UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE
IN
CONTEMPORARY CHILD CARE SOCIAL WORK

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In recent years there has been a steady increase in risk-averse, bureaucratic responses to the uncertainty, ambiguity and risk inherent in contemporary child care social work. This thesis argues that for these conditions to be effectively addressed professional responses are required that challenge the domination of ineffective bureaucratic approaches, which have as their primary objective the elimination of uncertainty and risk. The emergence of relationship-based practice is an approach to practice which offers this possibility. However, the development of relationship-based practice is dependent on practitioners and managers re-conceptualising their understanding of human behaviours - their own as well as those of the children and families they work with - and expanding the knowledges informing their practice. In essence, the development of relationship-based approaches to practice is contingent on social workers becoming accomplished reflective practitioners.

Within the literature reflective practice is recognised as complex and there is a paucity of empirical evidence relating to social work practitioners’ understandings and experiences of it. This research endeavours to contribute towards an enhanced understanding of the nature of reflective practice and the conditions which facilitate its development. The research findings, generated from ethnographic case studies of two family support teams, suggest that the potential for reflective practice is greater in work contexts which afford containing, reflective spaces in which practitioners have the opportunity to think, feel and talk about their work. Team structures and practices and team managers are identified as pivotal in determining the existence and effectiveness of these reflective, containing spaces. The thesis concludes by outlining a model of containing, reflective spaces and with a call for such spaces to be encouraged as an integral and essential feature of contemporary child care social work practice.
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List of Abbreviations

Organisations, Government Bodies and Procedures

CCETSW - Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers
DH - Department of Health
HMSO - Her Majesty's Stationery Office
LGA - Local Government Association
MAP - Management Action Plan
MCCSSD - Mornshire County Council Social Services Department
NCH - National Children's Homes
NISW - National Institute of Social Work
SSI - Social Services Inspectorate

Names and Pseudonyms

GR - Gillian Ruch
HC - Hurst Centre
ST - Sandworth Team
Model of Conditions for Holistic Containment

Inter-dependent Contexts for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice

Inter-dependent Conditions for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice

Holistic Containment for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice
Appendix Twelve

Model of an Internal Reflective Space
(adapted from Bower, 2002)

Practical-moral Knowledges \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Meaningful Relationship} \quad \leftarrow \quad \text{Technical-rational Knowledges}

\text{Internal Reflective Space}

Reflective Practice
Introduction

Reflective Practice in Contemporary Child Care Social Work

1. The Personal and the Political Backdrop to the Research

In the 1990s, whilst practising as a child care social work practitioner, I was aware of my growing frustration with the discrepancy between my experiences of the organisational and societal expectations of social work practice and understandings of practice gleaned from the social work literature and the realities I encountered on a daily basis. This frustration fuelled my interest in approaches to practice which engaged with the unpredictability and complexity inherent in social situations and which refused to consider as sufficient prescriptive or procedurally-restrictive responses.

My professional experiences coincided with research findings which highlighted how procedurally-regulated and managerially-dominated approaches, focusing on risk assessment and child protection investigations, had come to dominate social work practice at the expense of preventative work and family support (DH, 1995). The response to these findings was the call to 'refocus' child care services towards family support services and practice which was relationship-based (Parton, 1997). Relationship-based practice involves practitioners developing and sustaining supportive professional relationships in unique and challenging situations (Howe, 1998) and requires practitioners to re-evaluate their styles of practice and sources of professional knowledge in a social work context of complexity and uncertainty (Lishman, 1999; Parton, 1999). The importance of practitioners' capacity to draw on personal, experiential and tacit sources of knowledge to inform their practice - as well as technical-rational ‘theoretical’ and research-based knowledges - and to develop as reflective practitioners, has been acknowledged for some time as an important aspect of professional practice (Schon, 1983). Its relevance for the development of relationship-based practice in child care social work settings, however, has not been explored.
2. The Thesis Underpinning the Research

In this thesis I argue that contemporary child care social work faces challenges, acknowledged by the refocussing debate, arising from the uncertain, ambiguous, risk-ridden and complex context of practice and I suggest that practice approaches that are relationship-based and informed by reflective practice provide alternative, more appropriate and potentially more effective responses to these challenges. In designing the research informing this thesis five key research objectives were identified:

- To explore the diverse understandings of, and assumptions about, reflective practice in contemporary social work
- To examine the processes whereby practitioners draw upon different sources of knowledge and communicate, exchange and operationalise them in reflective practice.
- To consider the organisational contexts, conditions and systems that facilitate or inhibit reflective practice.
- To consider the contribution of reflective practice to the development of relationship-based practice
- To explore the significance of reflective practice for individual practitioners, service users and service provider agencies

During the initial stages of planning this research four key objectives were identified (number one, two, three and five above) and the fourth objective above was not included. During these early days my interest lay in reflective practice ‘in its own right’. I had not clearly identified or thought through the relationship that existed between reflective and relationship-based practice. As the research process and thinking surrounding this thesis has unfolded, however, it has become increasingly apparent that reflective practice needed to be considered as an integral component of relationship-based practice as opposed to an approach to practice that stood in isolation from other approaches. This realisation led to the inclusion of the fourth research objective, which in turn has become a pivotal component of the argument which I put forward in this thesis.
3. The Thesis Structure

Before outlining the content of each chapter it is important to clarify for the benefit of the reader the terminology used throughout the thesis. The social work practitioners and managers who were involved with this research have been referred to as research participants, a term which emphasises their active engagement in the research process. The professional identities are referred to as social work practitioners, or more simply practitioners, and managers. The two teams have been renamed to afford the research settings confidentiality and the names of the practitioners and managers have also been altered (the ethical implications of confidentiality and anonymity in the research process are discussed further in Chapter Three). The children and families with whom the respective teams worked are referred to as simply children or families or clients, a term I believe more aptly describes the nature of the relationship established between families and social work practitioners than service user.

In the first chapter I locate my interest in reflective practice in its contemporary social and political context. I suggest that the legacy of the dominant legalistic and bureaucratic responses to the uncertain and anxiety-provoking nature of contemporary social work practice has been two-fold: a reductionist understanding of human behaviour and a reliance on simplistic, procedurally-driven practice responses. The recent interest in relationship-based practice has arisen as a response to the limited effectiveness of the prevailing approaches to child care social work practice, most recently demonstrated by the Victoria Climbie Inquiry (DH, 2003). I argue that in order for relationship-based practice to develop and flourish, the uncertainty and anxiety associated with the emotionally-charged subject matter that social work comprises must be effectively contained. Reflective practice which recognises both the diverse sources of knowledge which inform practice and the unique, unpredictable nature of social work practice is identified as one way in which the challenges of contemporary child care social work could be effectively contained and relationship-based practice enhanced.

Chapter Two develops the ideas outlined in the first chapter and explores the literature-based understandings of reflective practice. The first section of the chapter considers definitions and classifications of reflective practice. Given the problematic
nature of these definitions and classifications I suggest, along with other writers (Ixer, 1999), that it is more helpful to consider why reflective practice is beneficial for social work practice. In responding to the question ‘why reflect?’ I identify three key reasons related to gaining enhanced understandings of the knowledges informing practice, the client, the self and the organisation. The third and final section of the chapter explores the individual and organisational obstacles and incentives to the development of reflective practice in contemporary child care social work and develops the idea of containment introduced in Chapter One. I suggest that in order for reflective practice to be a core component of social work practice, the contexts, conditions and forums facilitating it need to contain the uncertainty and anxiety of contemporary practice, currently ineffectively contained or ‘managed’ by the managerialist and outcomes-orientated ethos underpinning practice.

Chapter Three introduces the rationale for the research design and methodology adopted. I begin by acknowledging my personal and professional roots and their influence on my research topic and methodological stance before moving on to outline the compatibility between qualitative research methods and social work practice. The subsequent sections introduce the ethnographic case study approach, outline the observation and interview methods used and explain the principles of grounded theory that informed the data analysis process. Particular attention is paid to the place of subjectivity, reflexivity and emancipatory issues in qualitative research and to the practical and ethical issues encountered in research of this nature.

Chapter Four provides descriptions of the two research settings and comprises an outline of the organisational and team contexts of each setting and the practitioners located in them. This chapter forms the descriptive backdrop to the following three chapters in which I critically analyse the key findings arising from the research and begin to consider their significance for the nature and development of reflective practice.

At the outset of Chapter Five - The Practitioner Context of Reflective Practice - the first of three findings chapters, I acknowledge that the triadic linear structure of the research findings chapters in this thesis belies the extent to which the three contexts of reflective practice were dynamically inter-related. This inter-relationship was a core
research finding that underpinned the findings specific to each context. In this chapter I examine the nature of practitioners' experiences of practice and discuss the diverse sources of knowledge drawn on to inform reflective practice. I identify two different groupings of practitioners - one comprising individuals who are technically reflective and the other individuals who are holistically reflective. The second section of the chapter focuses on the manifestation of these different reflective orientations in practice.

Chapter Six focusses on the organisational context of reflective practice and I identify three key characteristics that have an important bearing on the extent to which this context is conducive or not, to reflective practice: professional identity, which embraces organisational and theoretical clarity, management structures and organisational expectations.

In the final findings chapter, Chapter Seven I consider the third context of reflective practice - the team - which occupies a pivotal position between the organisational and individual practitioner contexts of reflective practice. Several key characteristics of this setting, pertinent to the development of reflective practice, were identified which broadly fell into two categories - firstly, managerial identity which embraced managerial roles and responsibilities and managers' attributes, and secondly, team characteristics which covered team practices, culture, dynamics and relationships.

Chapter Eight draws together the findings which have emerged from the research and from the literature and endeavours to identify firstly, the type of reflective practice which is most conducive to the development of relationship-based practice and secondly, the conditions which promote it. The first section of the chapter compares the research findings in relation to the nature of reflective practice within the literature and identifies substantial overlaps which suggest that settings where practitioners have an holistic understanding of reflective practice offer the greatest potential for relationship-based approaches to practice to develop. The internal and external conditions which facilitate holistic reflective practice are the focus of the second section. It begins with the acknowledgement of the key research finding - the inseparable relationship between the internal and external conditions that promote reflective practice. The remainder of the second section is divided into two sub-
sections, the first addressing the internal, individual factors influencing the development of reflective practice and the second the external, collective conditions which include the centrality of organisational and professional clarity, the need for multi-faceted reflective forums to meet the diverse needs of reflective practitioners, the collaborative and communicative characteristics of effective reflective forums and the significance of the role of the reflective facilitator. In the final section of the chapter the common characteristic of the conditions promoting reflective practice - their capacity to contain the uncertainty, complexity and anxiety of social work practice - is developed in conjunction with Bion's (1962) concept of containment. A grounded model of reflective practice informed by the conceptual framework of containment is outlined. The model embraces a multi-faceted understanding of containment which addresses the individual needs of practitioners and responds to the organisational demands placed on them.

The concluding chapter considers the understanding that has been generated by this research and emphasises the importance of practitioners having ‘thinking spaces’ which encourage reflective and effective practice. I suggest how the findings of this research might be applied to the wider child care social work arena and propose some possible areas for further research.

4. The Spiralling Journey of Research

In the course of completing this thesis I have found the analogy of a journey helpful in making sense of my experiences. As I introduce this thesis and present it as a complete whole I am aware that its completeness is deceptive. Journeys such as this one reach ‘resting places’ but do not ‘arrive’. Qualitative research, like reflective practice, seeks to illuminate and create enhanced understanding of social phenomenon but never claims to have captured ‘the truth’. Reflective practice and qualitative enquiry, therefore, must acknowledge what has informed a practice intervention or been understood from the research experience but must equally acknowledge the persistent areas of uncertainty or ambiguity and highlight issues for future consideration. The reader is invited through this thesis to share in the journey that has taken place and to see the potential direction for future journeys into under- or as yet un-explored terrain.
Chapter One
The Historical, Social and Political Contexts of Contemporary Child Care Social Work and the Place of Relationship-based Practice

Introduction

In this chapter I locate my interest in reflective practice in its contemporary social and political context. I begin by tracing the shifts, since the 1950s, from preventative and therapeutic approaches to child care social work to approaches which involve legalistic and managerialist interpretations of the social work role. The limited effectiveness of these different approaches to child care social work practice, evidenced in the recurrence of child care tragedies and persistence of large numbers of children in need, raises important questions about which components of practice need attention in order for its efficacy to be improved and what level of efficacy can reasonably be expected. I suggest that the legacy of recent approaches to practice has been two-fold: a reductionist understanding of human behaviour and simplistic, bureaucratically-based responses to the uncertain and anxiety-provoking nature of social work practice. I move on to explore more recent trends towards relationship-based practice, which seek to respond to the challenges facing contemporary child care social work. Relationship-based practice is defined as practice which focuses on the client-professional relationship and the dynamic and unique nature of social work interactions. It involves re-conceptualising understandings of the client and the nature of social work practice and by implication it involves re-conceptualising the practitioner.

The final section of the chapter introduces the concept of reflective practice as a means of responding to the needs of practitioners’ engaged in relationship-based practice. I argue that in order for relationship-based practice to develop and flourish the unpredictability and anxiety associated with the emotionally-charged subject matter that social work comprises must be effectively contained. Reflective practice which recognises both the diverse sources of knowledge which inform practice and the unique, unpredictable nature of contemporary practice is identified as one way in
which anxiety could be effectively contained and practice enhanced. I conclude by suggesting that if social work practice is to appropriately and effectively respond to the needs of individuals and families it must develop a relationship-based approach, derived from and sustained by reflective understandings of practice, which embraces an holistic understanding of clients, of practitioners and of the nature of social work practice.

1. The Historical Context of Social Work Practice

1.1. The Rise of Legalism

1.1.1. Social Work in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

In order to understand the current state of child care social work and contemporary issues and tensions it is necessary to place it in its historical, social and political context. The 1950s and 60s saw the establishment of Children’s Departments as part of the Welfare State. The children’s officers who worked in these departments were primarily caseworkers who adopted psychodynamic approaches to practice (Parton, 1991; Stevenson, 1991). The focus was on the whole family and preventative approaches and the prevalent belief was that interventions were therapeutic and, therefore, outcomes were therapeutic. Welfare provision and state intervention were seen to be a ‘good thing’ and involvement was on the basis of negotiation rather than coercion (Otway, 1996; Parton, 1991). The legal aspects of social work with children and families had a low profile. Developments in the 1970s and 80s, however, began to challenge the efficacy of casework-based practice and the therapeutic approach (Brewer and Lait, 1980; Fischer, 1976) and the standards of child care social work provided by the Social Service Departments which had replaced the Children’s Departments (Otway, 1996; Stevenson, 1999). In 1974 the death of Maria Colwell, a child placed at home under Local Authority care, undermined the confidence of the general public in the social work profession and raised questions about the role and focus of child care social work. Since the publication of the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (DHSS, 1974) child care social work practice has had to publicly grapple with the tension between its caring/preventative and controlling/protecting roles.
1.1.2. The Inquiry Era - Social Work in the 1980s

During the early 1980s, in spite of the rumblings of discontent in relation to child care social work, social work practice maintained its emphasis on prevention. The Short Report (Social Services Committee, 1984), the Review of Child Care Law (DHSS, 1985) and research findings (DH, 1985) reinforced the existing welfare focus (Parton, 1991). The late 1980s, however, saw a spate of child care tragedies (London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Greenwich, 1987; London Borough of Lambeth, 1987) which served to shift the balance in child care social work practice significantly. The Blom-Cooper inquiry into the death of Jasmine Beckford (London Borough of Brent, 1985) reinforced the central role of the legal system in all decisions about children at risk and in care, commenced the process of legalising child care social work and shifted its focus from the broad issues of child welfare to the more narrowly focussed concerns of child abuse. For Blom-Cooper the law was social work's 'defining mandate' (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1995). The expectation placed on practitioners was that by working more closely with the legal system and improving their understanding of child abuse they could effectively eradicate it (Howe, 1992; Parton, 1991). Whilst the inquiries sought to identify the causes of the tragedies and eradicate them via new policies and procedures it was less clear how committed they were to examining and understanding the dynamics of the work and the experiences of the practitioners involved (Houston and Bamford, 1996), an issue that remains pertinent for current social work practice (DH, 2003). Woodhouse and Pengelly (1991:241) saw the judicial approach as one which avoided complex questions:

*In emotive circumstances, the legal approach has been invoked to establish and analyse the facts; to search for and to test the evidence... Complex questions remain, however, which a different frame of reference may throw light on.*

The very public nature of the inquiries, which were conducted in the full glare of the media, and the apportioning of professional blame, risked negating any positive lessons which could be learnt (Parton, 1996). Practitioners became fearful of making mistakes and being publicly and professionally pilloried (Ferguson, 1997; Munro, 1996; Spratt and Houston, 1999). Child care social work, as a consequence, became more restrictive in its outlook and defensive in practice (Ferguson, 1997; Howe, 1992;
Parton, 1998b). The Cleveland Crisis and Inquiry (Butler-Sloss, 1988) appeared to have been, in part, a result of the cautious and defensive approach adopted by practitioners in response to the criticisms of under-intervention which had been levelled at them. The criticism of over-intervention in the cases of Cleveland and Orkney (Clyde, 1992), however, had the same focus as that associated with under-intervention i.e. attempting to constrain social work practice within a pre-dominantly legal framework. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of a socio-legal approach to child protection and a discourse which embraced increasingly legalistic concepts: ‘risk’, ‘investigation’, ‘assessment’, ‘surveillance’, and ‘forensic evidence’ (Howe, 1992; Otway, 1996; Parton, 1991). Howe (1992:497) summarised the changes:

Social workers would have to become investigators and not family caseworkers. Managers would have to become designers of surveillance systems and not casework consultants....The shift is from therapy to surveillance and control.

Accompanying this discourse was a belief system which held that increasing practitioners’ knowledge of risk factors related to child abuse and improving the collaboration between professionals and the administrative aspects of the work would protect children and eventually enable incidents of child abuse to be calculated, controlled and even eliminated (Ferguson, 1996; Parton, 1998b). The document ‘Working Together’ (DH, 1988) and the introduction of planning meetings, network meetings and additional administrative systems represented attempts to proceduralise child abuse and to create a comprehensive child protection system, dominated by a legal framework (Spratt and Houston, 1999). As Otway (1996:160) recognised, the rational and bureaucratic response to the crises of the 1980s appeared to be based on the conviction that ‘anything is manageable as long as it can be understood and categorised...’. As a consequence social workers operated more like care managers, assessing and monitoring risk, than therapeutic practitioners (Otway, 1996; Parton, 1998b).

In the space of approximately six years the face of child care social work had altered markedly from one promoting the welfare of all children within a broadly preventative approach to a narrowly focussed system dominated by child protection concerns and
'high risk' (Parton, 1991; Parton, 1998b; Carter, 1995). The system was driven by legalistic mechanisms which replaced welfare, therapy and treatment with surveillance, investigation, protection and control (Howe, 1992; Parton, 1991, 1998b; Waterhouse and McGhee, 1998). The emphasis in practice was less on 'good' practice and more on 'right/correct' practice, as the prevailing climate of 'mutual suspicion and mistrust' (Jack, 1997:664) was intolerant of professional mistakes (Howe, 1992; Preston-Shoot, 1996a). Professional confidence was undermined and practitioners became anxious and uncertain. In an attempt to deny the reality of the work - unpredictable and emotionally charged - and its associated stresses, organisational defence mechanisms came into play (Menzies-Lyth, 1988). Competency criteria, evidence and demonstrable skills were clung to as the means of achieving the unattainable certainty that was aspired to (Ayrmer and Okitikpi, 2000).

1.1.3. The Children Act 1989, Research and the Refocussing Debate - Social Work in the 1990s and the New Millennium

The introduction of the Children Act 1989 can be understood as a response to the developments in child care social work during the 1980s (Bainham, 1990). Whilst the original foundations for the legislative changes which culminated in the Children Act were rooted in the preventative approaches of the early 1980s the influence of this thinking was significantly diminished by the emergence of the child protection concerns of the later 1980s (Parton, 1998b). The Act retained a welfare perspective and sought to identify children in need who could benefit from family support services but undoubtedly its primary focus was related to the issues of child protection and the balancing of rights and responsibilities in relation to parents, children and the state (Bainham, 1998; Otway, 1996; Parton, 1991, 1996a; Smith, 1996).

Following the implementation in 1991 of the Children Act, research was undertaken which began to highlight the imbalances in its application (Audit Commission, 1994; DH, 1995). The Audit Commission's report investigated the provision of services provided by Community Health and Social Services and concluded that there was considerable scope for needs-led assessments and improved co-ordination between the two service providers particularly in relation to family support services. The publication of 'Child Protection: Messages from Research' (DH, 1995) confirmed the
dominance of child protection in child care social work and the failure to develop preventative responses, general support and longer-term, therapeutic responses to the situations arising. Its overall findings reinforced Parton’s (1994:26) view that:

No longer are social workers constructed as therapists or caseworkers, but as care or case managers co-ordinating and operationalising care packages, where their knowledge of resources and networks is crucial and where, again, notions of monitoring and review are central.

Practice was criticised for being too reductionist in outlook, using the threshold criteria of ‘significant harm’ to assess risk and withdrawing from families if the threshold conditions were not met, regardless of whether there were other welfare concerns in evidence. It failed to recognise the complexities and subjectivities involved in securing the welfare of children in contemporary society (Aldgate and Hill, 1996; Fahlberg, 1994). The report concluded that more attention needed to be paid to practitioners developing relationships with clients based on the concept of partnership in the context of preventative services (DH, 1995; Parton, 1997; Parton, 1999; Sharland et al, 1995). Hence the refocussing debate was born which according to Parton (1996a:3) represented:

a major debate about whether and how policy and practice can be reframed so that it is consistent with the original intentions of the Children Act.

Within the refocussing debate discussion arose about how best services might be organised and how a ‘lighter touch’ might be adopted (Aldgate and Hill, 1996; Batty and Cullen, 1996; Hearn, 1995; NCH, 1996; Parton, 1996b, 1998a; Robinson, 1996; Rose, 1994; Stevenson, 1999). Parton (1996b) and Hughes (1996) both recognised the difficulties in shifting the prevailing emphasis in social work practice. Attention focussed on the most efficient organisational arrangements for child protection and family support services, with some people believing it was possible to offer a range of services along a continuum within the statutory sector (Hearn, 1995; NCH, 1996), whilst others questioned whether the two strands of child care should be separated out into the statutory and voluntary sectors (Parton, 1997, 1998a). What was lacking, however, was an adequate understanding of the dynamics of practice and guidance.
about how the distinction between child protection issues and family support services might be made (Parton, 1996b; Preston-Shoot, 1996a). Such understanding might have highlighted that organisational changes were necessary but not sufficient to shift the balance in child care social work, as organisational changes were dependent on practitioners being committed to them.

