earlier, that supervisors and line managers are themselves located within the same system that presents challenges for front line practitioners; a system which requires a delicate balance of triple accountabilities: towards staff, service users and the agency within which one is couched; the piggy in the middle (Jones 2004).

Managers do not transcend the emotional toll of child protection, upon appointment; they require support to balance what Ruch (2012:1237) refers to as the 'technical and the relational,' the emotive, and the demands of over procceduralism, not only for their staff, but also for themselves. However, Morrison (2005) warns in some settings, managers have been abandoned by the organisations for which they work, ultimately left unsupported.

Morrison (1990) urges caution to guard against the presumption that a competent practitioner will perform to the standard of a competent supervisor or manager, and suggests that for many there is a lack of training to assist them in acclimatising to their new roles and responsibilities. With elevated stress levels, managerial staff may risk 'reduced sensitivity' to the worries of those for whom they hold supervisory responsibility, or fail to identify them at all (Morrison, 1990; Brown and Bourne, 1996).

Rushton and Nathan (1996:371) outline the fact that assistance is required to help managers undertake empathic containment, which they define as the 'capacity of supervisors to deal with the frequently intense thoughts and feelings that the worker presents, and which arise from the concern about the maltreatment of children, without themselves becoming overwhelmed or paralysed'.

In teams and organisations where the culture engenders openness, enablement, engagement with feelings and emotions and consequent development, practitioners can feel supported enough to do such difficult work; supervision can provide, as eloquently described by Wosket and Page (2001: 19) a much needed 'container for creativity and chaos'. Yet, where such openness is stifled by a focus on targets and performance

management, service users may be detrimentally impacted upon by the very procedural safeguards that were implemented to ensure standards are met. In short, 'organisational processes can transform working cultures' (Beddoe, 2010:1282), with both negative and positive results.

In seeking to understand how we encourage front line practitioners to maintain a healthy professional curiosity then, we need to ensure that curiosity exists within the supervisory relationship and within the supervisor themselves. A curiosity, which can start to unpick the conscious and seemingly unconscious experiences of both parties. Above all, this requires an acceptance that as practitioners, at whatever level of management or experience, we may fall foul of what Hawkins and Shohet (2012:3) refer to as 'illusion, delusion and collusion in our work'. It is only then that we can acknowledge and accept there may be elements of functioning which we may not have an awareness of, that impact negatively on professional performance; likened by Wosket and Page (2001:20) to the Jungian concept of the 'shadow'. The authors suggest that just as practitioners have their own support needs, so too does the supervisor; in the form of 'unaware or unconscious dynamics' which impact on their ability to be effective. Supervision then must be firmly located within every tier of the organisation.

Firstly, supervisors themselves require a coherent level of support and safety to be able to move from directly working with families to being a worker who supports and enhances other practitioners to undertake such complex work (Wosket and Page, 2001). We have identified that the supervisor plays a central role in formulating case management strategies, but it is necessary for them to feel confident in their role of listening ear and (developmentally) critical eye. To address these issues many authors have called for a further layer of independence and objectivity, supervising the supervisor if you will (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Gadsby Waters, 1992). Access to external supervision or consultancy by an independent individual could provide the basis from which to engender reflection and exploration of practice inhibitors in the supervisor; ensuring that the practice supervisor is sufficiently able to retain his or her professional curiosity in increasingly challenging times. Yet this has been met with criticism, as external supervision can be too far removed from the pressure and demands placed up on the team (BASW, 2011). Rather than focussing on external means of support and oversight, Morrison (2005) suggests merit in ring fenced

supervision sessions geared towards developmental issues, team supervisions sessions and a 'buddy' system to monitor well being. He highlights the benefits inherent in expressly confronting the feelings and emotions that 'threaten to overwhelm us' (p.291).

Secondly, there is a need to focus on support for managers themselves to enable their reflective capacity to be remain activated. Supervisors also require support and guidance to navigate the layers of bureaucracy and the culture of performance management, which have become endemic within statutory social work teams. As identified by Ruch (2007) 'where practitioners felt 'held' by clearly defined organizational and professional frameworks, there appeared to be greater scope for the creation of confident, stable teams and individuals with secure professional identities, who as a consequence were able to develop as reflective, confident, autonomous and creative practitioners' (p670). This requires a clear commitment to reflective practice at all levels of the managerial framework. To enable managers to assist practitioners to surface hidden dimensions of practice, the organisation must hold equal responsibility in supporting the supervisor to be reflectively aware. Without such acknowledgement, Ruch (2012:1328) warns, that organisational contexts 'risk inhibiting the capacity for managers to think about the interpersonal and affective dimensions of practice that lie beneath the surface', those unconscious and often invisible behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

Further research is required to determine the impact of the move by some Local Authorities towards the Reclaiming Social work model (Cross et al, 2010). With evidence suggesting that the supportive and developmental function of supervision has been eroded in recent years (Ruch, 2007) can this approach stem the tide with its clear focus on reflective case work supervision? The decrease in individual, one to one supervision could provide a further barrier to the exploration of *self* within social work practice, although there is the potential for group reflection to offer an increased insight into case work dynamics, if all parties feel supported and able to contribute openly and without judgement. As such teams begin to embed, there will need to be an assessment of the degree to which professional curiosity can flourish within such a configuration.

Conclusion:

'High quality supervision is the cornerstone of effective safeguarding of children and young people and should be seen to operate effectively at all levels within the organisation.'

(DOH, 2004:107)

This article has hypothesised a potential for the 'rule of optimism' to exist within the supervisory relationship, inhibiting the power of supervision as a facilitator of professional curiosity in safeguarding practice. We suggest therefore that further research is required to determine whether the rule of optimism does indeed feature within the supervisory context and if so, how this may be countered.

Organisational processes designed to offer greater certainly to practitioners and managers may further compound the stress levels of these individuals, encouraging them to practice *correctly*, rather than *effectively* (Gadsby Waters, 1992:100). Such bureaucratic demands have encouraged practitioners and managers to focus on the rational and the predictable, at the expense of the sometimes irrational and illogical components of human behaviour, juxtaposed with social work practice, which aims at least, to embrace both.

The supervision of child protection work is a skilled activity; one that must attract equal recognition in relation to emotional labour. With an increased emphasis on and call for 'professional curiosity', further research is required not only to define the concept, but also to explore the contexts within which it may flourish at both a practitioner and managerial level, and how supervision may encourage and model this pro-social behaviour. A failure to identify the support needs of managers and develop their capacity to encourage professional curiosity will undermine any attempts to ensure such facilitative supervision.

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