Given that changes in practice, in response to the inquiries of the 1980s, explored in a Social Services Inspectorate Report (SSI, 1993), were only very slowly adopted, the challenges to practice in the 1990s raised important questions about what facilitated effective change. These questions generated interest in the significance of practitioners’ attitudes for the process of change. Practitioners appeared, in principle, to support the shift from defensive and investigative to engaging and communicative practice (Robinson, 1996). How practitioners’ attitudes and practice could be altered in reality, however, raised important and difficult questions relating to definitions of risk and ideologies of child protection (Ferguson, 1997; Jack, 1997; Parton, 1996b; Spratt and Houston, 1999). The dependency of change on the transformation of professional subjectivities is, as Woodhouse and Pengelly (1997:127) acknowledge, a challenging process:

\[
\text{to move from changed awareness to changes in behaviour is no easy matter, especially since personal defensive needs will be so bound up in the institutionalised defence structures.}
\]

Hetherington et al (1997), in a comparative study of the French and British child care systems, highlighted the preventative and inclusive nature of the French system which contrasted starkly with the British system. Hetherington envisaged the re-introduction of a preventative approach into a system dominated by legal discourse and non-intervention to be a painstaking and slow process, particularly because of the invisible, inconclusive and unquantifiable nature of the work. According to Hetherington et al (1997:108) refocussing in the child protection system was dependent:

\[
\text{on the manner in which things take place, on the 'how' rather than the 'what'. In this way of working procedure takes second place to flexibility and negotiation.}
\]
The attitudinal changes of professionals, identified as necessary for effective, as opposed to superficial, changes in practice to be realised, was dependent on the confidence of managers and practitioners being carried into the new organisational systems (Hetherington et al, 1997; NCH, 1996; Packman and Hall, 1998; Stevenson, 1999). Despite the changes that have taken place, professional confidence in the efficacy of social work practice has remained at a low ebb and consequently the extent to which the ideas arising from the refocussing debate have effected changes in child care social work is negligible. How professional understandings of and attitudes towards practice might be more effectively addressed is the focus of later sections in this chapter.

1.2. The Influence of Managerialism

The rise of legalistic understandings of social work practice have largely occurred in response to events internal to the world of social work. In contrast, the emergence of managerialism within social work is the result of the broader, external, social, political and economic contexts in which social work practice is located (Munro, 2000). Over the past forty years since the inception of the Children's Departments the socio-political context of child care social work has undergone a transformation, with significant consequences for social work practice. As Parton (1994a) and Howe (1994) both recognise, social work occupies an ambivalent social space and its particular relationship to the individual or the State is defined according to the prevailing dominant political ideologies (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). The welfarist approach to social work with children and families which dominated the 1950s, 60s and 70s was replaced in the 1980s by a neo-liberal political philosophy which emphasised individual rights and responsibilities and the role of economic market principles. Although, unlike the adult services provided by Social Services Departments, children and family services are not (yet) determined by legislation which is underpinned by market principles, it is apparent that the market culture has permeated social work practice with children and families and that notions of ‘best value’, consumers and
purchaser/provider splits are evident (Howe 1994; Munro, 2000; Parton, 1994a, 1998b). As a consequence of these governing principles the efficiency of social work practice has been subject to scrutiny, the right of the individual to freedom of choice has been emphasised and the interventionist role of the State has been reduced. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of marginalised and excluded people requiring help and a simultaneous decrease in resource provision (Parton, 1991, 1994a, 1998b). The repercussions of neo-liberal political principles have been accompanied by other trends, not directly attributable to neo-liberal political philosophies. Most notable among these trends is the shift towards welfare provision which is resource rather than needs-led, system-centred rather than client centred and outcome and audit driven (Audit Commission, 1994; Hearn, 1995; Preston-Shoot, 1996a; Smith, 1996). The overall consequences of these prevailing approaches to welfare for the practitioner-client relationship has been a shift from nurturing and supportive to contractual and service orientated approaches to practice, from therapeutic to transactional, from inter-personal to economic (Howe, 1996). The centrality for practice of the professional relationship based on trust (Hollis, 1964) has been replaced, according to Parton (1998b), by the notion of audit. Practitioners have become managers whose tasks are to assess, provide and review services. Practice is seen in terms of technical-rational competencies rather than professional values, knowledge and skills (Adams, 1998; Carter, 1995; Smith and White, 1997). Howe (1994:529) describes how under a neo-political ideology:

*professional discretion disappears under a growing mountain of departmentally generated policy and formulae.*

and how the managerialist approach to practice:

*is antithetical to depth explanations, professional discretion, creative practice and tolerance of complexity and uncertainty (Howe, 1996:92)*

Similarly Parton (1998b:6) sees:

*the essential focus for policy and practice no longer takes the form of a direct face-to-face relationship between the professional and the client but resides in*
managing and monitoring a range of abstract factors deemed liable to produce risk for children.

The rise of managerialism has been a slow but steady process (Spratt and Houston, 1999; Stevenson, 1999) and has been characterised by practice being focussed on measurable outcomes which prove its economic efficiency and effectiveness. Youll (1996:39) summarised the trend to managerialism as one which overlooked any aspect of practice which was not measurable which included:

*mindfulness, the process and nature of relationships, managing the affective component of the work, 'the artistry of social work'....*

As far back as 1986 Howe identified the tension between managerialist and professional practice and the process appears to have moved steadily onwards since then in response both to the legalistic developments in practice identified above and to the growing influence of the neo-liberal political philosophy (Munro, 2000; Otway, 1996). Aymer and Okitikpi (2000:69) similarly recognised how the emergence of managerialist social work practice became characterised by the separation of action from reflection:

*what it achieved was to change the ethos of the professional intervention from one of trust to that of contract culture where everyone involved from providers and purchasers to customers (people) only related to each other through contractual obligations that had been agreed.... guidelines, procedures, manuals act as a defence against the anxiety of 'not knowing'*.  

Recent practice initiatives such as the Framework for Assessment (DH et al, 2000) and the Looked After Children Action and Assessment Records and the imminent Integrated Children’s System have been devised to address some of the shortcomings of the proceduralised and managerialist trends in practice (Rose, 2002). The implementation of the Framework for Assessment (DH et al, 2000) and the Action and Assessment Records was intended to provide practitioners with more comprehensive, holistic and adaptable tools for practice. Instead the initiatives have fallen short of what they were expected to achieve and provided further evidence of
the outcomes-driven approaches which underpin contemporary practice (Garrett, 2002). It is possible to identify two possible explanations for these shortcomings. Firstly, whilst the Framework for Assessment aimed to equip practitioners with a breadth of evidence-based knowledge to apply to their practice, it failed to provide them with realistic timescales to complete assessments or an adequate understanding of the complexities, idiosyncrasies and subjectivities of the processes involved in completing these assessments. In essence the Assessment Framework provides practitioners with a tool which tells them 'what' to look for but does not provide them with an adequate explanation of how to weigh-up and 'reason' with the collected information - to ask 'why' the specific circumstances have arisen - on an individual basis.

A second explanation relates to the roots of these initiatives which are located in political contexts dominated by demands for audit, outcomes and evidence-based practice (Garrett, 2002; Rose, 2002; Trinder, 2000). To meet these demands new systems and policies, such as the Quality Protects programme (DH, 1998), the Government’s Objectives for Children’s Services (DH, 1999b) and the New Vision for Children’s Services (LGA, 2002), which identify appropriate practice outcomes and measurable targets, have accompanied the introduction of the new initiatives. As a consequence of the incompatibilities between the original aims of these initiatives and the socio-political climate in which they have been introduced, their potential to shift the emphasis in social work practice has been impaired. Their use as tools for identifying and evaluating the effectiveness of practice outcomes, measuring ‘performativity’, and ensuring ‘best-value’ (Hayden et al, 1999; Howe, 1996; Smith, 1997) has detracted from their use as holistic, client-centred tools for practice. On paper the intentions behind these initiatives were laudable. In practice, however, the search for more effective and responsive strategies for practice has encountered the tension between bureaucratic responses based on classification and monitoring and relationship-based responses which focus on the importance of the client-practitioner relationship, participation, empowerment and understanding (Rose, 2002). Rather than introducing more subtle and processual tools which acknowledge the complexities of practice, the Government appears committed to replicating earlier mistakes by relying on crude data-gathering systems and rigid procedures which emphasise absolute outcomes over individual processes. With the recent publication of the
findings of the Climbie Inquiry (DH, 2003) there is concern within the child care social work profession of the implications for their practice of further procedural requirements being introduced and organisational changes implemented in order to respond to the report’s recommendations.

Brandon et al (1998:199) have questioned the appropriateness of these governmental responses and initiatives which appear to prioritise procedures over and above client-practitioner relationships. In their opinion:

*It is not productive to give higher priority to decisionmaking and resource management than to working alongside the child.*

These recent outcome-driven Government initiatives highlight the unresolved tension which exists in contemporary practice between attempts to managerialise and proceduralise practice, and by implication individuals’ behaviours and circumstances, whilst simultaneously encouraging partnership and user-participation and advocating the importance of individual rights (Brandon et al 1998; DH, 2001; Munro, 2000; Thoburn *et al*, 1995; Waterhouse and McGhee, 1998). The disappointing impact of these initiatives has been heightened by recent research (DH, 2001), which reinforced the principal finding of the earlier research (DH, 1995) - the need for a more discriminating use of the formal child protection procedures.

1.3. Empowerment-based and Anti-Oppressive Approaches to Practice

Running alongside the emergence of managerialist approaches to practice and the attempts through the Children Act and the ensuing research to refocus social work practice, has been the emergence of anti-oppressive and empowerment approaches to practice which seek to be more client-centred. This practice perspective is based in part on the realisation that the likelihood of a positive outcome is enhanced if clients are involved in the decisionmaking process (Brandon et al, 1998; Cloke and Davies, 1995; Fahlberg, 1994; Horwath and Morrison, 1999; Munro, 2000; Thoburn and Shemmings, 1995). In relation to children this has been most clearly seen in the United Nations Convention for Rights of the Child (1990) which embodies the essential rights of children, including their right to express their opinion about what is happening to
them (Article 12) and in the principles underpinning the Children Act, which seek to place the welfare of the child as paramount and to ascertain their wishes and feelings. In relation to families the importance of partnership in practice, encapsulated in the Children Act, encouraged innovative new practices such as Family Group Conferences (Marsh and Crow, 1997; Ryburn, 1992). In the 1990s empowering and participatory perspectives became subsumed in the ascendancy of anti-oppressive practice which sought to address issues of social injustice and emphasised the oppressive circumstances in which social work clients were located and offered structural and collective explanations for the existence of oppression (Dominelli, 1998).

Although anti-oppressive practice has been widely adopted as a valuable framework for social work in many social work practice and educational contexts it has been, like the research outcomes proposing a refocussing of child care social work, less effective than its initial claims suggested. A partial explanation for the limited effectiveness of empowerment and anti-oppressive approaches to practice is located in the incompatibility between them and the prevailing legalistic and managerialist contexts of practice. The practice principles of empowerment and participation, which involve practitioners ‘getting along side’ children and families, have been uncomfortably located, however, in a legalistic and managerialist context of practice which involves governing ‘at a distance’ (Parton, 1998b) and the ‘depersonalisation of clients’ (Preston-Shoot, 1996a:27). These contradictory forces influencing practice have raised questions about the extent to which the more client-centred approaches based on empowerment, partnership and anti-oppressive practice could be implemented in a bureaucratically dominated practice culture (Munro, 2000; Smith, 1996).

1.4. Re-defining the Social Work Role and Organisational Context

Bringing this analysis of the history of child care social work up-to-date requires consideration to be given to the recent shifts in the organisational arrangements for child care social work, firstly in relation to the Government’s social inclusion initiatives and secondly, in relation to the shift towards multi-agency and inter-professional organisational arrangements. The emphasis placed by this Government on policies to promote social inclusion have been broadly welcomed by the social work profession but have had the effect ‘on the ground’ of eroding the practice base of child
care social work. The introduction of the Surestart, Children’s Fund and Connexions programmes, staffed by wide range of professionals, have focussed on the diverse needs of children across the age range and have had a significant influence on the narrowing of the remit of social service departments working with children and their families. The current focus of this provision is increasingly restricted to issues of child protection, with all the stigmatising associations that go with this remit, and the scope for responses which embrace broader understandings of child welfare and family support has been significantly reduced.

Running alongside this narrowing of the remit of child care social work provision is the shift towards structural configurations which involve social work departments being absorbed into multi-professional Children’s Trusts. As with the social inclusion initiatives, the move towards children’s services being located ‘under one umbrella’ can be seen to have benefits in relation to the comprehensive provision and co-ordination of services for children and families. The potential adverse consequences of these new arrangements, however, lie in the knowledge, skills and values of the social work profession being subsumed by those of other professionals located within the same organisational context and the diminution of the voice of the social work professional.

2. Contemporary Challenges to Child Care Social Work Practice

Social work has been in a crisis for several years but the explanations as to why it has reached its current ‘crisis’ remain disputed. Despite the different approaches that have been adopted to social work practice, progress has not produced the changes which are required for the efficacy of social work practice to be significantly improved, as illustrated by the recurrence of deaths of children known to social work departments and in particular by the findings of the Victoria Climbie Inquiry (DH, 2003). Some academics conceptualise recent developments as a reaction to the emergence of post-modernism and to the uncertainty and fragmentation which is central to this social theoretical perspective (Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994a), whilst others understand the shifts to be the result of the extensive and pervasive influence of neo-liberal political ideology (Smith and White, 1997). Whilst the origins of the current state of child care social work practice remain disputed, the historical overview I have outlined embraces two key characteristics of practice, which are common to all the different practice
approaches adopted in recent years: firstly, conceptualisations of the individual which are reductionist, as opposed to holistic, and which privilege rational understandings of human behaviour; and secondly bureaucratic responses to the uncertainty, complexity, risk and anxiety which are inherent in social work practice. These two characteristics of contemporary practice constitute the two main challenges facing the profession today. In the following sections I explore these characteristics in more detail and introduce an emergent approach to practice - relationship-based practice - which I suggest has the potential to transform the current obstacles to effective practice into building blocks for a more responsive and realistic model of practice, capable of meeting the recommendations of child care social work research (DH, 1995, 2001), the personal needs of clients and the professional needs of practitioners.

2.1. The Conceptualisation of the Individual

The shifts in child care social work practice's social, economic and political context in general and the pervasive individualistic stance of neo-liberalism in particular have resulted in the erosion of an holistic concern for the individual and of an holistic understanding of child care social work practice. The legacy of the neo-liberal era has been the two-fold, inter-dependent assumption underpinning recent contemporary child care social work practice - that human beings are rational and operate outside of their personal social contexts (Howe, 1997; Howe and Hinings, 1995) and that human behaviour can be rationalised and rendered predictable and managed through bureaucratic means. As a consequence of this legacy, current practice has been described as 'an emotionally-distanced way of managing people in need' (Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991:187) and its reductionist characteristics commented on by Howe (1997:164):

This approach does not encourage the worker to be curious or interested in people's psychology or experience so long as there are legal and administrative categories into which their behaviour can be put. The requirement is that clients change their performance through compliance or rational agreement. Hence the emphasis on task and outcomes.

The impact on child care social work practice of the dominant socio-political
frameworks has resulted in an altered perception of clients as individuals with difficulties, to 'service users', i.e. consumers who may or may not be eligible for services depending on their circumstances and the assessment criteria (Adams, 1998; Munro, 2000; Parton, 1998b). A further consequence of the reductionist understandings of human behaviour has been a shift in social work attention from the causes of individual or family difficulties and psychological explanations to a focus which is simply on the nature of the difficulty and whether it is of sufficient severity to warrant intervention (Howe, 1996, 1998b; Howe and Hinings, 1995). The focus is on 'surface' not 'depth' explanations, on what has happened, not why. As a consequence the irrational and emotional aspects of behaviour and the social and structural origins of social problems have been overlooked and practice has become manageable, predictable and safe:

*In shifting their focus of attention from actors to acts, social workers have changed their theoretical outlook from one of promoting psychological understanding to one of developing political rights... The messiness and confusion of human relationships was not to be tidied up using psychological insights; rather they were to be arranged and organised according to legal categories, contractual agreements, service provisions and social rights. The new certainty is established on procedure and not on psychological expertise (Howe, 1994:528)*

The prevailing perspective on practice which 'simplifies' clients and identifies them as 'rational consumers' has come to dominate social work practice in recent years, yet clearly from the lack of effectiveness of recent practice approaches it is an inadequate model of human behaviour. This perspective on practice also has important implications for understandings of practitioner behaviours as practical-moral, as opposed to technical-rational, in nature, an issue discussed below and in the following chapter. Before suggesting an alternative conceptualisation of the individual which seeks to address the shortcomings of the current model, the second major challenge in contemporary social work practice requires examination.
2.2. Procedures, Uncertainty and Anxiety

The lack of progress in practice and the shortcomings of the existing conceptualisation of human behaviour have clarified the need for new approaches to social work provision for children and families which are less legalistic and procedurally-driven. Such approaches would provide opportunities for relationship-based practice (defined and discussed in section 3) which explores not only the ‘how and what’ but also the ‘why’ of practice (Howe, 1996; NCH, 1996). Relationship-based practice would be compatible with understandings of social work practice which recognise the holistic (rational and emotional) nature of human behaviour, the interpretative nature of social work activity and the importance of reflective responses to unique and unpredictable situations (Carter, 1995).

It is precisely because of social work’s unique, unpredictable and complex nature and the professional anxiety it provokes, however, that bureaucratic and procedural responses to the ‘change agenda’ in child care social work (inadequate as they have been shown to be) abound (Blaug, 1995; DH, 1995, 2001; Spratt and Houston, 1999; SSI, 1997). Despite the shortcomings of procedural responses they are not entirely bad. The SSI report (1997) *Evaluating Child Protection Services: Findings and Issues* recognised this in its emphasis on the importance of good procedural foundations, which it saw as the ‘bedrock’ of effective child care practice. However, procedures are insufficient in themselves to meet the challenges and demands of contemporary child care social work (Cooper et al., 2003). The conclusions of the NCH report, *Still in Need: Re-focussing Child Protection in the Context of Children in Need* (1996:32) emphasise a more holistic understanding of the requirements of practice by acknowledging, but not affording supremacy to, the place of procedures in Child Protection:

*There can be no question of an unfocussed style that fails to confront real worries for children’s safety ... but it can be less procedurally driven, less alienating for families and more sensitive to the child....... a climate where practitioners and managers can exercise proper professional judgement without over-reliance on a detailed procedural approach.*

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The colonisation in recent times of child care social work with procedural and bureaucratic approaches (Blaug, 1995:428) raises important questions about the function served by such responses:

Child abuse assessments rest in part on the practical judgement and communicative competence of the worker; things which are very difficult to systematise instrumentally. What is occurring here, therefore, cannot be described as merely an increase in bureaucracy. It also constitutes a profound attack on communicative practice whereby worker and client interact to create mutual understanding of problems and solutions.

One explanation for the emergence of procedurally dominated practice lies in its role as a defence against the anxiety inherent in emotionally-charged professional practice. By legislating and managing child care social work practice it is possible to ignore its unpredictability and complexity and the holistic nature of human behaviour and to contain the anxiety it generates. According to Stevenson (1999) the enforcement of systems of accountability and control is a predictable organisational response to heightened anxiety. This explanation, however, raises fundamental questions about why systems of thinking and reflection are not considered to be viable responses to the anxiety provoking nature of social work and what it is that stops such responses happening. There is widespread recognition in psycho-dynamic thinking of the place of social structures as defences against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth, 1988). The government report Social Work Decisions in Child Care (DH, 1985:21) explained the adoption of bureaucratic and procedural approaches to practice as a defence for practitioners who lacked support and who ‘could not tolerate the pain of getting involved and working with feelings’. Farmer (1997:159) acknowledges the need to think carefully about new systems to ensure they do not repeat the bureaucratic shortcomings of the previous ones:

Regardless of how some children are diverted from Child Protection services a satisfactory system of gatekeeping is required which must have the involvement of senior management to share decisionmaking and to provide support to manage the anxiety which is no longer contained by the Child Protection system.
Whilst procedures are a necessary source of clarity in anxiety provoking situations, the danger is that they become:

A substitute for human contact and exploration, denying the necessity for professional judgement in assessing high risk situations. (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997:140)

However, the recurrence of child care tragedies throughout the 1990s into the present day (Cambridgeshire County Council, 1997; DH, 2003; Nottingham Area Review Committee, 1994; Stone, 1991), in spite of enhanced procedural guidelines, provides a clear indication that procedures do not provide a fail-safe response in practice, nor do they offer a guarantee of good practice (Munro, 2000; Preston-Shoot, 1996a; Sawdon and Sawdon, 1995; Spratt and Houston, 1999). The apparent gap in contemporary practice appears to lie, as Howe (1994; 1996; 1998b) suggests, in the lack of attention paid to the depth aspects of both the clients’ and the practitioners’ experiences. According to Howe (1998b:47):

We have yet to recover from the powerful, distorting and dehumanising effects of this shift from welfare to justice, from actors to acts, from psychological science to law.

For models of child care social work practice to be able to offer an effective means of addressing the contemporary challenges facing practitioners they must acknowledge and respond to the complexities of the people and the practice with which they engage. In the following sections of the chapter I make some proposals about how social work practice perspectives might be reconceptualised to respond to contemporary challenges. These proposals increase the potential for more favourable outcomes for the clients receiving child care social work services and for greater professional responsibility and satisfaction for those practitioners providing the services.

3. Contemporary Understandings of Relationship-based Practice

Relationship-based practice is an emergent approach to social work practice
Chamberlyne and Sudbery, 2001; Howe, 1998; Sudbery, 2002) which responds to the shortcomings of the existing approaches to social work practice and understandings of human behaviour. Its central premise is that all social work is conducted through the medium of relationship, whether the relationship is short, medium or long term and whether it is the end in itself, in more therapeutically orientated social work contexts, or a means to an end (Network of Psycho-Social Policy and Practice, 2002). The underlying and all pervasive features of relationship-based practice include: the inseparable nature of the internal and external worlds of individuals; integrated and holistic as opposed to polarised responses to social problems; and practitioner engagement in as well as with the professional relationship (Chamberlyne and Sudbery, 2001). The renewed interest in relationship-based practice represents the endeavour to restore the balance in child care social work from the over-emphasis on child protection and legalistic and proceduralised responses to family support and child welfare and more relational, flexible and individualised responses which recognise the importance of the professional-client relationship (DH, 2000). This interest is not, however, unequivocal, and reflects the division between practitioners who find addressing the internal and external worlds of clients through the application of psycho-dynamic concepts helpful for understanding complex, social situations and those who do not (Stevenson, 1991; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). In order to understand the ambivalence towards relationship-based practice that exists within the social work profession it is necessary to understand its historical context and the perspectives of its critics. This context provides the backdrop for a contemporary relationship-based model of practice. Based on the earlier psycho-social model of practice, this model has been modified to accommodate the criticisms levelled at it, that were in part responsible for its fall into disrepute (Turney and Tanner, 2001).

3.1. The Historical Context of Psycho-Social Models of Social Work Practice

The origins of relationship-based practice can be traced back to the emergence of psycho-analytic theory and practice in the 1920s and 30s. The Children’s Departments of the 1950s were staffed by social workers who predominantly practised along casework lines which were theoretically informed by psycho-analytic
principles that placed significance on the client-practitioner relationship. The 1950s and 60s saw the psychosocial model widely adopted as the most appropriate adaptation of psycho-analytic theory and principles for social work. Florence Hollis (1964), the creator of the psycho-social model, focussed attention on the diagnosis and treatment of the individual’s difficulties and sought to integrate a psychological understanding of the individual and a sociological understanding of their situation. Concepts from Freudian psycho-analytic theory of ego strength were used to assess an individual’s capabilities and those from social systems theory to understand the wider context in which the individual was located (Coulshed and Orme, 1998; Howe, 1998a; Payne, 1997). By acknowledging the client’s inner world and their external reality and through the use of a range of direct and indirect techniques practitioners sought to effect change for the better in the client’s social circumstances. Brearley (1991:62) understands the potential of the psycho-dynamic approach to lie in it:

    being conveyed in a fashion that brings to life the tension - and resolution -
    between inner and outer reality.

For Hollis (1964) and other advocates of the psycho-social model the relationship between the practitioner and the client was central to the potential effectiveness of this approach to practice (Biestek, 1961; Butrym, 1976; Ferard and Hunnybun, 1962). Biestek (1961:7) described the casework relationship as:

    the dynamic interaction of attitude and emotion between the caseworker and the client...

In acknowledging the centrality of relationship and in following psycho-analytic thinking about human behaviour the approach embraces both the cognitive, rational and affective, emotional aspects of individuals’ functioning. Over a period of approximately twenty years the psycho-social approach based on psycho-analytic theory principles became well established in social work practice. However, during the 1960s its influence began to wane as aspects of the approach were subjected to criticism (Brewer and Lait, 1980; Fischer, 1976; Howe, 1998b; Munro, 1996).
3.2. The Shortcomings of Psycho-Social Approaches to Practice

Since the late 1960s the extent and influence of psycho-dynamically-based practice has steadily declined (Cooper et al, 2003; Howe, 1998a and b; Stevenson, 1991). Resistance to relationship-based practice can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, the widespread discrediting of psychodynamically-based practice has been connected to its historical roots in Freudian psycho-analytic theory, principles and practice and their patriarchal, western, class-biased outlook (Nathan, 1993; Payne, 1997). However, contemporary psycho-dynamic thinking and practice has been significantly modified since the work of Freud (Payne, 1997; Pearson et al., 1988; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990). Post-Freudian theories associated with Klein, Bowlby and Winnicott have emphasised the relational as opposed to instinct /drive aspects of infantile human behaviour and their significance in later life. Similarly, Howe (1997, 1998a and b) identifies developments in psychodynamic thinking and psychology and counselling research which, whilst not colluding with positivistic understandings of ‘the truth’ of relationship-based practice, strengthen the foundations on which it is built. Secondly, the changing context of statutory social work practice with involuntary clients in situations of structural inequality have been considered to be incompatible with psycho-analytic approaches, emphasising the individual’s voluntary engagement in the therapeutic alliance and focussing on their internal world (Brearley, 1991; Howe, 1998b; Pearson et al, 1988). Furthermore, the practitioner-client relationship appeared to be imbalanced in favour of the practitioner who was seen as the ‘expert’ and inappropriate because of its therapeutic stance which raised important questions about what was permissible for social work practitioners to engage with (Simmonds, 1988a; Coulshed and Orme, 1998). The client was considered to be further disadvantaged by the medicalised and pathological approach to their problems which over emphasised the psychological, individual, as opposed to the sociological, structural causes of them (Butrym, 1976; Coulshed and Orme, 1998; Trevithick, 2000; Trowell and Bower, 1995). Thirdly, the search for certainty and absolutes which has emerged in response to political, practical and philosophical developments (Cooper, 2002; Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994, 1998; Smith and White, 1997) has coincided with the difficulties of assessing the effectiveness of psycho-dynamically orientated practice and provoked recurrent criticism of this approach (DH, 1991a; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990; Trevithick, 2000). The
emergence of behavioural psychology as a dominant and influential theoretical framework for social work has provided a considerable challenge to the psycho-dynamic approach because of its short-term, outcome focus and apparent ability to prove its effectiveness (Cosis-Brown, 1998; Howe, 1998b; Munro, 2000; Payne, 1997).

Whilst the criticisms of earlier models of psycho-social practice persist their validity can be challenged if their epistemological roots are exposed. The studies which challenged psycho-social approaches and which focussed particularly on the difficulties in proving effectiveness were based on positivistic models of knowledge which objectified those being researched and sought absolute outcomes (Brewer and Lait, 1980; Sheldon, 1986, 1987). From this epistemological perspective relationship-based practice failed. However, if an hermeneutical stance is adopted and the meaning of the relationship for clients is explored it becomes apparent, as Mattinson and Sinclair (1979) and Rees and Wallace (1982) demonstrate, that the experience of the social work relationship was relevant, meaningful and significant for clients, regardless of any other measurable outcomes. Potentially more serious criticisms of psycho-social practice have been levelled from those people who were supportive of its stance. Simmonds (1988), in writing about direct work with children, a relationship-based social work technique, recognised a potentially dangerous situation given the paucity of literature and guidance about therapeutic approaches which were relevant and appropriate for social workers, coinciding with an increasingly available and easily assimilated range of techniques. Simmonds (1988:19) warned that these techniques had:

> to be tempered with the realisation of the difficulties for both worker and child in developing a close and significant relationship. The pressure on social workers to stay within the theoretical limits of their role is at odds with the reality of children and families in trouble, presenting complex issues that do not easily succumb to rational discussion or understanding.

From Simmonds’ perspective the danger lay in practitioners underestimating the complex nature of the work and practising with insufficient support and supervision. Much of the relevant literature for psycho-social practice has come from psycho-
analytic practice and consequently has been too specialised and focussed on internal worlds for social work practice (Lanyado, 1991). The new model, therefore, needed to have its roots firmly placed in the internal and external worlds of clients and offer accessible and applied approaches to practice.

The paucity of writing and apparent thinking that has gone on since the 1960s about relationship-based practice in social work settings reflects not only the shift in attention to other models of practice but also the defence mechanisms, in this case avoidance, that relationship-based approaches seek to address. Previous approaches to practice ignored its relational and irrational aspects and avoided, therefore, the emotional implications of the work. As a consequence, in advocating a shift in emphasis in practice from child protection to family support and child welfare, with less emphasis on procedures and legalistic responses and more on uniqueness and relationship, policy makers and researchers have forced many practitioners into less familiar territory and required them to confront aspects of practice which up until now they may have avoided. Widespread acceptance of relationship-based approaches to practice, therefore, will inevitably require sensitive handling and appropriate timescales.

The criticisms of psycho-social approaches to social work practice, recognition of the obstacles to it becoming widely established in practice and its fall from favour coincided with the ascendancy of political and structural approaches to practice in the form of anti-oppressive practice and more cognitively orientated, inter-personal approaches. For the re-emergence of psycho-social understandings of social work practice to be credible and acceptable a clear explanation of the differences between the earlier models of practice and the model currently being advocated is required. Of particular importance is the capacity of the new model to embrace the more recently established anti-oppressive and empowerment dimensions of social work practice.

3.3. The Characteristics of a Relationship-based Model of Practice.

Inspite of the internally and externally derived criticisms of the earlier models of relationship-based practice new approaches are now slowly emerging (Howe, 1997, 1998b; Schofield, 1998). However social work is conceptualised it is impossible to
ignore the relational nature of its practice (Sudbery, 2002). A central, if not key, feature of social work practice is the personal nature of the work and the impact of it on both the client and the practitioner (Brearley, 1991). Historically the centrality and significance of the client-practitioner relationship has altered according to the dominant socio-political ideology (Adams, 1998; Howe, 1998a; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Irrespective of the political slant on practice, however, social work practice by its very nature has to acknowledge the inner and outer worlds of the individual (Payne, 1997; Pearson et al, 1988). Whilst at any one point in time the inner or the outer world of the individual may have more or less importance attached to it, at no point do either disappear (Cooper, 2002; Howe, 1998; Sudbery, 2002). The essence of the relationship-based approach - the centrality of the professional-client relationship and the emphasis on the inter-related nature of past and present experience and inner and outer reality and the professional relationship - remains relevant to social work practice which has struggled, throughout its history, to balance the individual and the structural components of experience and continues to do so (Brearley, 1991; Payne, 1997; Pearson et al, 1988; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990). The model's emphasis on an integrated understanding of the individual-structural causes of social distress and dysfunction has been welcomed and allayed concerns about the onus on practitioners if individualised understandings of the origins of social problems were a dominant feature of revised models of relationship-based practice. The strength of a psycho-dynamically informed relationship-based perspective on practice lies in its ability to enable practitioners to understand the influence on individuals of inter-personal relationships and experiences (Pearson et al, 1988; Schofield, 1998). It offers practitioners a thinking space to reflect on thoughts, feelings and actions, their own and the client's (Simmonds, 1988b; Trowell and Bower, 1995) and it provides a way of understanding what is going on in turbulent times in a way that procedures cannot (Nathan, 1998).

The underlying and all pervasive feature of relationship-based practice is the acknowledgement and management of anxiety, as it recognises this to be the primitive emotional response to distressing and uncertain situations (Howe, 1998a; Salzberger-Wittenberger, 1976; Trowell and Bower, 1995; Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991). Positive early relationships and attachments generate feelings of security and trust. Inconsistent, hostile and negative experiences generate anxiety and mistrust (Howe,
Both Howe (1998a) and Schofield (1998) reference the work of Jones (1985) who recognised that for preventative child care social work to be effective it needed to be based on a nurturing, sustained relationship - on ‘being there’. Simultaneously, however, contemporary understandings of relationship-based practice acknowledge the criticism of previous models that social work practice is not synonymous with therapy and that therapeutic social work relationships need to be carefully bounded (Spratt and Houston, 1999).

For Howe (1997, 1998a and b) the social situation of the self is central to understanding behaviour and he uses Attachment Theory as a theoretical framework to understand how people’s behaviour is affected by internal working models relating to external situations:

*what is on the social outside therefore, establishes itself on the psychological inside. In this sense, external relationships become mentally internalised (Howe 1998b:175)*

An understanding of the socially situated self offers an alternative perspective on human behaviour to that associated with the reductionist neo-liberal view and challenges social work practice to adopt a more holistic approach to assessing and working with children and their families:

*If the developing sciences are right to understand the self as something that forms within relationships and that human beings are social beings then psychology and practice that deny the socialness of self not only fail to understand the psychological nature of personal and social problems, they also commit an injustice by reacting to and dealing with people entirely and always as independent and rational agents. Parents and families come to the notice of social workers when there are failures of relationship, problems with behaviour or concerns about conduct (Howe 1997:168)*

According to Howe (1998a) the potential function of relationship-based practice is to contain anxiety for the client. By enabling and empowering clients to feel in control of their emotional, mental and social states Howe believes practitioners help clients
enhance their sense of well being and reduce their anxiety and its associated behaviours, which are often what bring individuals to the attention of social agents. For Howe (1998a:182):

*using a psycho-social approach allows social workers to understand and stay with the apparent confusion and complexity that seems to characterise the lives of so many clients.*

Schofield (1998) acknowledges the importance of the practitioner’s ability to hold together the cognitive, emotional and practical aspects of a client’s life as it provides a sense of security and therefore reduces anxiety. Schofield also identifies the importance of the social work profession becoming clearer about the nature of the client-practitioner relationship in light of the move away from contractual to relational understandings of practice. For Schofield the social work relationship needs to be reclaimed as a vital resource in an increasingly resource-led, resource-deficient environment. The model of inner and outer worlds developed by Clare Winnicott (1964), and cited in Schofield (1998), provides a framework for understanding how internal and external influences interact. Schofield’s theoretical approach places equal value on the practical tasks and emotional/psychological aspects of practice and considers them to be inseparable. Interestingly, Schofield recognises the resistance to attend to the emotional aspects of practice and cites the reluctance to heed past research outcomes which emphasised the importance of the client-practitioner relationship (Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979; Rees and Wallace, 1982). This may indicate a defence within practice to addressing the anxiety provoking aspects of practice. It also represents a failure to recognise that the processes involved in the professional working relationship can be as important to the client as any observable or quantifiable outcome.

Further contributions to the development of a model of relationship-based practice have been provided by Sudbery (2002) who examines key features of relationship-based models and Turney and Tanner (2001). Turney and Tanner (2001) respond to the criticisms of psycho-social models of practice, which accused practitioners of abusing their power and pathologising clients, by emphasising the importance of incorporating understandings of power and difference, under the auspices of theories
of anti-oppressive practice. To this end relationship-based approaches to practice seek to be participatory and empowering, acknowledging the expertise of the client as well as the practitioner (Horwath and Morrison, 1999; Turney and Tanner, 2001). The integration of ideas from the anti-oppressive and empowerment approaches to practice with psycho-dynamically derived ideas makes an important contribution to the development of a mature and integrated model of relationship-based practice and avoids the unhelpful and false polarisation of practice perspectives that has characterised the history of social work practice.

4. Reflective Practice - Re-conceptualising the Practitioner in Social Work Practice

The re-conceptualising of the individual in social work practice to embrace holistic understandings of their functioning involves practitioners confronting the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of contemporary practice (Parton, 1998b). Whilst challenging, the risks inherent in engaging in relationship-based practice appear to be worth taking if it leads to the well-being of children and their families being more holistically understood and responded to. Such a shift in practice perspective, however, generates further challenges for practitioners. If clients are recognised as emotional as well as rational beings, by implication practitioners must be too. Re-conceptualising the practitioner means acknowledging their emotional responses and the emotional impact of practice on them. The anxieties which arise from uncertain and risky situations need containing not only for clients but for practitioners as well.

Reflective practice (Payne, 1998; Schon, 1983) which has been embraced within social work over the past decade and which acknowledges the uncertainty and risk inherent in social work practice has the potential, I would argue, to respond to the needs of practitioners arising from the adoption of relationship-based approaches to practice. In the following chapter I put forward the argument that reflective practice is a key determinant in the successful and effective application of relationship-based practice. Reflective practice acknowledges a diverse range of knowledges informing practice. It embraces the ‘lived reality’ of social work practice ‘from the inside’, as opposed to technical-rational practice which arises from external knowledges - policies, theoretical frameworks, research findings - imposed from the outside. It encourages practitioners to develop an holistic understanding of clients and consequently to develop into
reflectively, rather than technical-rationally, competent professionals. If the social work profession can follow this path it can develop ways of practising which promote the welfare of the client through reflective professional practice rather than organisational convenience achieved through bureaucratic case management (Carter et al., 1995).

Summary

The argument I put forward in this thesis is that if an effective response to contemporary child care social work concerns is to be made there needs to be a re-conceptualisation of the ‘person in practice’ - both the client and the practitioner. This would involve adopting relationship-based ways of working which acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual’s situation, the centrality of the client-practitioner relationship and the complex and holistic - rational and emotional - nature of human behaviour. Relationship-based practice needs to be capable of containing the challenges arising from contemporary practice, whilst resisting the temptation to resort to the all-pervasive, but ineffective, bureaucratic forms of containment associated with legalistic and managerialist approaches to practice. The emergence of relationship-based practice as a counter-cultural approach to child care social work provides opportunities for practitioners to develop professional responses which are capable of addressing the complexities of social work practice in the interests of the client and which promote the professional well-being of the practitioner. The development of relationship-based practice, however, is contingent on epistemological perspectives, such as those embraced by reflective practice. Reflective practice informs relationship-based practice and provides a comprehensive understanding of the client, the needs of practitioners and the knowledge(s) informing practice. In Chapter Two the nature and function of reflective practice, as a pre-requisite for relationship-based practice, are examined and the conditions which facilitate its development are explored.
Chapter Two

Reflective Practice - What it Is, What it Does and What it Requires

Introduction

This Chapter builds on the thinking about relationship-based practice in Chapter One and introduces the concept of reflective practice, without which, I suggest, relationship-based practice is unlikely to become an effective and transformative feature of contemporary social work practice. The chapter begins by exploring contemporary understandings of and contentions about reflective practice and critiques van Manen’s (1977) triadic classification of ‘ways of knowing’ as a framework for understanding the diversity of reflective practice. Given the inherent complexity of and unresolved definitional problems surrounding reflective practice, the second section of the chapter shifts from what reflective practice is to what it does. I identify three domains pertinent to social work practice - the client domain, the practitioner domain and the organisational domain - and examine the importance of reflective practice for each of them. If the full benefits of reflective practice are to be realised in each of these three social work domains the right conditions for the promotion of reflective practice need to exist. The final section of this Chapter addresses this issue by exploring the internal and external conditions that are considered necessary for reflective practice to develop and flourish. The Chapter concludes with an acknowledgement that, whilst there is a wealth of writing about reflection, reflective learning and reflective practice, the dearth of research that enhances our understandings of reflective practice provides the rationale for this thesis.

1. The Nature of Reflective Practice - What is Reflective Practice?

In my experience as a practitioner the term reflective practice was frequently used with the assumption that everyone knew what everyone else meant by it. In exploring the literature it is clear that my experience was not unique and that definitions of reflection, reflective learning and reflective practice, terms which are frequently used interchangeably in the literature (Gould, 1996), require further clarification. To this end I begin this section by examining definitions of reflection and reflective practice
before moving on to suggest that the identification of different modes of reflection might be a more productive way of enhancing understanding of reflective processes and practice.

1.1. The Definitions of Reflection

To reflect according to the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘to meditate on, think about, consider, remind oneself.’ This definition, like many of those provided in the literature on reflection, reflective learning and reflective practice, emphasises the cognitive processes involved in reflection. One of the earliest proponents of reflective processes in education, Dewey (1933:100-101) referred to ‘the function of reflective thought’ as intending:

\[
\text{to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious.}
\]

Subsequent educational researchers such as Korthagen and Wubbels (1995:55), who undertook research into the characteristics of reflective practitioners, adopted a similar definition, believing reflection to be:

\[
\text{the mental process of structuring and restructuring an experience, practice or existing knowledge or insights......}
\]

More recently, Moon (1999:4) in her extensive literature review on reflection across a range of disciplines concluded:

\[
\text{common usage of the word (reflection) implies a form of mental processes with a purpose and/or an anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is no obvious solution.}
\]

Most of the definitions, located primarily although not exclusively, in the education and nursing literature, have several common characteristics which suggest reflection is a positive, purposeful and deliberative action drawing on cognitive processes to focus
on problematic situations (Atkins and Murphy, 1993; Copeland et al, 1993; Loughran, 1996; Tann, 1993). The understandings gained from these cognitive, reflective processes are used to inform future actions. A shortcoming of these definitions, however, lies in the limited explicit acknowledgement of the affective dimensions of the reflection process (Brockbank and McGill, 1998).

Whilst the components and process of reflection appear to be relatively easy to comprehend its application in professional practice appears to have become unnecessarily complicated and theorised (Bryant, 1996; Moon, 1999). Moon (1999:4) underlines the importance of reflection not losing touch with its common-sense, everyday meaning for fear of complex categorisations of reflection 'representing distinctions which are more academic than practical.' Boud and Walker (1990:66) refer to reflection as 'a normal on-going process which can, if desired, be made more explicit and more ordered.' Hall (1996), however, suggests that a definition of reflection distinct from that of the every-day definition is necessary for professional practice on account of the negative connotations of navel-gazing, self-indulgence and day-dreaming associated with reflective activities. Hall's comments appears to imply less a concern about the process of reflection per se and more about the purpose of reflection. This preoccupation with the nature of reflection appears to have arisen in part as a result of confusion over the purposes of reflection - what it is for and what it can achieve. Johns (1998:2) also notes that this preoccupation with definitions of reflection is a 'legacy of rational modes of thinking - to know the thing itself.' Moon (1999:5) makes a similar point, suggesting that the reflective process per se is relatively simple and that:

> apparent differences in reflection are not due to different types of reflection but to differences in the way it is used, applied or guided.

To understand these issues attention needs to be turned to the relationship between reflection and reflective practice.

1.2. The Nature of Reflective Practice

The diversity of knowledge sources - rational and affective - for reflective learning
(Boud et al., 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Polanyi, 1962; van Manen, 1977) and for reflective professional practice (England, 1986; Eraut, 1994; Johns, 1992; Schon, 1983) has been recognised for some time. It is only in the past decade, however, that reflective learning and practice have achieved recognition and greater emphasis and importance has been placed on their contribution to professional social work practice (Gould, 1996; Lyons, 1999; Parton, 1999; Payne, 1998; Quinn, 2000; Sheppard, 1995, 1999; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995) and that the term 'reflective practice' has become an integral feature of the social care professions. The growing interest in recent years in reflection, reflective learning and reflective practice has been in response to the increasing recognition of uncertainty and risk as integral components of society and the failure of the dominant positivistic modes of thinking and knowledge creation to respond effectively to these social traits.

As a 'way of knowing', an epistemology of practice, reflective practice is generally associated with social constructivist, hermeneutic understandings of knowledge (Gould, 1996; Schon, 1983). Underpinning reflective approaches to knowledge is an endeavour to narrow the gap between theory and practice. Such approaches strive to identify knowledge for practice that, as Imre (1984:44, cited in Dean, 1989) recognises, is derived from within practice rather than imposed upon it and which acknowledges the relevance of diverse sources of knowledge for developing understanding of human behaviour:

*A profession intrinsically concerned with human beings requires a philosophy of knowing capable of encompassing all that is human.*

Gould (1996) identifies reflective practice as the process of acquiring professional knowledge through the systematic examination of experiences encountered in practice. He suggests that coming under the reflective practice umbrella are the concepts of practice skills, human judgement, artistry, intuition and tacit knowledge and that a central feature of reflective practice is its ability to transcend hierarchies and dichotomies, for example between fact and feeling, rational and emotional, researcher and practitioner. In adopting an holistic epistemological stance reflective practice challenges the supremacy and superiority that, up until recently, has been afforded to technical-rational sources of knowledge (Goldstein, 1990; Gould, 1996; Peile, 1993;
Rolfe, 1998; Schon, 1983). Reflective practice enables practitioners to theorise their practice by drawing on knowledge embedded in practice (Fisher 1997; Palmer, 1994) and to practice theoretically by make connections between espoused theory and practice (Gould, 1996). It is an holistic, creative and artistic phenomenon which endeavours to hold theory and practice together in a creative tension:

> Reflectively, creatively and imaginatively, the mind of the practitioner strives to blend and incorporate fragments of theory, information, intuitions, sensations and other perceptions into something called understanding (Goldstein, 1990:41).

Given its social constructivist and hermeneutic epistemological roots, an exploration of the nature of reflective practice is inherently complex and multi-faceted. The combination of the internalised nature and unique features of reflective practice and the complex process of externalising these internal features, make it a difficult concept to understand define, conceptualise and operationalise (Clarke et al, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1994; Ixer, 1999, 2000; Moon, 1999). One of the recurrent features in the literature on reflective practice is the confusion about what precisely it embraces and its inherently ambiguous nature which defies simple definition (Copeland et al, 1993; Eraut, 1994; Grimmett, 1988; Harris, 1996; Ixer, 1999, 2000; Macintyre, 1994; Morrison, 1997; van Manen 1995; Ward, 1998c). Ixer (1999) examining reflective practice in social work training suggests that the lack of clarity concerning what exactly it is can in part be overcome by focussing on the aims of reflective practice.

When the question of the purpose of reflective practice is raised it becomes apparent that a more practical perspective is required which grounds the definitional/philosophical questions about reflection and reflective practice in concrete reality. Reflective practice represents the concrete application of the reflective processes in professional contexts. In so doing reflective practice both generates knowledge through the reflective process and is the vehicle by which it is applied in practice. Reflective practice, as a process and a product of reflection, can be operationalised at different levels and it is to these I now turn.
1.3. The Multiple Levels of Reflective Practice

The three different levels of reflection - technical, practical and critical - were originally identified by van Manen (1977) and associated with the different sources of knowledge defined by Habermas (1973). These three categories of reflection have been subsequently adopted and modified by other writers in the field (Bengtsson, 1995; Clarke et al., 1996; Clift et al., 1990; Eby, 2000; Hatton and Smith 1995; Knowles, 1993; Kondrat, 1992; Moon, 1999; Morrison, 1997). The three different levels of reflection are differentiated not by the nature of the reflective process as much as by the differing objectives of the reflection process and the epistemological perspective informing it, which influence the content of the reflection. A further modification of the different modes of reflection - process reflection - is introduced which, I believe, broadens the existing practical mode of reflection to include the under-acknowledged contribution of psycho-dynamic thinking to understandings of the reflective process (Ward and McMahon, 1998).

1.3.1. Technical Reflection

Technical reflection, associated with technical-rationality and the empirical-analytic level of knowing (Habermas, 1973; van Manen, 1977) uses external sources of knowledge derived from formal theory and research to resolve an identified problem. It is generally associated with instrumental reflection - 'decisionmaking about immediate behaviours or skills' (Hatton and Smith, 1995:45) - as a means of problem-solving (Clift et al., 1990; Kondrat, 1992). The purpose of technical reflection, according to Clift et al. (1990) is to 'direct/control' practice as the identified goals of practice are considered to be unchallengeable. The criteria for reflection are restricted to the technocratic issues of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (Goodman, 1984). The work of Dewey (1933) is primarily located at this level, although his thinking overlaps with the second, practical, level of reflection. In his definition of reflection, Dewey (1933:6) acknowledges the rational basis for his understanding of the reflective process:

*Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to*
The primary criticism of this mode of reflection is its lack of attention to non-rational sources of knowing and some writers question whether this is reflection at all (Hatton and Smith, 1995; Howe and Hinings, 1995; van Manen, 1977; Ward, 1998c). Whilst educationalists since Dewey (Boud et al, 1985; Kolb and Fry, 1975) have acknowledged the place of affective sources of knowledge in the reflection process, they mirror Dewey’s stance by privileging the deliberate, cognitive and conscious aspects of the reflective process and Burns (1994) suggests that the externally driven nature of technical reflection limits the scope for more personalised, affective reflection and forces the process to adopt a primarily cognitive stance. A further criticism of this level of reflection is its failure to consider the influence of contextual factors on the reflection process. As a consequence the outcomes of technically reflective practice are restricted to generalisable responses to particular problems and do not allow for dialogue between professionals, clients or the wider organisational, social or political context.

1.3.2. Practical Reflection

Practical reflection has a broader purpose compared with technical reflection as it seeks to ‘inform’ practice and the practitioner (Burns, 1994), pays attention to the processes - the why - as well as to the content and outcomes - the what - of professional practice (Burns, 1994; Copeland et al, 1995; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Payne, 1998; Schon, 1988). Practical reflection is based on a hermeneutic-phenomenological epistemology which endorses the relative, constructed, contextual and inter-subjective nature of knowledge and the importance of meanings attributed to experience. From this reflective perspective the ends and means of professional practice are all open to examination and modification, through deliberative, dialogical reflection (with self and others), informed by personal, practical, tacit and intuitive as well as technical-rational knowledge. By analysing professional performance practical reflective practice modifies personal and professional assumptions underpinning practice, seeks alternative responses, enhances professional understanding and affords personal insight (Bulman, 1994; Hatton and Smith, 1995; van Manen, 1977). In
subscribing to this approach professionals demonstrate their openness to new ways of
thinking and their eclectic view of knowledge (Clift et al, 1990).

Whilst Dewey and his followers’ understanding of reflective processes and practice
overlaps into this level of reflection most of the seminal thinking that has taken place
about practical reflection has derived from the work of Schon (1983, 1987). Schon’s
interest lay in exploring epistemologies of practice which inverted the established
epistemological framework by suggesting that rather than knowledge acquisition being
solely ‘top-down’ i.e. externally imposed, propositional knowledge it was also, and as
importantly, ‘bottom-up’ i.e. knowledge gained from specific practice experiences.
Schon (1987:xi) sought to:

stand the question of professional knowledge on its head by taking as its departure
the competence and artistry already embedded in skilful practice - especially the
reflection-in-action (the thinking what they are doing while they are doing it) that
practitioners sometimes bring to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict.

By encouraging ‘professional artistry’, developed in the context of the practicum,
Schon’s concept of reflective practice made connections between theory, practice and
intuition (Pietroni, 1995) and explicitly included cognitive and affective aspects of
experience and reflection. An important aspect of Schon’s model is its inclusive
approach which endeavours to dissolve the dichotomies between subjectivity and
objectivity, feelings and facts, art and science. In endeavouring to generate an holistic
approach to practice, several critics of Schon have suggested, however, that he has
gone too far and over-emphasised the role of non-rational sources of knowledge at the
expense of technical-rational knowledge, thereby falling into the trap of adopting the
positivistic approach to knowledge generation which he is seeking to challenge (Boud
and Walker, 1998; Eraut, 1994; Glickman, 1988; Moon, 1999; Morrison, 1997;
Shulman, 1988). Others maintain Schon’s model of reflective practice fails to
effectively challenge the privileged position occupied by technical-rational knowledge
(Papell and Skolnik, 1992).

Further criticisms of Schon’s work relate to his failure to take into account the
significant contextual factors influencing reflective potential and processes, the
representativeness of the professional experiences on which his thinking is based and in particular, the confused interpretations of reflection in and on action, (Boud and Walker, 1998; Eraut, 1994; Moon, 1999; Morrison, 1997; Reid, 1994). Eraut (1994) acknowledges that it is perhaps unfair to overly criticise Schon's work as it sought to generate ideas rather than provide a definitive model. These critiques and different understandings and interpretations of reflection, however, highlight the pertinence of suggestions in the literature (Ixer, 1999; Moon, 1999) to focus on the purpose rather than the mechanics of reflection, as the risk of rigidly defining the 'how, what and when' of reflective practice lies in it becoming a prescriptive and positivistic approach to knowledge generation and application, which contradicts its hermeneutic and constructivist roots (Boud and Walker, 1998).

1.3.3. Process Reflection

The attention that has been paid to the technicalities of the reflective process appears to have distracted critical attention from another source of division - between the conscious, cognitive and affective processes associated with technical and practical reflection and the unconscious, affective processes which comprise what I have termed process reflection. Process reflection focuses particularly on the unconscious and interactive aspects of the reflection process and their manifestation in the relationship between practitioner and the reflective context. In relation to Schon's work it might be possible to understand the oversight with regard to process reflection as arising from the focus of much of his foundational work which was with non-relational professions i.e. architecture and engineering, as opposed to 'caring' relationship-focussed professions in which inter-personal, affective and unconscious processes are central to professional practice and the process of reflection. Given the overlaps between psychotherapy, which focusses on unconscious processes, and social work there is surprisingly little acknowledgement within the literature on reflection of the history and nature of reflection within the fields of psychotherapy and psycho-analysis and its pertinence for social work practice (Payne, 1998). Psycho-dynamic theory offers a different perspective on reflection and reflective practice to that provided by technical and practical reflection as it focuses on the unconscious as well as the conscious aspects of practice (Ward, 1998c). It contributes to the contextualising of behaviours of individuals (clients and practitioners) and organisations (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995)
and it emphasises the unavoidable impact on practitioners of the emotional content of interactions (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). Hughes and Pengelly (1997) acknowledge the loose and diverse ways in which the terms reflection, reflective practice and reflective process are used, but believe Mattinson’s (1975) definition is the most accurate. For Mattinson (1975:84, cited in Hughes and Pengelly, 1997) the reflection process, or mirroring, involves dynamics in one relationship or setting being acted out in another as if they belong there:

*Mirroring is therefore a secondary effect of counter-transference, that is not fully known about but enacted; the practitioner like the service user is compelled to act rather than to feel or think …*

The influence of unconscious processes can result in client-practitioner relationships reflecting - mirroring - other significant earlier relationships and also being further reflected by the practitioner in other professional contexts and relationships such as the practitioner-supervisor relationship (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Mattinson, 1975; Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979; Payne, 1998). The opportunity to reflect - to think and feel before acting - on the relationship dynamics and associated thoughts and feelings enables practitioners to retain the work focus, to gain insight into the experiences of the client and their own responses, (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Ward 1998b) and:

*to transform emotional chaos into containable anxiety and to create a time to think when so much of our experience is that there is no time to think (Nathan, 1993:79)*

To understand the unconscious dynamics at work in practice practitioners need to be familiar with the concepts of transference, countertransference, projective identification and mirroring (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Dearnley, 1985; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Papell, 1996; Shohet, 1999). In addition to the ‘normal’ psycho-dynamic processes involved in all human relationships the experiences of social work practitioners are made more complex by the emotionally distressing and disturbing nature of the relationships they have to engage in. In order to cope with the demands of practice and to engage in effective reflective practice practitioners need to experience a ‘containing’ (Bion, 1962) or ‘holding’ environment (Winnicott, 1964)
which enables them to think about, process and respond to the conscious and unconscious dynamics they have encountered. The reflective process highlights the close parallels between the experiences of clients and practitioners and underlines that the effectiveness of practice and its capacity to ‘hold’ clients is in part dependent on the quality of the holding environment for practitioners (Miller, 1993; Ward, 1998a).

1.3.4. Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is associated with Habermas’ (1973) critical and emancipatory sources of knowledge and seeks to transform practice by challenging the existing social, political and cultural conditions which promote certain ‘constitutive interests’ at the expense of others and the structural forces which distort or constrain professional practice (Clift et al, 1990). Critical reflection according to Clift et al (1990:32):

*begins with such questions as to what ends and in whose interest knowledge is being used*

and focusses on how professionals:

*explicate the taken-for-granted assumptions and humanly constructed distortions that constrain and frustrate practice (Clift et al, 1990:34)*

Hatton and Smith (1995:35) describe critical reflection as being comprised of technical and practical reflection but also inclusive of:

*considerations involving moral and ethical criteria..., making judgements about whether professional activity is equitable, just, and respectful of persons or not.*

Critical reflection occupies a central, although not unproblematic place in the social work context. The focus of social work practice on the promotion of anti-oppressive practice encourages practitioners to pay close attention to both their understanding of power dynamics and to prevailing power structures at the individual, personal and the collective, societal level. The literature suggests critical reflection embraces technical
and practical reflection. In addition I would argue it also embraces aspects of process reflection. In order for practitioners to focus on issues of power in practice, their own and society’s, involves them engaging with both the unconscious and conscious thoughts and feelings, values and prejudices which inform their practice. In so doing the emancipatory potential of reflective social work practice is released. Given the multi-faceted nature of critical reflection it is unsurprising that the literature considers it to be the most rigorous and demanding form of reflection. This conclusion is supported by empirical studies which claim critical reflection to be the form of reflection least frequently evidenced in practice (Hatton and Smith, 1995; Morrison, 1997). For Dempsey et al (2001: 639) reflective learning and practice and critical theories are ‘inherently compatible’. A question that arises, however, is whether critical reflection is a level of reflection in its own right or a value based perspective which could be conceptualised as a component of practical reflection. The combination of a definition of critical reflection which embraces all the other forms of reflection with the reported infrequent occurrence of critical reflection does support the idea that critical reflection could be conceptualised as an aspect of practical/process reflection, rather than a discrete level of reflection in its own right.

2. The Implications of Reflective Practice - Why Reflect?

The identification of different modes of reflection in the previous section was in response to the definitional shortcomings surrounding reflection and reflective processes and began the process of exploring the objectives of reflection and reflective practice. In this section I take this exploration further by focussing more explicitly on the implications of reflective practice and consider the contribution of reflective practice to relationship-based practice. Relationship-based practice has at its centre the professional relationship and the practitioner’s endeavours to understand the client’s circumstances and behaviours. It is founded on social constructivist understandings of knowledge which embrace relativism, contingency, situatedness and uncertainty (Coulshed and Orme, 1998; Hollis, 1964; Howe, 1997; Schofield, 1998). Implementing relationship-based approaches in practice means, therefore, being prepared to work in uncertain, unpredictable, messy and unique situations (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). It means being open to change, to vulnerability and to the possibility of making mistakes (Nathan, 1993; Preston-Shoot, 1996a; Stevenson,
In order to develop and enhance their professional understanding and capacity to practice in relationship-based ways practitioners need the opportunity to make sense of what they are experiencing professionally, personally and organisationally (Lishman, 1998; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1996; Schofield, 1998). Reflective practice, with its social constructivist and hermeneutic roots, has been identified as an important means of achieving these enhanced understandings discussed in the following three sub-sections.

2.1. Enhancing Professional Understanding of Practice - ‘Making Sense’ of the Client

As I acknowledged in Chapter One, one of the main reasons for the emergence of relationship-based approaches to social work practice has been the inability of rational, positivistic sources of knowledge to respond effectively to the complexity of human behaviour (Howe, 1997; Howe and Hinings, 1995). In a similar vein, reflective practice challenges reductionist understandings of human behaviour and the ineffective attempts to tackle the demands of practice which emphasise ‘tight control designed to eliminate stress and risk, and to repress user demand and emotional expression’ (Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991:20) and result in defensive and proceduralised practice.

In the midst of the wealth of legislative and procedural guidelines and the expectations placed on practitioners to ascertain clients perceptions and participation the need for practitioners to ‘make sense’ of clients’ circumstances and to ‘hold the child in mind’ has never been greater (Brandon et al, 1998; DH, 2003; Pietroni, 1995; Smith, 1996; Trowell, 1996). The circumstances of most individuals in contact with social work agencies are, by definition, problematic, complex and emotionally charged (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979; Schofield, 1998). Consequently simplistic, rational explanations and solutions are inappropriate. Practitioners’ effectiveness, and by implication clients’ well-being, is contingent on practitioners ‘making sense’ intellectually of what is experienced rationally and affectively as:

*The ability to make intellectual sense of people in difficult, distressing and...*
Reflective responses in the context of relationship-based practice enable practitioners ‘to pull back from the client’s emotional vortex and explore the inter-actional process’ (Agass, 1992:14), to contain anxiety and, by disentangling the internal and external influences on clients’ circumstances, to ‘make sense’ of how clients understand their situations (Howe, 1997; Parton, 1998a; Schofield, 1998). The holistic and contingent understandings which reflective practice promotes ensures that the complexity and uniqueness of each practice situation is respected, that ‘negative capability’ (Nathan 1993:74), which involves tolerating the anxiety of ‘not knowing’ and remaining in doubt and uncertainty, is bearable and acceptable and that ritualised practice is avoided. Through reflective practice practitioners are afforded the opportunity to develop their ability to think systemically and dynamically as opposed to causally and linearly (Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991). With a broader understanding of the range of professional knowledges which contribute to professional judgements as opposed to professional technicism (Knowles, 1993; Morrison, 1997), practitioners can acquire changed, ‘contained’, conceptual perspectives on their clients’ circumstances (Boyd and Fales, 1983; Glickman, 1988; Palmer, 1994).

2.2. Enhancing Personal Understanding of Practice -‘Making Sense’ of Self

Relationship-based practice makes explicit the relational nature of social work practice, identifies the practitioner-client relationship as the primary resource for practice and emphasises the centrality to the practitioner’s experience of practice of the interface between their personal and professional and internal and external worlds (Agass, 1992; Ash, 1992; Ash, 1995; Lishman, 1998; Nathan, 1993; Preston-Shoot, 1996b; Sudbery and Bradley 1996; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Within the literature on social work practice and research there has been a growing awareness of the importance of self awareness and the process of analysing the impact of self on practice and vice versa. This phenomenon is referred to interchangeably as reflective practice, reflectivity and reflexivity, although reflexivity, as opposed to reflective practice or reflectivity, tends to be more common within the research literature. The prevailing adversarial and bureaucratic climate, is not conducive to reflective practices,
however, and is, according to Pietroni (1995:35), ‘antagonistic towards thoughtful practice’ as it stifles professionally sensitive practice and practitioners who are creative and reflective (Ash, 1992; Rushton and Nathan, 1997; Stevenson, 1999) and marginalises the ‘thinking and feeling’ aspects of practice, whilst privileging the ‘doing’ dimensions (Morrison, 1997). The potential of reflective practice lies in the attention it affords to subjective sources of knowledge and the professional use of self which involves practitioners gaining an understanding of themselves:

An authentic and personal response cannot be achieved....... without thought and without pondering upon the way the world without is inextricably bound up with the world within. We carry with us throughout our life structures of meaning, assumptive worlds which frame our experience and enable us to interpret and articulate it and act.... Effective learning is, therefore, dependent, at least in part, on access to that world of feeling and phantasy, which allows structures of meaning to be recognised and to be open to change, in a way which facilitates a different and perhaps more constructive professional response (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995:9)

For Yelloly and Henkel (1995) the acknowledgement of the inner and outer worlds of both clients and practitioners is a central feature of ‘good’ practice and through reflective practice practitioners can hold these two worlds in a healthy and informative tension. To understand the personal-professional interface and the impact of practice on the practitioner - emotional responses - and practitioners on practice - beliefs and values - attention needs to be paid to both cognitive and affective responses (Le Riche, 1998; Moffatt, 1996; Nathan, 1993; Sudbery and Bradley, 1996) and to individual strengths and weaknesses, all of which can be highlighted through the process of reflection (Palmer, 1994). The development of self-awareness through reflective practice enables practitioners to disentangle the dynamics of practice and to ensure that their actions are determined by the needs of the client and not their own needs (Brearley, 1991; Dean, 1989; Fisher, 1997; Lishman, 1998; Payne, 1997; Ward and McMahon, 1998).

Self-awareness is of crucial importance given the distressing nature of the work (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Dean, 1989; Fahlberg, 1994; Hindle and Miller, 1997;
Mumford and Banks, 1988; Ruch, 2000; Simmonds, 1988a) and its potential to generate negative and anxiety-provoking feelings (Sudbery and Bradley, 1996; Ward, 1998a) which can adversely affect clear thinking and decision-making:

\[\text{Doubts, for example, about not being good enough or not getting it right: feeling liable to be blamed; not knowing, not understanding, feeling helpless, feeling intrusive or perhaps in reverse, feeling intruded upon, feeling lost and confused, are liable to beset most of us at times when attempting new endeavours or in difficult situations. Such feelings can be burdensome when there is the double task of relating to our own anxieties, and distinguishing them from feelings evoked in us by the client (Copley and Corryan, 1997:21)}\]

The consequences of denying, avoiding or repressing anxiety are widely recognised as being manifest in low staff morale, stress-related sickness, depression and burnout (Agass, 1992; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Fisher and Cohen, 1989; Main, 1990; Morrison, 1990; Preston-Shoot, 1996b; Sudbery and Bradley, 1996).

One criticism of reflective practice is that it is a self-indulgent activity of benefit to the practitioner but not to the client (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Hall, 1996). The counter to this criticism derives from the inextricably inter-twined nature of the social work relationship and the positive impact on practice if the practitioner’s self-awareness is heightened and their responsiveness to increasingly difficult situations more informed (Batehup, 1994). To effect change in others, as social work seeks to do, requires practitioners examining the changes required in their own internal and external worlds and the resistance to it (Bengsston, 1995; Morrison 1997; Ward 1998c). Self-awareness according to Moon (1999) informs self-improvement which in turn has an emancipatory and empowering effect, thereby enhancing professional as well as personal autonomy and practice. The combination of enhanced self awareness derived from reflective practice and relationship-based practice informed by reflective practice provides an ideal opportunity for practitioners to be emancipated from established practices (Stevenson, 1999) and released through ‘self-containment’ to explore new possibilities.
2.3. Enhancing Organisational, Political and Social Understanding - ‘Making Sense’ of the Context

One of the criticisms of earlier models of relationship-based practice was their marginalising of the social dimensions of clients lives. More recent models recognise the structural aspects to be of importance when deciding on appropriate interventions (Schofield, 1998). Reflective practice encourages practitioners to view their practice in a broad context and critical reflection in particular challenges the ‘constitutive interests’ influencing practice (Clift et al., 1990; Hatton and Smith, 1995:35). The significance of the societal contexts in which clients are located and the organisational contexts in which practitioners are situated cannot be under-estimated (Boud and Knights, 1996; Boud and Walker, 1998; Stevenson, 1991; Taylor, 1999), nor can the epistemology around which organisations are structured (Connelly and Clandinin, 1992). Practitioners find themselves at the confluence of the individual stresses percolating upwards from clients and the organisational stresses permeating down (Brown and Bourne, 1996). The turbulent nature of the welfare sector with its constantly shifting organisational structures and trends towards integrated multi-professional service provision generates considerable anxiety for those it affects - both practitioners and clients (Huntingdon, 2000; Knowles, 1993; Moon, 1999; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991). This anxiety is exacerbated by an increasingly task-orientated, pressurised decisionmaking environment. Reflective practice as a means of ‘making sense’ of organisational and professional behaviours is particularly pertinent in the current political climate and in its emphasis on contextualising practice encourages understandings of relationship-based practice which contextualise and ‘contain’ both the client and the practitioner.

The work of Menzies-Lyth (1988) on social structures as defences against anxiety highlighted the extent to which uncontained anxiety can result in organisational systems which may, in the process of seeking to contain uncertainty and anxiety, create social structures which prevent the task being fulfilled as effectively as it could be (Sudbery and Bradley, 1996). A more recent model of individual and organisational responses to work-generated anxiety is Morrison’s (1990) adaptation of the Accomodation Syndrome originally developed by Summit (1983) in response to practitioners’ experiences of working with sexual abuse. In Morrison’s adaption the
five stages of accommodation - secrecy, helplessness, entrapment and accommodation, delayed disclosure and retraction are all seen as relevant to staff and organisations which are unable to process the emotional impact of the work. What the model highlights is the inter-related nature of individual and institutional anxiety. In light of this the scope for practitioners to reflect on how organisations are responding to anxiety-provoking situations is vital if they are to keep the welfare of the client paramount (Challender, 1999; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Ward, 1998a). Preston-Shoot (1996a) encourages practitioners to challenge their organisations and to establish support and consultation initiatives in order to address the demoralised climate in which practitioners operate. To do so, however, he recognises the need for practitioners to be able to reflect on the prevailing processes and ‘make sense’ of what is happening around them. Hughes and Pengelly (1997:114), in considering the impact of the organisation on practice, acknowledge the growth in ‘downwards projection/mirroring’ i.e. the impact of organisational dynamics on practice:

the more or less healthy (adaptable and flexible) defensive structures for processing anxieties in order to carry out their stated tasks.

The most common defences are the de-personalising of the practitioner-client relationship through procedurally-dominated practice (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991; Ward, 1998b) and the restrictive definition of primary task (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991) frequently evidenced in ineffective or fraught inter-agency collaboration. Reflective practice allows practitioners to remain thoughtful, flexible and critical of rigid defence mechanisms which are characteristic of the organisations unable to face the emotional implications and unconscious aspects of the work. In adopting a reflective stance practitioners are aware of the containing aspects of the organisation that need to exist for reflective, relationship-based practice to be sustained.

3. Conditions for Reflection- How Can Reflective Practice Be Facilitated?

Reflective practice is a response to the realisation that social work is a complex and contested profession and discipline operating in uncertain and unpredictable contexts. The literature on reflective practice, however, has been pre-occupied with what
reflective practice is, more than with how it can be developed and the conditions which promote it. To date, greater emphasis in the literature has been placed on the individual, internal characteristics of practitioners (Eraut, 1995; Ixer, 1999, 2000; Johns, 1998; Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999) with wider contextual conditions, up until recently, receiving very little attention (Boud and Walker, 1998; Taylor, 1999). Before considering, in the final sections of this chapter, the conditions - individual and organisational - which have the potential to promote reflective practice it is important, however, to acknowledge the existence of obstacles and resistance to its development.

3.1. Obstacles to Reflective Practice

3.1.1. Organisational Epistemological Perspectives

Although the compatibility of reflective practice and social work practice is generally accepted, the potential for it to develop is influenced by the epistemological perspective of the organisation and the organisational ethos it gives rise to (Boud and Walker, 1998; Clarke et al, 1996; Grimmett et al, 1990; Moon, 1999; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991; Taylor, 1999). The privileging of positivistic epistemological perspectives that prevails in statutory social work settings in the U.K brings to the fore particular professional attitudes and practices - performance indicators, evidence-based practice and outcome driven procedures. By implication in such organisational contexts, professional manifestations of social constructivist and hermeneutic epistemological perspectives - relationship-based practice, reflective practice, tolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty and risk - are viewed with scepticism. The extent of this circumscription of opportunities for reflective practice, however, is not solely determined by the macro context of practice. The micro context of the individual and their commitment to reflective practice, which in turn is mediated at the meso level by a range of different systems and structures - including supervision and consultation forums, co-working arrangements and teams - also exert an influence over the macro obstacles to reflective practice, and are discussed below.
3.1.2. Internal Resistance

The second major obstacle to reflective practice - internal resistance to reflection - arises for a number of reasons: the influence of prevailing epistemological perspectives on organisational contexts of practice and in turn their affect on practitioners responses; the emotionally charged nature of the practice being reflected on; and the process of reflecting which involves the practitioner becoming vulnerable and prepared to lose some of the control over their practice (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Loughran, 1996; Masson, 1990; Tann, 1993). In contexts of risk, the scope for acknowledging complexity, uncertainty and affectivity is significantly reduced (Cooper, 1999; Ferguson, 1997; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Parton, 1998b; Spratt and Houston, 1999). To avoid having to face the complex and emotional aspects of peoples lives, affective responses, whether they are associated with clients or practitioners, are frequently marginalised:

The mental and emotional space required of supervisors struggling to provide containment for such workers is considerable; shortage of supervision time however real may frequently be pleaded to avoid the anxiety of being unable to cope with the feelings if they were allowed to emerge (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997:177)

The ability to admit to one’s subjective position, uncertainties and ability to ‘not know’ is a crucial ingredient in the reflective process and yet one that is not encouraged or valued in contemporary social work practice (Connelly and Clandinin, 1992; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Hess, 1995). Whilst subjectivity, affectivity and transparency remain marginal dimensions of social work practice the scope for reflective practice to develop is limited.

3.1.3. Epistemological Obstacles, Internal Resistance, Uncertainty and Anxiety

The common feature of the two internal and external obstacles to reflective practice, described above, is their relationship to uncertainty and anxiety. Uncertainty, according to Cooper et al (2003), and by implication I would argue, anxiety, are fundamental components of child welfare policy management and practice. From an
epistemological perspective the positivistic practices underpinning contemporary social work are a response to the uncertainty generated by unpredictable and risky psycho-social situations. Positivistically aligned practice emphasises the control and elimination of risk, as opposed to social constructivist, reflective understandings, which emphasise the need to engage with and contain the risk. Similarly, individual practitioners, influenced by their risk averse organisational contexts and the uncertainty and anxiety they experience arising from their daily practice, are attracted to prescriptive, procedural approaches and more resistant to approaches to practice which focus explicitly on uncertainty, anxiety and their causes, for fear of it highlighting their own areas of professional vulnerability.

This explanation of current collective and individual behaviours in the social work profession suggest that for reflective contexts - individual or collective - to stand any chance of promoting reflective practice they must address two important issues: firstly, they must acknowledge and address the inter-connected relationship that exists between individual behaviours and their external contexts; and secondly, they must acknowledge and ‘contain’ the uncertainty and anxiety experienced by practitioners. In the following section I explore what I consider to be a fundamental characteristic of effective, reflective forums - the containment of uncertainty - and draw on the work of Bion (1962) and his understanding of the container-contained relationship.

3.2. Containment - The Fundamental Characteristic of Reflective Forums

Underlying the different interpretations within the literature of the reflective process, outlined in section one, is a conviction that reflective practice ‘is a good thing’ and should be encouraged. The organisational and individual obstacles to reflective practice identified in the previous section, however, are indicative of the challenge for social work practice if this belief in reflective practice is to be realised. Psycho-dynamic thinking, focussing on the work of Bion (1962) offers a partial explanation for this obstructive dynamic. For Bion, who worked from an object relations perspective as a psychoanalyst with individuals and groups, the primitive feelings which can be generated by complex, unpredictable situations can have the effect of disrupting cognition and fragmenting thought processes, thus making it difficult for an individual or group to think coherently about a situation (Pietroni, 1995; Stokes, 1994;
Trowell, 1995). In order for feelings to be made manageable and for thinking and feeling to be integrated and informative, each for the other, Bion developed the concepts of 'contained-container' and identified the potential of therapeutic relationships (individual and/or collective) to act as containers for unmanageable feelings, thereby enabling individuals and groups to address the situation facing them. In Bion’s terms the primitive, unprocessed feelings - raw sense data or pre-conceptions - experienced by infants are referred to as beta-elements (Hinshelwood, 1989). In order for these feelings to be tolerated by the infant they are projected into the mother (primary carer) who performs what Bion refers to as the ‘alpha function’ of digesting the infant’s intolerable experiences and returning them to the infant in a more manageable form. The purpose of the alpha function, or mother’s ‘reverie’, is to enable the infant to tolerate and make sense of or give meaning to their experiences and to symbolise them in order for the beta elements (feelings, unsymbolised/ unthinkable experiences) to be translated, via the alpha function, into alpha elements (thoughts, symbolised experiences) which can be used for thinking. The containing experience is initially channelled through the relationship between the person(s) acting as the container but there is potential for the experience to be internalised within the individual who can become capable of processing thoughts and feelings in a dynamic and inter-related way (Pietroni, 1995). According to Bion as thoughts develop the structures for thinking are constructed. In the absence of a mother figure or ‘container’ the infant’s experiences remain uncontained and fragmented. As a consequence the linking of thoughts and feelings which generates emotional and cognitive development - thoughtfulness - is impaired. Of importance in the process of being contained is the experience of uncertainty. Immediate solutions to sources of anxiety may not be forthcoming but the process of ‘being held’ is considered sufficient to offer relief and enable individuals to keep going (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997) and as Barker (1982:9) observes:

One result of the development of thoughts and the apparatus for thinking about them is an extended capacity for tolerating frustration and tension because thought can be used as an experimental way of acting.

A further dimension of Bion’s thinking is the identification of three types of container-contained relationships: commensal, symbiotic and parasitic (Pietroni,
According to Pietroni (1995:40) the most desirable form of containment is of the commensal variety in which 'two objects share a third to the advantage of all three.' The relevance and attractiveness of Bion's ideas for social work practitioners (and academics) is, according to Pearson et al. (1988:10), associated with the capacity of Bion's ideas to 'make sense of their own or their clients puzzling and emotionally charged experiences'. The pertinence of Bion's thinking for practitioners, working in emotionally sensitive, complex situations and within organisations which are increasingly splitting the 'doing' from the 'feeling' aspects of practice, cannot be overlooked (Pietroni 1995; Yelloly and Henkel 1995).

From a psycho-dynamic perspective, therefore, the source of the resistance to the development of reflective practice can be attributable to the emotionally challenging nature of human behaviour and the barriers that are created to rigorous and emotionally sensitive thought (Pietroni, 1995). What Bion's work illustrates is that for reflective practice to be possible the appropriate physical, mental and emotional space - containers - need to be provided. Yelloly and Henkel (1995:9) describe a reflective, containing space as one:

*which is separate from the everyday world, where a reflective mode and slower pace is promoted and where it is possible to allow vulnerability to surface.*

If containment is accepted as a fundamental feature of reflective spaces it has significant implications for the role of the reflective facilitator - the 'personified container' - who can provide what Bion refers to as 'reverie'. For Johns (1998) two key ingredients for effective, reflective practice are the quality of the facilitator(s) and the approach taken to the reflective process. Johns (1998) pays attention to the abilities of the facilitator and their capacity in particular to 'be available', which includes their ability to know the practitioner's personal and professional characteristics, to create an environment conducive for reflection and to be able to model appropriate management of self. Brockbank and McGill (1998) support John's views by emphasising the ability of the facilitator to model reflective practice, observe the process of practice as much as its content and to engage in reflective dialogue. Boud and Walker (1998) in recognising the lack of attention paid to the context of reflection take a broader contextual perspective on reflective forums but similarly
emphasise the crucial role of the facilitator and their capacity to create a safe and containing reflective space. For Boud and Walker (1998) the danger of inexperienced facilitators appears to lie in two possible and opposite directions - either towards a prescriptive approach to reflection which negates the very process of reflection or towards a very loose understanding of reflection which can result in inappropriate personal disclosures and quasi-therapeutic expectations of the reflective process. For reflective practice to be beneficial to the practitioner, and most importantly the client, it is crucial that those facilitating it are clear of their capabilities and limitations to avoid it being intellectualised as a defence against painful feelings (Boud and Walker, 1998; Taylor, 1999). The reflective space must offer a safe and trustworthy setting, which is both supportive and challenging (Goodman, 1984). Clear boundaries in relation to what is appropriate material to reflect on and whose interests are served by the process are essential (Boud and Walker, 1998; Lanyado, 1991; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999).

Containment provides a conceptual framework for understanding how in both individual and group situations uncertainty and affective responses to practice, through thoughtful relationships, can be faced, understood and effectively thought about and managed, as opposed to denied and repressed, and how as a consequence reflective practice can develop.

3.3. Conditions and Contexts which Promote Reflective Practice

From reading the literature in relation to the conditions which promote reflection it is possible to identify two different sources of conditions which influence the reflective potential of practice - internal, personal factors and external, contextual factors.

3.3.1. Internal Factors - Individual Characteristics

Within the literature on reflection there is debate about whether reflective practice is an attitude, a skill or a personal characteristic (Dewey, 1933; James and Clarke, 1994; Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995; Moon, 1999; van Manen, 1977) and whether all practitioners can develop into reflective practitioners (James and Clarke, 1994). Dewey (1933) identified three attitudes - open-minded, wholehearted and responsible
which he deemed essential to reflective thinking. Whilst Dewey's focus was on reflection in teaching the attitudes he identified have been recognised as pertinent for other professional practices (Goodman, 1984; Reid, 1994). Traits similar to those identified by Dewey are emphasised within the literature as important for the development of reflective practice - 'tact' and 'embodied thoughtfulness' (van Manen, 1995), 'openness' (Boyd and Fales, 1983), 'internally-orientated' (Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995). In addition practitioner motivation for and commitment to reflection (Eraut, 1995; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999) are considered important qualities of reflective practitioners. According to some writers developing the ability to practice reflectively is a slowly evolving, developmental process which can only be learnt, not taught (Loughran, 1996) and according to Schon (1992:61):

*Systems of intuitive knowing are dynamically conservative, actively defended and highly resistant to change.*

Other writers do not distinguish between teaching practitioners to 'do' reflective practice and practitioners learning to 'be' reflective (Boyd and Fales, 1983; Loughran, 1996; Ward, 1996) but argue that the 'natural inclinations' (Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995) and quality of 'intent' (Boud and Walker, 1990) towards reflective practice demonstrated by some practitioners are crucial for reflective practice and can be harnessed through specific structures and activities. The acceptance that reflective practice can be enhanced, whether by teaching or learning, implies that whilst personal qualities play a part in the development of reflective practice, the harnessing of individual practitioners' reflective potential is significantly dependent on containing, nurturing external conditions.

### 3.3.2. External Factors - Reflective Forums and Practices

The literature is clear that reflective practice requires time, space and structures which enable the connections to be made between practice experiences and conceptual frameworks (Boud and Walker 1998; Clarke et al, 1996; Copeland et al, 1993) and nurture the enhanced understandings and professional capabilities identified in Section Two (Morrison, 1990; Preston-Shoot, 1996b; Ward and McMahon, 1998). Furthermore, collaborative reflection is seen as critical *in taking the reflection process*
beyond self affirmation’ (Moon, 1999:72) and in countering the charge that reflective practice is merely a self indulgent activity of benefit only to the practitioner and of little benefit to the client (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Hall, 1997). Whilst the literature is clear that external opportunities for collaborative reflection are valued by practitioners, most of the thinking about reflective forums and strategies relates to reflective learning contexts or to disciplinary contexts other than social work (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Calderhead and Gates, 1993; Cox et al, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1994; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991). Consequently, little has been written about the reflective potential of forums which exist within social work practice contexts.

In the following section I explore the literature in respect of the three practice forums - supervision, consultation and team work - that I consider to be most pertinent for reflective practice in social work. The extent to which these forums offer reflective opportunities is dependent on how the primary functions they exist to fulfil are perceived and prioritised by practitioners and managers. I conclude the chapter by briefly acknowledging the potential contribution of professional training to the development of reflective practice.

3.3.2.1. Supervision

Supervision, originating in psychoanalytic practice (Turner, 1995) is the most widely recognised support forum for social work practitioners. Contemporary challenges to the role of supervision, however, risk impairing its potential as a reflective space. Simultaneously the paucity of empirical studies which explore the nature of supervision and its current dilemmas (Gardiner, 1989; Harkness and Hensley, 1991; Tsui, 1997) has left unanswered important questions about the specific features of supervision that could facilitate reflective practice.

The classic texts on supervision (Kadushkin, 1976; Payne and Scott, 1982; Westheimer, 1977) identify three components to good supervisory practice:

- administrative/managerial/normative - ensuring good standards are maintained
- educative/formative - developing workers’ skills, understanding and abilities
- supportive/restorative - enabling workers to reflect on their reactions to the work
In its original tri-partite format supervision had the potential to be a reflective space for and ‘container’ of the uncertainties and complexities of practice, with psychologically orientated understandings of supervision offering an explicitly reflective and containing space for practitioners. Whilst these three aspects of supervision continue to be recognised as the core components of supervision, there is growing concern about the qualitative shifts in the nature of supervision (Borland, 1995; Butler-Sloss, 1988; DH, 1991b; DH, 1995; Rushton and Nathan, 1996), and the ability of supervisors to balance the ‘administrative-inquisitorial’ and ‘consultative-empathic functions’ (Rushton and Nathan, 1996) of the supervisory process (Fisher, 1997; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Lishman, 1998; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990). The recommendations of government inquiries (Butler-Sloss, 1988; London Borough of Brent, 1987), in conjunction with the broader neo-liberal political context of social work and increasingly procedurally-driven and managerialist practices (Adams, 1998; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Howe, 1994, 1997; Howe and Hinings, 1995; Preston-Shoot, 1996a), have had significant implications for the support and supervision of practitioners. These implications have been manifested in managerially dominated forms of supervision with tighter procedures for accountability emerging at the expense of the supportive, relational and processual aspects of supervision (Borland, 1995; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Kohli and Dutton, 1996; Lishman, 1998; Spratt and Houston, 1999).

According to the literature to maximise their effectiveness practitioners require a psychologically containing, intellectually challenging, relationship-sensitive environment, which attends to interactive, inter-personal processes (Agass, 1992; Ash, 1992; Ash, 1995; Copley and Corryan, 1997; Dearnley, 1985; Fisher, 1997; Howe et al, 1999; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997) and which:

*places as much importance on the supervisory relationship and the feelings and development of staff as on the task, regulation and control functions (Brown and Bourne, 1996:9)*

The current state of supervision raises urgent questions. How can practitioners’
anxieties, generated by practice which is recognised to be complex, uncertain and ambiguous and insufficiently contained by bureaucratic measures (Blaug, 1995; Carter, 1995; Cooper et al., 2003; Parton, 1998b), be appropriately ‘contained’ in order for them to respond reflectively and professionally? The debate in the literature about the merits of compartmentalising the different functions of supervision highlights the complexity of meeting the multiple needs of practitioners (Brandon et al., 1998; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Hetherington, 1996; Rushton and Nathan, 1996) and the dangers of reductionist responses to a complex phenomenon (Nathan, 1993; Rushton and Nathan, 1996; Sawdon and Sawdon, 1995). This debate serves to highlight that however the different functions of supervision and supervisory roles are operationalised it is essential, if reflective forums and holistic support for practitioners are to be available and effective, that the supervisor has a clear understanding of their responsibilities. The potential for splitting as a defensive response is considerable, given the primitive and anxiety-provoking nature of the work being dealt with (Nathan, 1994). Consequently, good communication must exist between all involved in the supervisory relationship.

3.3.2.2. Consultation

Consultation in the social work context generally implies someone without direct responsibility for practice, and usually external to the agency, providing opportunities for individual staff members or groups to review aspects of their work (Clough, 1995; Rushton and Nathan, 1997). Although a familiar forum in clinical child care settings (Copley and Corryan, 1997; Hindle and Miller, 1997; Tanner, 1998) within child care social work in general, consultation has not been widely implemented written about or researched (DH, 1991d; Rushton and Nathan, 1996). As a consequence little is known about its nature or implications. The interest in recent years in the role and function of consultation has been in response to the colonisation of practice by managerialism (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Rushton and Nathan, 1997; Sudbery and Bradley, 1997) and its corollary - the marginalisation of support structures for practitioners (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997).

Consultation processes seek to enable practitioners to be reflective, critical and vulnerable, qualities deemed to be essential for the evolution of reflective practitioners.
who are able to acknowledge their mistakes and doubts and learn from them (Munro, 1996; Stevenson, 1991, 1999). The value of consultation forums seems to be attributable in part to their non-managerial, unconstrained and child-focussed perspective which can tolerate uncertainty and vulnerability (Boud and Walker, 1998; Rushton and Nathan, 1997). Other benefits of consultative forums include the scope they provide to consider individual cases in detail, to identify the professional development needs of practitioners (Gadsby-Waters, 1992) and their capacity to be on-going, thereby offering practitioners a sustained nurturing experience (Hindle and Miller, 1997; Rushton and Nathan, 1997). The sustained experience of consultation contributes to the development of reflective practice, which has been identified as a slowly evolving phenomenon (Loughran, 1996). The consultation process and relationship mirrors the increasing importance being attached in practice to a sustained client-practitioner relationship (Howe, 1998; Schofield, 1998; Sudbery, 2002). The reflective potential of the external, non-managerial consultant’s role, whilst considerable, is partially offset, however, by the risk of blurred lines of accountability (Brown and Bourne, 1996).

3.3.2.3. Teamwork

Given that teams are the primary organisational structure for practice (Rosen, 2000) their significance and that of the team manager for the development of reflective practice cannot be underestimated:

*The team plays a crucial role in effective practice. The key difference between good and bad practice appears to rest with the first-line manager and the team’s abilities (Kearney, 1999:3).*

Despite this situation recent literature and more particularly empirical research on teamwork in social work settings in general is limited (Chapman, 1995). Research and literature that specifically addresses the supportive aspects and working practices of teams is even sparser (Morrison, 1990). Literature focussing on the area of interdisciplinary team work (Finlay, 2000; Payne, 2000, 2002), however, is burgeoning, in association with the widespread development of integrated social, health and educational services for children. Within this literature and that relating more
specifically to social work settings the acknowledgement that teams have considerable potential as sources of support for practitioners is tempered by the admission that the recognition afforded by organisations to the importance of teams as a resource for practitioners and good practice is rarely backed up by practical measures to operationalise effective teamwork (Illes and Auluck, 1990; Morrison, 1990; Richards et al, 1990). The contribution of teamwork to the facilitation of reflective practice is two fold: firstly, the contribution arising from the overall team systems and structures (Masson, 1990); and secondly the contribution of the specific team practice of co-working. Attention to the potential of teams in general and co-working in particular, is of added significance in light of the increased understanding of the ambiguities and uncertainties of practice and the current colonisation of practice by a neo-liberal outlook which privileges individualistic approaches to professional practice (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Howe, 1997; Spratt and Houston, 1999). Braye and Preston-Shoot (2000:147) emphasise the importance of the team being ‘a safe space and facilitating environment’ which ‘encourages analysis, reflection and discussion, rather than denial of complexity.’

Given the potential for parallel processes to operate between clients and staff groups it is essential that practitioners have access to multi-layered, collective, reflective opportunities - co-work, consultation, allocation and team meetings - as well as an individual, reflective space, in order to make sense of their own, their colleagues and their organisation’s contribution to current dynamics (Challender, 1999; Hardwick and Woodhead, 1999; Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990; Ward, 1998a). The effectiveness of these collective forums according to Ward (1998a:50), like good practice, depends on positive relationships and good communication, but he recognises this is not easily achieved:

Such (i.e. clear) communication does not happen by accident and by and large, it cannot happen through solely bureaucratic channels such as memos and noticeboards; nor can it rely on simply having a schedule of staff meetings. It requires people to give of themselves in communication, to receive awkward feedback at times and to take risks in talking about things which may feel confusing and uncertain at first.
Finlay (2000) discusses the challenges arising from multi-disciplinary team contexts and concurs with Ward’s views and proposes a collaborative model of team functioning. This model encourages respectful, communicative team practices and has the potential to provide appropriate space for practitioners to develop reflective skills. In a similar vein, there is an acknowledgement within the literature on reflective practice that the development of reflective practice is enhanced in settings where practitioners are encouraged to engage in reflective dialogue (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Duke, 2000; Eby, 2000). Dialogical opportunities enable practitioners to explore their professional uncertainties and to be vulnerable within a safe space. Such spaces and practices are crucial if the individual resistance to reflective practice identified in section 3.1.2. are to be overcome.

The potential of co-working to foster reflective practice appears to be under-addressed in the literature and under-utilised in practice, apart from in relation to joint child protection investigations. Co-working offers considerable potential for reflective practice as it harnesses the diverse expertise that resides in all teams and creates collaborative and communicative working practices. The collaborative nature of co-working overcomes the isolated and often persecutory nature of individualised approaches to practice. Co-working requires the commitment of the team, and particularly its manager, to operationalise it, but requires minimal additional resources.

The literature specifically addressing the role and function of team managers is also sparse and understandings of the needs of team mangers under-researched (Kearney, 1999; Martyn, 2000; Rosen, 2000). Recognition, however, of the significant role of the team manager in facilitating team functioning in general and specific practices such as co-working in particular (Finlay, 2000; Kearney, 1999; Masson, 1990; Rosen, 2000), echoes the comments made earlier in relation to containing contexts and the importance of the facilitator for reflective practice. The research into the experiences of front-line managers, undertaken by the National Institute for Social Work (Kearney, 1999; Rosen, 2000), highlighted the isolated position of front-line managers. Established systems for peer support were negligible and managers expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities to develop management skills appropriate for their social care settings. The research report (Kearney, 1999:30) concludes by identifying areas for development of the front-line manager’s role and emphasises the
need for managers to model in their practice an ability 'to engage with rather than to avoid problems involving confusion, anxiety and personal pain.' Only by modelling such behaviours, it argues, can managers expect their team members to respond similarly. The fact this recommendation has been made suggests that under current conditions the potential for team managers to promote reflective practice amongst practitioners is not fully realised.

3.3.2.4. Professional Training

The practice assessment process for the professional qualification in social work - the Diploma in Social Work, accredited by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), previously the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers (CCETSW) has been a cause for much debate because of its focus on assessing competence. Some educators perceive competency-based qualifications to be antithetical to reflective practice and only capable of producing technicians as opposed to professionals (Trevithick, 2000). Although not identified as a competency the Dipsw rules and regulations (CCETSW, 1991) includes an expectation that students will be able to reflect on their practice, will become familiar with the concept of reflective practice and begin to demonstrate skills as reflective practitioners. Given this situation it might not be unreasonable to expect qualified practitioners to exhibit some understandings of and familiarity with reflective practice.

It is imperative, however, to simultaneously acknowledge the debate in the social work literature which highlights the confused and contentious understandings of reflective practice that exist (Ixer, 1999) and the concern that students are being assessed as 'competent reflective practitioners' when reflective practice remains an enigma. An unresolved tension exists between competency-based assessment processes and the characteristics of reflective practice which suggests that understandings of what constitutes reflective practice may be unclear amongst qualified practitioners and vary substantially depending on the clarity of understanding afforded by their training institution.
Summary

In this chapter I have explored the contentious understandings of reflective practice, considered the reasons why reflective practice should be promoted and identified some of the obstacles and incentives to its development. Hughes and Pengelly (1997) in their conclusion highlight the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in the reflective practice debate, which are endorsed by this review of the literature. For practitioners to survive in the increasingly and persistently turbulent climate of social care it is essential for their professional survival and for safe, effective decision-making and practice that attention is paid to reflective practice. Yet by placing this expectation to practice reflectively on practitioners it involves acknowledging the riskiness, pain and difficulty of the work. Such expectations could be experienced by practitioners as persecutory and unwelcome. This contradiction raises important questions about how practitioners understand and experience practising in a reflective way, what encourages it and whether it promotes relationship-based practice by helping practitioners engage with and contain uncertainty and anxiety. The research on which this thesis is based seeks to explore and offer some tentative insight (not necessarily answers!) into some of the issues raised by the review of the literature. However, it is perhaps important before embarking on further exploration to be realistic and acknowledge too the limitations of reflection:

*Reflection is just a metaphor intended to help us understand the complicated patterns of thought, emotion and their communication which arise within and between people and such metaphors can only ever contribute a certain amount to our understanding (Ward, 1998c:224).*
Chapter Three
The Research Philosophy and Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the philosophical and methodological framework underpinning the research. I begin by acknowledging the personal and professional origins of the research and the importance of compatibility between the topic being researched and the research methodology. The epistemological compatibility between social work practice in general and reflective practice in particular and the social constructivist epistemological perspective is addressed before I move on to discuss case studies and ethnography, which are the primary methodological approaches informing this research. I highlight the pertinence to these approaches of reflexive research practices and feminist understandings of research. The final section of the chapter addresses two components of the research. Firstly, the data generation process including the identification of the research settings, negotiating access and consent and issues relating to conducting observations and interviewing. Secondly, the data analysis process which drew on principles of grounded theory to construct codes and categories through iterative processes and identified appropriate criteria for research authenticity and trustworthiness.

1. The Compatibility of Qualitative Research, the Constructivist Paradigm and Reflective Social Work Practice

1.1. Prior Professional Experiences

As I acknowledged in the introduction to this thesis my interest in reflective practice as a research topic evolved from my experiences as a child care social work practitioner. The questions my professional experiences had raised, in conjunction with an initial review of the literature, contributed to the compilation of the key objectives of this research outlined in the introductory chapter. The intention of the research was not to seek ‘the truth’ about reflective practice but to contribute to existing understandings of it and to explore and illuminate previously unexplored aspects of it. From my practice experiences I identified several principles which
informed my research:

- a ‘bottom-up’ approach which sought the practitioners’ perspectives, generated data from natural settings and acknowledged the ‘mess’ and complexity of real life situations
- the significance of practitioners as participants in, and potential beneficiaries of, the research
- the need to hold an holistic, reflexive understanding of ‘self’ and others and the importance of inter-subjective, inter-active understanding
- the important contribution of the research process, as well as the research outcomes, to emergent understandings.

I discovered in the process of my research training that the practice principles I had identified as important components of my research strategy were constituent elements in the constructivist research paradigm and reflexive and feminist approaches which inform this paradigmatic approach.

1.2. The Constructivist Paradigm and Reflective Practice

In any area of research it is important that research strategies are in sympathy with the focus of enquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Mason, 1996; Reissman, 1994; Sherman and Reid, 1994). According to Mason (1996) sound research design is founded on cohesion and compatibility between the focus of the research and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin it. Over the past decade there has been a growing recognition of the compatibility between qualitative approaches to research and social work practice (Gilgun, 1994; Goldstein, 1991). In some respects this recognition is surprising given, during the late 1980s and 1990s, the dominance in the social work field of competence-based, procedural approaches to practice, which Scott and Usher (1999:13) refer to as the ‘enactment of positivist principles in practice’, associated in the field of research with the emergence of evidence-based research strategies derived from a positivistic epistemology (MacDonald, 1997; Sheldon, 1986, 1987; Trinder, 2000). The attempts in the late 1990s to refocus practice towards broader notions of family support and welfare has been accompanied by a shift in understanding of human nature to one which is more
holistic (Howe, 1997, 1998b), a growing interest in reflective practice and the emergence of more holistic, interpretive, constructivist approaches to research (Brun, 1997; Goldstein, 1991). These approaches to research are very much in keeping with the epistemological understanding of reflective practice referred to in the previous chapter. Such research strategies have had to work hard, however, to overcome the challenge to them from the persistent presence of managerialist understandings of practice and outcome-orientated practice agendas (Hough, 1996), which as I indicated in Chapter One have remained influential components of the ‘refocussed’ child care social work agenda.

The practice-based and experiential origins of my research topic necessitated an epistemological approach which embraced the inter-active and inter-subjective nature of human relations and focussed on the participants’ perspectives and the relationship between me, the researcher and the practitioners as participants. By identifying as my focus of enquiry the concept of reflective practice and practitioners’ perceptions of it, the research strategy required sensitive exploration of people’s experiences, perceptions and understandings of and attitudes towards reflective practice. In thinking about how to approach research focussing on an aspect of social work practice which was difficult to define and hard to ‘make sense’ of I recognised the inappropriateness of positivistic approaches, which sought tangible, concrete findings - an objective truth - about what reflective practice is, derived from the application of a priori theories (Goldstein, 1991; Moon, 1999). Positivistic research methods run counter to the whole concept of reflective practice by seeking to impose an understanding and an identity on it which is not grounded in the experiences of practitioners who endeavour to practice in a reflective manner. Given my interest in researching an aspect of social work practice which was deeply inter-twined with practitioners internal experiences and processes, qualitative, interpretive research strategies, which endeavoured to understand how individuals, within their idiosyncratic contexts, construct reality and their social world, seemed the most appropriate and potentially the most effective means of responding to the research objectives posed earlier. The logical and complementary research paradigm for reflective practice, therefore, was one which was qualitative, descriptive, exploratory, idiographic and valuing of people’s subjectivities and interpretations of them, for as Sherman and Reid (1994:1) identified:
In seeking a research paradigm which complemented both the requirements of the research topic and my personal foundational research principles I identified the constructivist paradigm commonly associated with Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1989, 1998a). The constructivist paradigm is founded on the ontological and epistemological concepts of construction and interpretation (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). According to Guba and Lincoln (1998:206 and 207):

'Realities are apprehendable in the form of mental constructions, socially and experientially-based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on individual persons or groups holding the constructions.'

and epistemology is understood to be:

'the interactive relationship between knower and known in which 'findings' are created as the process develops.'

The assumptions which underpin these constructivist and interpretive processes are:
- the inter-subjective, inter-active and interpretive nature of all knowledge and the inter-dependence of the researcher as 'knower' and the research participants as the 'known'
- the situated, dynamic nature of knowledge
- the multiple and partial nature of 'truth' and the possibility of more than one reality (Schwandt, 1998).

From a constructivist perspective the positivistic objective, observable and independent reality which can be discovered by neutral, independent researchers (Kemmis, 1983; Usher, 1997) is replaced by understandings of partial and multiple truths arising from the mental constructions of individuals which are by nature 'transactional and subjectivist' (Guba and Lincoln, 1998:207) and understood through

For the human sciences both the object of investigation - the web of language, symbol and institution that constitutes signification - and the tools by which the investigation is carried out share the same pervasive context that is the human condition.

Ideas of holism, meaning, social construction and responsibility associated with the social constructivist paradigm stand in contrast to the positivistic assumptions of the knowledge production process. According to Kemmis (1983) positivistic assumptions are based on rational thought processes, meaning-free research and a priori theoretical frameworks (with built-in, but unacknowledged, assumptions and values) externally imposed on the research topic and the insufficiency of the role and nature of language and experience (Padgett, 1998; Sherman and Reid, 1994). Positivists believe that knowledge can be created in an unmediated and neutral way and reduce meanings to what is observable (Hammersley, 1998; Usher, 1997). Within the constructivist paradigm findings are mediated by the normative assumptions of both the researcher and those being researched and are dependent on the inter-subjective inter-actions of the research parties (May, 1997). For constructivists there are 'multiple, holistic, competing and conflictual realities' belonging to the 'multiple stakeholders and research participants' (Guba and Lincoln, 1985:73). The extent to which objectivity within the research process is achievable is a source of much debate. The different positions held by those researchers of a positivistic persuasion and those who adopt a constructivist approach are in part explicable by the differing degrees to which subjectivity within the research process is made explicit or not. Given these debates the notion of a continuum of epistemological perspectives might be a helpful device for reconciling the different positions, with the boundaries between objective, positivistic and subjective, constructivist research perspectives being acknowledged to be blurred and dynamic.

A logical consequence of the inter-subjective and constructed nature of reality and knowledge from the constructivist perspective is the centrality of the interpretive
process in knowledge generation. According to philosophical hermeneutics it is not possible not to interpret and all interpretations are influenced by the situatedness of people (Schwandt, 1990; Usher, 1996). The hermeneutic tradition centres on the recognition of the complexity of human action and the use of interpretation to elicit implicit meanings:

_Hence actions cannot be observed in the same way as natural objects. They can only be interpreted by reference to the actor’s motives, intentions or purposes in performing the act. To identify these motives and intentions correctly is to grasp the ‘subjective meaning’ the action has for the actor (Kemmis, 1983:88)_

Constructivist knowledge is contingent, situated and transient in contrast with the absolute, universal and static knowledge associated with the positivist paradigm. Knowledge construction is a dynamic and iterative process, full of uncertainties and surprises, rather than the retrospective, finished product of the positivist paradigm, consisting of predictable outcomes, certainty and universal laws discovered through controlled, objective and linear procedures (Goldstein, 1991; Kearney, 2000). From the constructivist perspective the contextual or situated nature of knowledge must be acknowledged:

_Contexts give life to and are given life by the constructions that are held by the people in them (Guba and Lincoln, 1989:175)_

Given the key features of constructivist approaches to research it is possible to outline the extent of the compatibility of the constructivist research paradigm and reflective social work practice (See Appendix One).

One of the common criticisms of constructivist approaches is their relativist stance and the risk of nihilism arising from findings being rendered ungeneralisable at any level. The counter to this critique rests in the overall aims and objectives of the research which in this instance are represented in the wording of the research objectives - ‘examine’, ‘explore’, ‘consider’ - which indicate that the intended outcome is not a clear explanation or prediction but an enhanced understanding. Constructivist approaches do not claim to produce ‘the truth’. Theoretical claims or propositions can
be made but the limitations of their generalisability are acknowledged. As a consequent of the inductive, iterative and interpretive nature of the research process, outcomes of constructivist research strategies are partial, complex, and multi-layered, reflecting the diversity of knowers and known (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Mason, 1996; May, 1997; Williams, 2002). A similar critique of potentially nihilistic relativity could be applied to reflective practice given its emphasis on the uniqueness of each encounter. In responding to the critiques of research and professional practices, the concept of ethically grounded behaviour is helpful. Although this concept does not entirely resolve the moral and ethical issues of constructivist and relativist perspectives it acknowledges the contingent nature of these approaches. It ensures that the underlying objectives of the research process - developing enhanced understanding of a phenomenon - and of professional practice - taking actions to help families in distress - remain paramount.

A further implication of the processual, hermeneutical and dialogical nature of this paradigm is the emphasis it places as much on process, on ‘knowing and being’, as on method and outcome (Kearney, 2000; Schwandt, 1998; Smith, 1990). Janesick (1998) refers to the ‘methodolatry’ of the positivist paradigm with its concentration on prediction and control through tightly focussed research methods and contrasts this with the fluid, process-focussed approach of the constructivists. At their best constructivist approaches enrich understanding and identify better questions to ask (Goldstein, 1991).

2. Methodological Approaches to Research Compatible with the Constructivist Paradigm

The contextual and inter-subjective characteristics of the research topic, the constructivist paradigm and my personal research principles required the data generation processes to be located in ‘natural’ practice settings and grounded in the ‘lived reality’ of the individuals in those settings. As a consequence of these requirements positivistic approaches to data collection using randomised controls and quantitative survey methods which de-contextualised the data gathered were considered to be inappropriate, and the methodological perspectives of choice were case studies and ethnography, which were informed by reflexive and feminist
understandings of knowledge generation processes.

2.1. Case Studies

The purpose of case studies, as part of naturalistic enquiry in qualitative research, is to 'develop as full an understanding of that case as possible' (Punch, 1998), and to highlight the unique and particular aspects of the case(s), as opposed to making grand generalisations across populations (Punch, 1998; Simons, 1996; Stake, 2000). The paradox of the case study approach to research is that it represents both the process of learning about the case and the product of that learning (Stake, 1995) and:

- by focussing in depth and from a holistic perspective, a case study can generate both unique and universal understandings (Simons, 1996)

From this paradoxical perspective case studies are in keeping with the principles of a social constructivist epistemology, as both value the particular and understand knowledge to be from diverse sources and dynamic, multiple, partial and contingent in nature. The transparency and inclusive attitude towards the voice of research participants (Simons, 1996) that case studies embrace are also in keeping with my research principles which sought to explore the practitioner perspectives and experiences.

Stake (2000) distinguishes between intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. Intrinsic case studies are discrete entities in which the interest of the researcher is focussed on the specifics, the particularity of the case. Instrumental case studies focus on an issue or process located within a case(s) and whilst the case is explored in detail the purpose of the exploration is to enhance understanding of the external interest. According to Stake (2000:437) in instrumental case studies:

- The case is still looked at in depth, its context scrutinised, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest.

The ‘external interest’ in my research was reflective practice. Each case was
understood to comprise all aspects of family support teams - the individuals in them, contextual factors and their significance for reflective practice. The decision to explore more than one case and to adopt a collective case study approach - 'instrumental case study extended to several cases' (Stake, 2000:437) - was made to increase the potential for reaching broader, albeit tentative and contingent, theoretical generalisations, derived from the key characteristics of the cases (for more details of the choice of case see section 3.1.). An unavoidable tendency of collective, instrumental case study research is to emphasise the comparative aspects of the multiple cases. The case study approach, however, eschews the privileging of comparison. The significance within the research process of exploring a case(s) lies in the attention the case study approach pays to particularisation - to the detail and specifics of individual cases. It emphasises both commonalities and differences between cases. From the in-depth data generated by the multifarious research methods 'petite' or 'moderate' generalisations are derived (Punch, 1998; Stake, 1995; Williams, 2002). These generalisations are translated into theoretical propositions, as opposed to applied to populations (Robson, 1993). They are recognised to be dynamic and situated, dependent on the provision of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and working hypotheses by the researcher and on their 'fit' with and transferability to other cases (Guba and Lincoln, 2000).

2.2. Ethnographic Research

A fundamental characteristic of ethnographic research is its commitment to the research process generating 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) by researching over a prolonged period of time in a natural setting. By adopting an ethnographic approach researchers seek to minimise the impact of the research process on the research topic and maximise the opportunities for the contextual influences on behaviour to be understood (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In locating itself in the 'lived reality' of the research participants, in my case family support teams, I sought a 'bottom-up, inside out way of knowing life in action' (Goldstein, 1994:44), allowing the data to emerge inductively from the ground rather than via theoretical constructs imposed upon it and to gain:

an holistic perspective, contextualisation, and emic, etic and non-judgemental views of reality (Fetterman, 1998:113)

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Ethnographic approaches recognise the inseparable nature of the researcher-researched relationship and seek to maintain fidelity to the phenomenon under study by showing ‘the familiar in the strange and the strange in the familiar.’ (Hammersley, 1993:207). As a consequence of these objectives I endeavoured to ‘earn intimate familiarity’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1984:11) by becoming immersed in the research setting as the means of experiencing and understanding its social reality (May, 1997). By observing and interviewing practitioners in their work setting (see Section Three) I sought to understand from the inside: from the inside in terms of the research participants’ perspective and in terms of the researcher understanding their part in the research process. The challenge for me was to interpret and reinterpret the data in order to create constructions of reality which incorporated the multiple realities which existed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; van Manen, 1983). The centrality of inter-subjectivity and interpretation in ethnographic research required me to be consciously reflexive in my practice, for as Schwandt (1998:222) acknowledges:

“To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of those meanings; it is to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies.”

Interpretation - ‘explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions’ (Hammersley, 1998:111) - was a central component of the ethnographic approach and was one with which I was familiar as a social work practitioner. However, whilst recognising myself, the human instrument, to be a potentially ‘sensitive and perceptive data gathering tool’ (Fetterman, 1998:31) I also needed to be vigilant, recognising there was no such thing as ‘pure’ data and that my previous professional experience inevitably would influence my findings. All the research participants were made aware that I was qualified practitioner who had worked in Local Authority children and families teams, i.e. that I was a researcher familiar with this type of work setting, a position Scott (2002) refers to as an ‘honorary insider’. I recognised, however, that this position could be to my advantage by gaining me credibility as a practitioner and colleague or could disadvantage me as I could be seen as a threat to the practitioners - an outsider with insider status (or an insider posing as an outsider?). My professional status had the potential to further disadvantage me as my insider status could make it harder for me to adopt an outsider perspective (Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley and
Atkinson, 1995). My task, according to Fetterman (1998), was to gather information from the ‘emic’, insider perspective and analysis it, non-judgementally, from the ‘etic’, outsider perspective, in order to develop informed and sophisticated consensus constructs (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). This I realised could only be effectively achieved by developing a reflexive awareness of the research process.

2.3. Reflexivity, Subjectivity and the Research Process

2.3.1. The Nature of Reflexivity

Inherent in and central to reflexive understandings of social work practice and the constructivist research paradigm is the ‘self’ and its inter-actions with others, be they clients or research participants. As a practitioner I developed a firm belief in the importance of acknowledging the impact of ‘self’ on practice and vice versa and sought to apply this belief to my research practice. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:16 and 192) emphasise the impossibility of conducting research

\[\text{in some autonomous realm that is insulated from wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher}\]

and recognise the significance of:

\[\text{the constant interplay between the personal and emotional on the one hand and the intellectual on the other.}\]

For Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:192) reflexivity represents the transformation of these private responses ‘by reflection and analysis into potential public knowledge’.

The reflexive process addresses two of the constructivist paradigm’s central axioms: that the inter-subjective relationship between the researcher and the researched is inseparable; and that there is no such thing as value-free knowledge. For constructivists and reflective practitioners, unlike positivistically-orientated researchers and non-reflective practitioners, who see knowledge as value-free, the production of knowledge is ‘biased’ and facts and theory are inseparable. From a
constructivist perspective, however, research ‘bias’ is perceived as an opportunity to be taken, as opposed to an obstacle requiring removal, as it represents the researcher’s subjective identity and is an integral component of the research process (Schwandt, 1997; Scott, 2002). According to Scott (2002: 929):

*Good qualitative research is thus more likely to be achieved by writing the researcher into the research than by trying to ‘sanitize’ it by writing them out of the text. The researcher’s inevitable use of self does not constitute a licence for less rigour, but a case for even greater rigour.*

Finlay (2002) recognises reflexivity to be multi-faceted but most commonly evident in research in the form of introspection and inter-subjective reflection. My own experiences corroborate Finlay’s views with my reflexive strategies focussing on my personal responses to the research process - introspection - and my understandings of the inter-personal dynamics impinging on this process - inter-subjective reflection.

In the early stages of the research process I was conscious of my reflexive strategies being in alignment with Finlay’s introspective reflexivity. I paid attention to my personal and professional orientations and sought to make them explicit in the form of autobiographical accounts of my experiences and their influence on the research design and by acknowledging my pre-existing hunches about what I might discover in the course of my research. In the initial stages of my field work in the first setting, introspective activity was pronounced, particularly as I found myself to be researching in a challenging setting which appeared to have a very limited understanding of what reflective practice was and provided scant evidence of it. As my reflective journal entry attests this experience unnerved me:

*Chaos and control - has been important to try and acknowledge the unnerving chaos that is field work i.e. the apparent complexity and confusion of what I observe compared with the clear theoretical picture gleaned from the literature. Has been important to struggle with allowing myself to be open to the chaos and to ‘trust the process’ (research consultant’s phrase) which I know does not come easily or naturally to me (Reflective Journal Entry 8.12.00)*
I was forced out of necessity to draw on my reflexive resources - my reflective journal, academic supervision, research consultant and my de-briefing sessions - to keep me afloat when I felt confused and uncertain about what I was researching and how I could do it in such a setting. A journal entry several weeks on from the earlier one was indicative of how my understanding had developed through my immersion in the setting:

Realised I am becoming clearer in my understanding of this setting and my part in it. Recognise the different 'I's' at work:

- personal 'I' - which is driven and conscientious and therefore reacts badly and judgementally to the pace and volume of work done by individuals

- practitioner 'I' which has clear ideas of what I want from team, supervision and work - i.e. reflective practice which acknowledges feelings and frustrations, which is stretching and stimulating - and I see none of this

(Reflective Journal Entry 25.1.01)

The dynamic and emergent nature of ethnographic research became more apparent during the fieldwork in the second setting and subsequent data analysis stages of the research when I became aware of a shift in reflexive emphasis. As I became more familiar with the settings, more comfortable with my part and presence in the research process and began to understand the two-way dynamics of the research process my reflexive activity appeared to correlate with Finlay's inter-subjective reflection, which focussed on the implications of the interactions between the researcher and the research participants for the research process, the researcher and the research participants. On entering the second setting, where reflective practice was an integral component of the team's operations, I was able to introspectively acknowledge my relief to be in more familiar terrain, but also had to face the reflexive challenge of ensuring my alliances with the research participants were carefully thought about. In facing this challenge I became more aware of how my feelings and responses were influenced not only by my pre-existing views, beliefs and values but also by the behaviours and actions of the research participants and became more confident about introducing this awareness into the research process. These experiences heightened my awareness of the complex nature of 'knowing' (Hunt, 1989).
2.3.2. Reflexivity, Subjectivity and the Nature of Knowing

As I acknowledged above, undertaking ethnographic research as a qualified social work practitioner created potential for blurred boundaries between the emic and etic perspectives and presented me with the challenge of separating out my researcher 'I' and my practitioner 'I' (Peskin, 1988). Whilst it was possible for me to 'put to one side' my practitioner identity, the 'lens' through which I observed practice and interviewed practitioners was clearly tinged with my own experiences, personal and professional, thereby underlining the importance of sound reflexive strategies to address them. I recognised how in undertaking observations and interviews I was drawn to practitioners with 'world views', approaches to practice, which mirrored my own (Patton, 1987). Acknowledging my 'conscious partiality' (Ellingson, 1998) was important in order to acknowledge its potential influence on my findings. Richards and Postle (1998) and Sands and McClelland (1994) refer to the dynamic nature of the emic and etic roles in research. Certainly my experience was of feeling differing degrees of 'emic-ness' and 'etic-ness' or 'situational subjectivity' (Peshkin, 1988: 18) at different points in the research process. What is clear from a constructivist perspective is that the researcher's personality, presence and 'performance' are an integral and constitutive part of the research process, and have a significant effect on the nature and quality of the outcomes (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Morris et al, 1998). Consequently always asking 'why' questions was an important part of the reflexive stance I sought to hold throughout the research process i.e. why am I interested in this topic; why do I think that is/is not important; why do I want to follow that avenue of enquiry? Peshkin (1988:17) identifies the importance of researchers being 'meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity' and by posing the 'why' questions I was encouraged to constantly challenge potential influences on the research strategy, design and implementation and to be passionate but tentative (Everitt et al, 1992)! At times it was difficult to research the 'lived reality', with all the chaos, mess, complexity and uncertainty of the ethnographic and reflexive research processes, and tempting to impose some order on to the data collection process and adopt less naturalistic research strategies. As Fetterman (1998:146) acknowledges, however:

*The irony of ethnography is that good ethnography requires the researcher to pursue the detours as well as the paths and to become lost in the culture to*
During the course of this research I engaged in many discussions about the experience of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative data analysis. These conversations generated an awareness of the complex and embodied nature of knowing that arises in research of this type and of the parallels that existed between these holistic understandings of the research process and similarly holistic and embodied understandings which contribute to reflective social work practice. At times, particularly during the process of analysing the data, when its richness and diversity felt overwhelming, I was aware of the significance of the ‘lived reality’ of ethnographic research for those undertaking it. ‘Lived reality’ according to Coffey (1999:131) ‘evokes physical as well as mental meaning and presence’, it defies words or rational explanation, holds emotional responses and feelings to be as valid as facts and acts as an important means of internally endorsing the inadequacies of rational and verbally expressed research findings. Given the complex and challenging nature of knowing in research of this nature appropriate support structures were vital to ensure my reflexive abilities were nurtured and sustained.

2.3.3. Resources for Reflexivity

Throughout the various stages of the research process, from the initial identification of the research topic, the creation of the research design, data generation and analysis through to writing up of the findings I sought to retain a reflexive stance on my work. Achieving this was not always easy and commitment to a reflexive stance throughout a prolonged research process cannot be taken on lightly. Acknowledging my experiences, however, enhanced my understanding of the parallels between the research process and the reality of reflective practice in all its ambiguity and unpredictability. The potency of reflexivity, however, necessitated clear definitions and careful use to ensure its effectiveness as a research method was realised. I was particularly alert to the risk in the research field of ‘abusing’ reflexivity and allowing it to lose its research focus and become a self indulgent activity (Finlay, 2002). How reflexive do you become and when do you stop being reflexive were questions I frequently posed to myself and others. As a reflexive researcher it was necessary to ensure that I did not fall into the trap of claiming false objectivity and authority on
the grounds of my reflexive stance and in the process risk abusing my power and promoting a disguised form of realism (Coffey, 2002; Finlay, 2002; Walkerdine et al., 2002). Conversely I also had to guard against the accusations that reflexivity is a nihilistic and self indulgent activity and ensure it was a means to an end and not an end in itself. In keeping with the limitations of reflective practice in social work contexts, where decisions have to be reached and actions taken, reflexive researchers need to be clear about the purpose and boundaries of their reflexive responses:

*It is the task of each researcher, based on their research aims, values and the logic of the methodology involved, to decide how best to exploit the reflexive potential of their research* (Finlay, 2002:227)

The reflexive baseline from which I operated was that of ensuring that reflexive understandings were purposeful (Finlay, 2002; Johnson and Scott, 1997) and contributed to ‘critical knowing’ (Reason, 1988) which was fed back into the iterative research process for further construction and re-construction. When I felt issues being touched on were more personal or less clearly connected to the research I endeavoured to re-focus my reflexive attention.

In order to sustain a reflexive perspective which remained clearly defined, pertinent for my research and did not veer off into self-indulgent introspection or ‘untamed subjectivity’ (Peskin, 1988:21) I drew on a range of reflective resources. My observations and interviews were reflected on by using a reflective journal, a tool familiar to many reflective practitioners (Boud and Knights, 1996; Bulman, 1994; Lait, 2000; Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001). In contrast to my field notes which were essentially factual accounts of observations, journal entries allowed me to reflect on how I had experienced specific encounters and any feelings, thoughts, ideas or hypotheses it had evoked.

As an alternative means of accessing and checking the trustworthiness of my reflexive understandings I identified another research student engaged in qualitative doctoral research with whom I established what Guba and Lincoln (1989) refer to as a peer debriefing relationship. In discussing the nature of my research experiences with my colleague I was able to tease out the significant emergent themes, address areas of
concern, obstacles to understanding and perplexing interactive dynamics.

In addition to the academic supervision that I regularly received, I arranged non-academically aligned research consultation sessions, which were provided by an experienced, retired social work practitioner, educator and psychotherapist. This forum afforded me the opportunity to stand back from the research, to examine my responses, reactions and reflexive thinking and, in particular, to explore the process of the research (Hunt, 1989; Johnson and Scott, 1997).

One of the key features of reflexive understandings of the research is the light it sheds on issues of power in the research relationships and processes and in particular the issue of whose voice is heard through the research. Whilst reflexive understanding addresses, to some extent, the issue of ‘voice’ in the research process, it simultaneously can risk privileging the voice of the reflexive researcher over the voices of the research participants (Finlay, 2002). The importance of practitioners being participants in the research process, however, was one of my core research principles and to ensure this was an integral component of my research methodology I drew on feminist understandings of research.

2.4. Feminist and Emancipatory Approaches to Research

2.4.1. Feminist Research Perspectives

Feminist researchers have challenged the domination of patriarchal, rational, epistemological perspectives which ignore the gender differences between men and women, subordinate feminine characteristics and privilege the masculine (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Usher, 1996). In seeking to construct an alternative epistemology for research, feminists have focussed particularly on issues of power, privilege, oppression and voice in the research process and acknowledged the implicitly political nature of all research, identifying the personal as political and the political as personal (Davis and Srinivasan, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1993) The diversity of thinking and views on feminism, however, has ensured that it has become neither dogmatic and universal in its beliefs and their application nor in a position which claims to provide a replacement ‘grand theory’ to orthodox epistemologies (Williams, 1993). Post-
modern feminism seeks to move away from the false dichotomies of dualistic thinking and seeks to emphasise continuities (Usher, 1996) and global approaches to knowledge creation. As a consequence of these fundamental shifts in understanding the roots of knowledge creation it is possible to see that knowledge is perspectival and holistic in origin, that difference and diversity are to be celebrated and that the primary aim of feminist research is to overcome oppression and create emancipatory experiences. The diverse forms of feminism, the reluctance of recent feminist thinking to make absolutist claims about what feminism can achieve in research and the emphasis it places on relationality and difference, resulted in me including feminist research perspectives within the methodology as opposed to epistemology section of this thesis. As such I perceived the significance of gender and feminist principles in research to be one aspect of a social constructivist approach, as gender is only one of several factors which influence how individuals construct their reality. It sits alongside other influences such as age and social class (Silverman, 1993).

In exploring the feminist research literature it became apparent that my foundational principles of process-based, transparent research which focussed on the individual’s perspective, acknowledged the roles of both the researcher and researched in the research process and aimed to be of benefit for practitioners, were central tenets of feminist thinking. Given the predominance of women as practitioners within the social work profession and as service users and my own status as a woman it also seemed important to incorporate ways of thinking, knowing and researching which acknowledged the distinctive contribution of women to society, social work practice and social science research.

The relevance of feminist research perspectives for my research was twofold: firstly, the importance of recognising the voice of the research participants and secondly, the influence of power dynamics and transparency in the research process and relationships.

2.4.2. ‘Giving Voice’ and Sharing Power

Feminist thinking emphasises the importance of experience as a source of knowledge and of rendering visible the research process by focussing on the everyday ‘lived
experience’ of the research participants and the researcher’s ‘lived experience’ of conducting research (Hyde, 1994). In so doing it recognises the importance of adopting an individualistic, personal approach which embraces an holistic understanding of what constitutes knowledge (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Hammersley, 1992) and seeks to give a voice to those who are often marginalised and silenced (Morris et al, 1998; Walmersley, 1993). In this respect I wanted to research in potentially empowering ways with practitioners, who had historically been the recipients of practice policies and procedures, rather than the commentators on them (Fisher, 2002; Huntingdon, 2000). By researching from the ‘bottom-up’ and from the inside I was committed to enabling the practitioners’ voice to be heard.

In keeping with reflexive understandings of research, feminist approaches underline the inextricably inter-woven nature of the self in the research process (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1993) and the centrality of power dynamics relating to the control and ownership of the research. The focus on the experience of the researcher and the researched and the importance of transparency in the research process was operationalised in my research by endeavouring to work co-operatively with the research participants in an involved and inter-active manner, one which did not assume an ‘expert’ stance but saw the research process as a shared experience. Transparency and co-operative research practices were modelled in the inaugural meetings with the participants, the feedback on current thinking during the course of the research at team meetings, the nature of the interview process and dynamics and the member checks conducted during the fieldwork stage and after my departure from each of the research settings. However, whilst the notion of a dissolved research hierarchy was my research ideal, I also recognised the practical obstacles embedded in the research design which meant attaining it was impossible. As a consequence I had to openly acknowledge throughout that I did have more control of the research process and accept that ultimately I was responsible for what I wrote, subject to some participant feedback (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Finlay, 2002; Hart and Bond, 1995; Hyde, 1994; Usher, 1996). Consequently, whilst power differences could not be eliminated it was possible to work with them to reduce their impact and also possible to see that power was not a ‘unitary commodity’ (Whitaker and Archer, 1994) shared by individuals but a shifting commodity. The power balance, therefore, altered depending on the stage of the research process. In the early stages I established the
research boundaries but as the research relationships developed I was open to the unanticipated research opportunities (and constraints) the research participants presented me with which resulted in these boundaries shifting. These negotiated and changing power relationships were not, however, free from ethical dilemmas.

My commitment to collaborative and emancipatory research and respondent validation of the research process was evident in several aspects of the research design and particularly in my feedback sessions during and after completion of the research. However, I chose not to undertake respondent validation by offering the interview transcripts back to the research participants. This decision was reached partly on pragmatic grounds as the transcripts were not completed until some time after departure from the respective settings and partly for ethical reasons. In the first setting the content of the interviews provided powerful evidence of the difficulties which existed in the team and the obstacles that existed to the promotion of reflective practice but also contained sensitive material about relationships within the team. All the participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts at the beginning of the interview but I did not follow up this offer (and neither did any of the participants) as I felt it was unlikely they would read them given their length and for fear that they might edit out sensitive but highly pertinent sections. On reflection, whilst recognising that respondent validation does not necessarily generate more truthful data but simply more data (Schwandt, 1997), the principle of sharing the data generated and allowing the participants the choice of what they do with their transcripts seems to me to be more ethically correct and in keeping with my epistemological perspective. Furthermore, given the on-going debate over the appropriate criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, the views and experiences of the research participants become a key means of doing this (Smith and Deemer, 2000).

An additional feature of participatory and collaborative research designs is the scope for reciprocity within the research relationship. Reciprocity is a complex concept and my attempts to offer back something to the two research settings highlighted this fact. With hindsight my offer in the first setting to help clear out the activity rooms with a member of staff, in the absence of any other team members volunteering, whilst gratefully received, appeared to be a naive attempt on my part to reciprocate for the
research access the team had given me. My offer in part appeared to reflect my need to respond to the dysfunctional team dynamics. In the second setting the opportunity to reciprocate for the team’s willingness to allow me to research with them arose from requests of team members. Two practitioners asked for my assistance with written assignments they were completing for their respective training courses. The recognition by these practitioners of my ‘expertise’ when I was observing their’s seemed highly appropriate and provided an ideal opportunity to reciprocate.

Following my departure from the two research settings I was struck by the more complex forms of reciprocity which in the course of analysing the research data I discovered existed. Without being aware of it at the time my presence as a researcher appeared to have been important for practitioners in both settings and reinforced for me the importance of researching ethically, responsibly and reflexively. From comments made by practitioners in the first setting it was apparent that their experience of the research had been supportive and containing:

GR: I think that is all I would like to ask. Is there anything you would like to ask or say about how it has been?

Sue: It's been brilliant process. Yeah, whole process has been very, very good. I think we've all said 'thank goodness Paul has focussed on supervision' and I'm looking forward to reading what you produce. Is that going to be possible?

GR: Yes, although I don't know in what form yet.

Sue: Or what your conclusions are.

GR: I'm wondering what else do you think it has done, apart from focussing on supervision?

Sue: I know Mike has found you very useful to offload to in a totally neutral way and you're just there to listen, not to offer a view, someone to bounce things off. I just think it has been a useful process, particularly this session
because it really makes you think about your practice because we don’t get an opportunity to do that. (Interview)

In the second setting practitioners were able to acknowledge how the research focus and process had enabled them to feel more confident about their practice:

Sarah: Well my sense is that you have seen, you have got quite a good picture of how things are. Things that you’ve said, I’ve heard you saying, I sort of think ‘oh you’ve picked up on that’. So I think you probably have got quite a good overall picture actually. For me to be honest, it has been a godsend having you here. It has because it’s been like a validation of my particular way of working I feel. Not just me but I feel it has really been validating the way that I, of reflective practice, because that has been your agenda it’s like saying well it’s important actually, because there has been this kind of thing in the team about this kind of on going joke about being wishy washy and you know I think sometimes as a practice it has been devalued slightly actually reflective working. So having somebody from the university, a researcher wanting to research it I think has been – it’s like saying well actually this is important. And the fact that you’ve said ‘I’m interested in it and I’m researching it’ is kind of a message that it’s important. So for me because of my particular way of working it has as I say been a sort of a godsend really. (Interview)

The extent to which the conduct and process of the research was a form of reciprocity surprised me, despite my intention to research in ways which were beneficial for the research participants. This discovery highlighted important issues about the dangers of privileging research outcomes over the research process and of modelling aspects of reflective practice in the research process. In this instance the findings arising from the research process proved to be as important as those derived from the content of the research.

The shifting power balances combined with the uncertainty and ambiguity built in to the emergent, inter-subjective nature of the research process underlined for me the importance of sound reflexive strategies referred to earlier. I recognised that how these
experiences and the research process were handled was of significance for the quality of the research relationships and, therefore, by implication the quality of the data generated. I clung on, however, to the realisation that the inter-subjective nature of qualitative research eliminates the possibility of mistake-free research and valorises research which acknowledges the mistakes:

Learning from mistakes is a given in this quest: misunderstanding illuminates what needs to be understood (Goldstein, 1994:48)

2.4.3. The Research Participants' Experience of the Process of Research

Feminist research places considerable importance on producing change - informed committed action, praxis which emancipates participants from oppressive situations. In a similar vein reflective practice aims to enhance understanding and promote change. Emancipatory research actively promotes new ways of working. Rather than problematising individuals, groups, organisations or behaviours constructivist-based research seeks to realise potentialities, to empower, to emancipate, to 'give a voice to', to render visible the invisible and centralise the marginal (Morris et al, 1998; Walmersley, 1993). A fundamental criterion, therefore, for determining the relevance, authenticity and trustworthiness of the research process was the significance and meaning of the research to the participants and its impact on them. For research to be empowering and emancipatory it must be pertinent to all those involved. Whilst issues of the 'validity' of the research are a source of contentious debate in qualitative circles (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Smith and Deemer, 2000; Williams, 2002) if the outcomes 'fit' with the experiences and understandings of the participants and the research accounts are 'intrinsically related to and compatible with the actor's own theory' (Kemmis, 1983:92), then the criteria for 'good' research have been to a considerable extent achieved (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guba and Lincoln, 1985, 1989; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1993; Kemmis, 1983; Smith and Deemer, 2000; Williams, 2002). Opportunities for feedback on the research experience in the form of member checks were built in to the research process and proved to be valuable means of communicating and assessing the progress I had made and provided evidence of the research having prompted changes in team practices and in individual practitioners' understanding.
However, collaborative and open research practices were not without their difficulties. Despite my efforts to operate in a transparent and inclusive manner with all the research participants I was struck by comments made by some participants which highlighted the confused understandings that existed about how I was conducting my research. The power of the positivistic mindset was evident amongst the research participants' comments, which suggested they understood the research process to be driven by the gold standards of quantitative evidence and objectivity. I was asked by one research participant whether I was counting the number of times I observed reflective practice and on another occasion a practitioner acknowledged that she had never been entirely clear whether when I was observing the team informally she was ‘allowed’ to talk to me. She felt that if she had engaged with me it would have contaminated my objective position! My attempts to explain the research as an interactive, fluid and emergent process were in part thwarted, therefore, by the understandings of some research participants who viewed the research as a detached and linear process. This discovery reinforced for me the importance of maintaining ongoing and open dialogue and negotiation throughout the research process to ensure that shared understandings are held as far as is possible.

3. The Research Settings

3.1. Identifying the Settings

In light of my research principles and those of the constructivist epistemological approach the first stage in commencing my research involved identifying suitable research settings. Unlike orthodox, positivistic research designs, qualitative approaches do not adopt random sampling techniques to select research settings but select samples on theoretical or purposive criteria (Flick, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The justification for this sampling approach lay in the aims of the research process which were to describe, understand and illuminate the data gathered rather than to explain and predict it. In deciding which settings to choose purposive sampling was used to identify research settings which would potentially provide the richest data to answer the research questions posed (Silverman, 2000). It was important that the criteria for sample selection were made explicit, particularly because of the implicit process of interpretation which is associated with non-random sampling.
techniques (Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Finding the appropriate research focus in terms of the setting and practice inevitably required making what Patton (1987) refers to as ‘trade-offs’. The ‘perfect’ maximum variant sample did not exist and what I recognised in making the sampling decisions was that they were informed by a mixture of theoretical and practical considerations.

In order to research reflective practice it was important not to opt for settings, such as Area Offices where, given the predominantly child protection focus of their work and the pressures they operated under, the scope for reflective practice was likely to be limited. Local Authority Children and Families Teams which provided family support/‘therapeutic’ work to children and families were chosen as the ‘setting of choice’, as these were the locations where the most potential for relationship-based and reflective practice appeared to lie. By choosing settings in which the likelihood of reflective practice existing was maximised I intended to take the opportunities the settings afforded to gain an understanding of the processes of reflective practice and systems supporting it, with a view to developing conceptual and theoretical thinking which could be applied in other less conducive settings (Boyd and Fales, 1983).

In the case of this research the choice of one of the two settings was informed by my prior, albeit quite limited, knowledge. From my encounters with this setting I had become interested in aspects of its organisational structures, in particular the regular consultation arrangements which it had with a child psychotherapist and was intrigued to know how such provision influenced social work practice. In deciding to research in more than one setting my intention was to create an opportunity to explore how different settings understood and operationalised reflective practice and to try to identify possible reasons for any commonalities and differences in practice which emerged.

On a pragmatic level, it was important to establish how many research sites were required to provide sufficient data, whilst ensuring the research could be in depth. My initial intention had been to research in three settings but during the course of my field work in the second setting it became apparent that the data generated from two settings was sufficiently rich and diverse for the scope of this thesis. The possible ‘settings of choice’ within a realistic geographical area and in different Local
Authorities to the pre-identified setting, numbered four. Within all these settings it was expected that teams would consist of approximately seven to eight members, to ensure a large enough sample of practitioners across a small enough number of settings, that supervision and team meetings would exist which would provide opportunities for observation and that ideally some form of formal consultation arrangements would be in place. Of the four potential settings two were excluded as one was without a team manager and the other had only recently appointed a new team manager. The final two settings had the necessary selection criteria and the ultimate decision was a pragmatic one based on geographical proximity, an under-rated feature of research design according to Punch (1998)! The two settings which were eventually chosen each had between 6-9 practitioners and a team leader, held regular team meetings and supervision sessions and had consultation arrangements.

3.2. Anonymity and Confidentiality

From the outset participants in the two research settings were informed that the research findings and written material produced would be anonymised to preserve their confidentiality. The names of the two teams have been anonymised and each participant was invited to provide a pseudonym to be used in writing up the research. Where participants failed to suggest a name one was provided. There was simultaneous recognition that given the small scale of the research project anonymity could not be guaranteed. Anonymity could be compromised by the descriptions of the settings enabling people familiar with them to identify them. The limited number of participants in each setting made it impossible to ensure interview extracts could not be traced back to their source.

As avoidance of harm, or what Butler (2002) refers to as non-maleficience, was the primary ethical principle underpinning my research I was particularly concerned about research participants voicing negative feelings which, if quoted in writing, could be associated with a particular participant. The inclusion in my research of practitioners and managers enhanced the potential for discordant views to be expressed. It was important, therefore, to emphasise that whilst I aimed to offer anonymity, given the small scale nature of the research project, I could not totally guarantee it. Whilst adequate, the measures taken to protect the research participants did not feel entirely
satisfactory. With hindsight it might have been helpful, prior to commencing the interviews, to emphasise more explicitly to the participants the ethical dilemmas arising from publishing research findings. In writing up the research findings I have endeavoured to avoid personalising the findings in relation to individuals and emphasised that all of the findings referring to characteristics and behaviours of individuals need to be understood as a product of the interactions between the individual and organisational, contexts and their resources and constraints.

3.3. Negotiating Access and Obtaining Informed Consent

Initial encounters and beginnings in the research process, as in social work practice, can provide pertinent information for the subsequent experiences and outcomes. I endeavoured to undertake my research with a reflexive stance from the outset and my reflections on my initial contacts with the two settings did provide insights and generate hunches about the way they functioned which were re-enforced and born out throughout my subsequent involvement with them and became important ingredients of the research findings (see Chapter Six).

3.3.1. The Sandworth Team - The First Research Setting

My first contact with the Sandworth Team was with Jeff, the manager of the Children’s Resource Centre in which the team was located. Jeff referred me to the family support team leader, Paul, with whom all my subsequent negotiations were conducted. During the course of my subsequent fieldwork I was not aware of Paul consulting with Jeff (or vice versa) about any of my research activity. Following an initial meeting with Paul at which he expressed an interest in my research and confidence that the team would agree to it, I was invited to meet with the team. At this meeting I spent most of my time listening to the team’s concerns about their long-term viability in the face of team members leaving the team for a variety of reasons and an imminent re-organisation. I shared with those present an outline of my research proposal and a copy of the consent form (Appendix Two and Three). The outcome of this meeting was an agreement that I could commence my research and that Paul would discuss this decision with those practitioners who were absent.
My first official involvement with the team was a team meeting. Paul was not present but the team were expecting me. I was particularly surprised in the meeting to be presented with signed copies of the consent forms from team members present. I had not expected the practitioners to sign the 'specimen' consent forms I had provided in my initial meeting with the team and had anticipated some form of discussion about the nature of their consent (See section 3.2.3. below). Whilst the team appeared to have been prepared for my arrival a subsequent conversation with one team member, Lisa, who had been absent from my preliminary visit and the first team meeting I attended, indicated that she had limited knowledge of my involvement in the team. This information raised concerns for me about how comprehensively my research involvement with the team had been discussed. Interestingly the issue of communication within the team, which this observation raised for me, was a theme which recurred throughout my time researching with the team.

3.3.2. The Hurst Centre Team - The Second Research Setting

My initial contacts with the Hurst Centre were through Linda, who had been the Centre’s manager and was now the overall manager for the three teams based in family centres in the Local Authority. Linda put me in contact with the Hurst Centre’s acting manager, Steve, with whom I negotiated the details of my involvement with his team. Steve had regular contact with Linda about my research and during the course of my research I too spoke with Linda on several occasions. Following my initial meeting with Steve I was invited to attend a team meeting where I discussed my proposal and responded to issues raised by team members, particularly around the confidentiality of my recordings. Following further team discussions, in my absence, the team agreed to grant me access.

3.3.3 The Nature of Informed Consent

At the outset I discussed with team members in both settings the importance of their willing involvement in the research and that at any time they had the right to withdraw from it, a fundamental feature of ethically informed research (Butler, 2002). I was not entirely comfortable with the use of a formal consent form, as it proceduralises, in a similar manner to contracts with clients in social work practice, what essentially
revolves around establishing a trusting relationship, something which I believed could only be realised over time and through experience (Patton, 1987; Wax, 1971). My feelings echoed views expressed in the current debate concerning a code of ethics for social work research (Butler, 2002, 2003) which distinguish between formalised codes of conduct and the underlying motivation that is essential for their meaningful implementation. As in social work practice I did not want the contract culture to pervade my research practice and detract from the importance of the researcher-researched relationship (Aylmer and Okitikpi, 2000). In introducing the consent pro forma (Appendix Three), however, I felt I was explicitly stating my intention to respect the wishes of the participants but emphasised, through informal clarification of their position at each stage of the research process, that I understood the notion of informed consent to be a dynamic and on-going process, subject to continual review (Punch, 1998). I also recognised that the emergent and dynamic nature of the research design conflicted with traditional understandings of informed consent (Eisner, 1990) and made it imperative that as new developments occurred I re-negotiated the issue of informed consent with the participants.

Although gaining access and informed consent with the Sandworth Team was reasonably straightforward it was not without its shortcomings. Several months after my departure from the team as I began the formal stage of my data analysis, I discovered I had not obtained consent forms from the two team members, Lisa and Paul, who had not been present at the first team meeting when everyone present returned the forms to me without question. I corrected this error but it raised important questions for me, some of which pre-dated my entry into the field. These questions related to the nature of informed consent, particularly when it is translated into procedural responses i.e. forms which require signing. With hindsight the lack of questioning which my presence generated for this team seemed to concur with observations I made of the team’s functioning. My initial experiences with the team resonated with subsequent observations of team functioning which involved limited depth or breadth in team discussions and a strong sense of powerlessness. However, I also subsequently discovered from my conversations with individuals that access was granted to me for two reasons: firstly, on the basis of my presentation in my initial meeting with the team when I openly acknowledged the personal and professional origins of my research topic, which resonated with several people.
present; and secondly, when I indicated my wish to research alongside and 'with' them as practitioners and research participants as opposed to 'on' them. A previous research experience in the team had been more of the researching 'on' variety and had not been positive for the team. With this understanding I was left wondering how far 'real' informed consent is gained through inter-personal negotiations as opposed to bureaucratic procedures.

This question raised by my experiences in the Sandworth Team was in part answered by my experience in the second research setting. In the Hurst Centre Team I received a similarly straightforward response to my consent forms but noticed practitioners needed to be prompted to complete them. I discovered from several practitioners that following my initial meeting with the team, where the focus of discussion was on pertinent questions and issues which my research raised for them, there had been lengthy discussions about the implications of my involvement with the team before a final decision was made. In both settings, therefore, the inter-personal negotiations appeared to be the means of gaining informed consent and once the teams felt confident in me as a researcher the consent forms became a formality for them as the research participants and me as the researcher.

The biggest challenge to gaining consent arose in the Hurst Centre Team when it became clear that the child psychotherapist who provided regular consultation for the team was not expecting me, in my observational capacity, to attend her sessions. Following the initial embarrassment and confusion on my part verbal consent was obtained and I proceeded to observe several of the sessions. It was only as I began to analyse the data I realised I had not obtained written consent which covered quoting extracts from her sessions in my thesis. My retrospective request for written consent was not granted. The incident served to highlight the different forms of consent which I needed to consider and the boundaries of consent - whose consent should be obtained when they are not part of the core group of research participants and in what form. My recognition of my research 'naivety' and blunder, however, was partly offset by my discovery, in the course of the research, that the lack of communication between the team manager and the child psychotherapist about my research presence was indicative of broader communication and accountability issues between those working in the Centre and professionals coming in from outside.
4. The Research Methods and Process

4.1. The Research Rationale and Remit

The decision to restrict the remit of the research to practitioners was two fold: firstly, the combination of my own professional experiences and the limited attention currently paid to the views of practitioners fuelled my commitment to researching practitioners’ experiences and understandings of reflective practice (Fisher, 2002; Huntingdon, 2000); secondly, the decision not to directly engage with clients was based on my wish to avoid intruding into the lives of vulnerable people who already may feel their privacy has been invaded. Whilst this could have been resolved, the justification for further intrusion was one that required careful ethical consideration. In my opinion if alternative and less intrusive approaches were capable of generating pertinent research data then they were the approaches to be preferred. The opportunities to observe practitioners in a range of forums were considered to provide satisfactory access to ‘direct’ material relating to practice issues and practitioners’ experiences of reflective practice.

The social constructivist epistemological framework and ethnographic, reflexive, feminist methodological perspectives which informed my research were operationalised in three ways - participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis.

4.2. Observation as Research Method

Ethnographic observation in research, originating in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, has parallels in social work training in the form of non-participant observation, most commonly associated with the Tavistock Model of Infant Observation (Bick, 1964; Trowell and Miles, 1991) with which I was familiar. Within the research literature a typology of observational positions is frequently referred to which identifies a continuum of observer positions which span from participant to non-participant positions (Gold, 1958). In light of the research remit, observations were restricted to practitioner settings with the exception of the family assessment sessions in the Hurst Centre when I was included in the reflective team as a non-
participant observer. In most of the observational settings I was a non-participant observer, although as I became established in the two teams this identity became harder to maintain. As the fieldwork progressed I accepted that in the more formal settings (team meetings, supervision and consultation sessions) I was likely to be almost entirely observing and not participating, whilst the extent to which I was a participant observer would vary but be greatest in the informal setting of the team room.

Wherever possible I audio-tape recorded the forums in which I was an observer and simultaneously made field notes in a visible manner which confirmed my observational researcher identity. In order to structure my observations I identified four key features of reflective practice - the content (technical, practical, process and critical reflection), the process (dynamics), the practitioner, the facilitator (where appropriate). In the early stages of the research these features provided a loose framework for my observations, with varying degrees of relevance depending on the observational setting and enabled me to operationalise some of the conceptually dense thinking and writing which exists on reflective activity. It was important for me to realise that significant observations could be made in the most unlikely settings and interactions and that everything that happened, and that which did not, was data (Patton, 1987). These diverse experiences taught me the fluidity of the ethnographic researcher’s role and the importance of being able to adjust to more or less involved observational roles and emic and etic perspectives (Sands and McClelland, 1994). The biggest struggle throughout the observation process was holding the tension between familiarity and strangeness (Hammersley, 1993), adopting a marginal position which sought to minimise the risks of over-rapport, whilst simultaneously endeavouring to gain access to the participants’ perspectives:

To ask questions of, to problematise, to bracket social life requires distance (martian). To understand, to answer questions, to make sense of social life requires closeness (convert). The sensitive investigator wishes not to be one nor the other but to be both or either as the research demands (Davies, 1973, cited in Lofland, 1984:16)

In the early stages I was frustrated by the slowness of the observational experience
and my inability to identify themes or connect patterns around which I could begin to generate tentative working hypotheses. As Briggs (1992:50), drawing on the work of Rustin (1989), recognised and I experienced, the skill of the observer lies in part in their 'ability to see, hear, feel and understand' with the 'avoidance of premature knowing' and in their capacity to remain in doubt or uncertainty long enough to understand rather than to reach prematurely for facts or uncertainty. It was a lesson in tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty, key components of reflective practice as well as ethnographic research. Consequently my research experience enhanced my understanding of some of the complexities and difficulties inherent in reflective practice. As the research process became established it became easier to make the connections and think in 'joined up' ways about how different observations informed each other and how themes were emerging. I was also alert to those observational incidents which did not fit neatly into emerging categories. Ethnographic writing and grounded approaches emphasise the importance of 'the exceptions to the rule' as disconfirming data can be of as much, if not more, value as confirmatory data (Patton, 1987; Rowan, 1981).

4.3. Semi-Structured Interviews as Research Method

Interviewing is an integral research method in the interpretive paradigm as it enables the researcher to access the understanding and meanings research participants attribute to their experiences and behaviours (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002; Kvale, 1996). Qualitative interviewing, however, differs markedly from the interview process associated with the positivistic research paradigm, which is generally large-scale questionnaires conducted using survey methods to elicit data for statistical analysis. Qualitative interviews are generally either in-depth or semi-structured in design, affording opportunity for the researcher to gain an understanding of the individual's social reality. They require contextualised listening, or what Jones (1991: 211) refers to as 'listening beyond' and 'understanding beyond', which involves making sense of the interview data in the specific context in which it emerges.

My decision to commence interviews following the initial observations was based on the belief that by this stage rudimentary themes and analytic categories would have emerged. These themes and categories could then be used to guide and structure the
interview process. The advantage that interviews had over observational techniques was their flexible approach which enabled me to explore some of my pre-determined areas of interest and those which had arisen in the course of the research. Once the interview process had begun it was then possible to feed back into the observations unforeseen issues which the interview process had generated. The inter-relatedness of the different research methods became an important component of the iterative and dialogic research process. The different sorts of data generated by the research were an important aspect of its constructivist epistemology and naturalistic methodology as they informed the process of crystallisation (Janesick, 2000; Richardson, 1994) by shedding light from different angles on the research topic.

The process of crystallisation, however, was not without its problems. At times it was difficult to reconcile my understandings, arising from my observations and subsequent reflections, and the experiences and understandings provided by the practitioners (Patton, 1987). I was also surprised when I sought to write myself out of the initial interviews in the first setting and the extent to which, as I had discovered with the research participants’ understandings of the research process (see section 2.4.3. above), objectivity as the ‘goldmark’ of research was ingrained within my research practices. I struggled to work out the extent to which reflexive understandings generated by my experiences of observation and from the interview process could be appropriately introduced into the research relationships and was mindful in my attempts to be reflexive of not seeking a false objectivity (Finlay, 2002). By allowing the interview process to be dynamic and dialogical, as opposed to static and prescriptive, with both parties informing the discussion, I endeavoured to overcome the difficulties associated with the researcher-researched inequalities and to maximise the potential for generating rich and rounded data (Lofland, 1984; Mason, 1996). As the researcher, however, I encountered tensions arising over the extent to which I, as the researcher, controlled the interview process, or allowed fluid, albeit potentially ambiguous or divergent, conversations to take place (Hammersley, 1992; Kvale, 1996). Acknowledging the ambiguity and unpredictability of the interview process, however, reflected the reality of the world under scrutiny (Kvale, 1996). I recognised that potentially significant influences in the interview process related to how practitioners perceived the research itself and the researcher, as well as to spatial and temporal factors which impacted on their perspectives at the point of interview (Cantley, 1992;
Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Research reactivity in participants’ behaviours was an inevitable part of the research process and made my commitment to a reflexive stance even more crucial. Ultimately I had to acknowledge that I did have more control over the interview experience than the participants and that a dissolved researcher-researched hierarchy was not a reality in this research (Kvale, 1996).

The importance I attributed to beginnings in social work practice was similarly adhered to in my research practice. At the beginning of each interview I reiterated the confidentiality of all that was said during the interview and advised the research participants that all the material would be anonymised. All the interviews were audio-tape recorded without objection. Following a piloting exercise on a fellow research student I devised a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix Seven) which was derived from questions raised for me from my reading of the literature, professional experience and observations. I was particularly conscious of the importance of starting with the research participants’ thoughts, experiences and perceptions before introducing any of my own and so I began by asking them to talk about a piece of practice, how they had approached it and about the sources of knowledge which informed their practice. In the second section of the interview the usefulness, or otherwise, of different forums for promoting reflective practice was explored and the final stage of the interview process involved the practitioner synthesising their conceptual and practical understanding of reflective practice. I was aware of the importance of this schedule being a dynamic and flexible tool whose emergent nature would become apparent as the interview process evolved. As each interview provided new data I was able to modify and add to my existing questions, thereby devising an interview schedule which became increasingly responsive to the grounded data being generated. My understanding of this emergent process was informed by the hermeneutic dialectic circle of Guba and Lincoln (1989) although I did not adhere to all of the principles of their approach. Following comments from the first practitioner interviewed in the first setting who suggested that it would have been helpful prior to the interview to have been provided with an outline of its nature and purpose, an outline was devised (Appendix Five) and distributed.

The interview process was structured in two stages with a first interview lasting between one to one-and-a-half hours and covering as far as possible the broad areas of
interest identified in the interview schedule. Where this was not achieved, part of the second interview was used to cover previously unaddressed areas. The primary reason for the second interview, which usually lasted between half to three quarters of an hour, however, was to allow the research participants to respond to their first interview experience, to add any thoughts it had generated for them and for me to follow up any aspects of the first interview I was unclear about or had insufficiently explored.

In order for me to capture the essence of the processual elements of the interviews, I found it necessary to take time privately after each interview to write down my observations and feelings in order to reflexively record my understanding of my impact on that particular interview and its impact on me.

4.4. Documentary Analysis as Research Method

During the course of the research in each of the settings documentation pertinent to the organisational contexts and remit of the teams was recorded and where possible collected. The documents ranged from information displayed in the offices, minutes of meetings and academic articles referred to by practitioners to material from training sessions and policy and procedure manuals. Examination of this documentation was intended to contribute to an understanding of the political and organisational contexts of the settings and to provide a further means of contextualising and critically analysing the data generated by the methods outlined above.

It had been my intention to review case files to explore how reflective practice might be evident in written records. Access to files was provided without question in the Sandworth Team but in the Hurst Centre Team it was not feasible because of the complexities of data protection and seeking clients’ permission. As a result of these complications I decided not to consider case files as part of my research. With hindsight I recognised that I had not considered sufficiently carefully this aspect of the research design and its ethical and practical implications.
5. Data Generation and Analysis

5.1. Data Generation

The four primary types of data were field notes and documentation, audio tape recordings and my reflective journal. Field notes were written at the time of the observations (both formal and informal) and expanded as soon as possible afterwards. In endeavouring to ensure my recordings were as accurate and detailed as possible I heeded advice to keep formal fieldnotes focussed on the observable phenomena and recorded in descriptive, rather than interpretive terms (Patton, 1987; Rodgers and Cowles, 1993; Silverman, 1993). Audio tape recordings which were accompanied by field notes were listened to as soon as practicable after they were made to inform the field notes and my reflective journal. Entries in my reflective journal were initially ad hoc as ideas, thoughts or hunches arose but became more structured as I discovered the importance of maintaining a running record of my reflective processes. A further source of data, which was partly encapsulated in the reflective journal, but also transcended it, was that of ‘bodily knowing’ (Coffey, 1999; Ellingson, 1998), knowing derived from the ‘lived reality’ of my field work experiences, from my ‘conscious partiality’ towards practitioners’ experiences and from a sense of data ‘feeling right’.

The diverse research methods generated a substantial amount of data which once collated comprised fieldnotes, tape recordings, a reflective journal and transcripts of all the interviews and of some meetings, supervision and consultation sessions.

5.2. Grounded Theory Approaches to Data Analysis

The generation of analysis through dialogue between researcher and the research data is central to hermeneutic research strategies (Schwandt, 1997). To inform my approach I used principles derived from grounded theory which seemed particularly suited to my research topic as:

*The findings of grounded theory fit the realities of practice because they are steeped in the natural world, the world of multiple variables and multiple*
Grounded theory is a means of producing theory, albeit substantive and tentative, which is inductively generated from the lived experiences of the research participants. The aim of grounded theory to produce 'systematic statements of plausible relationships' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998b:170), through a dialectical and dialogical process, and to generate tentative theory, was in keeping with my research objective of addressing the nature of reflective practice in social work settings and illuminating understanding of the phenomenon, rather than providing deterministic, causal explanations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

5.3. The Data Analysis Process

The emergent, inter-active and inter-subjective nature of qualitative research strategies meant that a degree of data analysis was undertaken whilst researching in the field. I deliberated over ideas and hunches that were generated by the data and drew on them to inform subsequent research actions.

On completion of the fieldwork in both settings the first stage in the analytic process involved compiling an inventory of all of my data (Appendix Eight). I systematically analysed each setting separately by coding all the data from each source i.e. team meeting, supervision session, interviews etc. An entry in my audit trail recorded the rationale for the order adopted for the analytic process:

1. Decision to start with team meetings as this is the most comprehensive source of data embracing all the participants and covering the time span of the observation and addressing organisational/contextual issues
2. To move on to informals as they were second source of data covering everyone and contextualising other activities
3. Supervision was third source and shifts emphasis from organisational context of observation to more individually orientated data
4. Interviews are obvious progression into more individual perspectives on the research topic
5. Documentary evidence brings the data analysis full circle and places all the observations and data collected in the broad organisational context. (Audit Trail 14.11.01).

In addition to analysing all of the data sets thematically, and as part of the process of crystallisation (Janesick, 2000; Richardson, 1994), they were also analysed and coded in relation to the individual team members to build up individual practitioner profiles. As a lone researcher it was not possible to analyse the data with the level of detail and inter-rater cross referencing associated with 'pure' grounded theory. Instead, in keeping with the principles of grounded theory, I used the constant comparison method which codes, categorises and conceptualises the data to identify emergent themes and to construct, de-construct and re-construct the codes and categories identified (Strauss and Corbin, 1998a, 1998b).

In the early stages of analysing data from the team meetings in the first research setting the number of codes generated led me to identify broad categories within which codes were located. By using the cut and paste function on my computer I compiled analytic files according to the data source (e.g. supervision sessions) and broad categories (e.g. team issues, organisational issues) and similar files on each research participant. Each file was comprised of coded extracts of data. For example the analytic file on supervision sessions in the Sandworth Team was comprised of eight broad categories - team issues, organisational issues, communication patterns, supervisory process/relationship, work, knowledge sources, session content/reflective practice, individual - within which there were a large number of codes. Within the category of organisational issues codes included: organisational uncertainty, organisational confusion, resource shortages, senior management role, inter-agency relations, area office relations, organisational ethos. Each code was recorded, defined and evidenced. Organisational uncertainty, for example, was defined as 'expressions of uncertainty about the future of the organisation in general and team in particular.' This was evidenced in formal and informal conversations and memos. As the iterative analytic process unfolded codes were de- and re-constructed. With regard to the above example, it became possible to distinguish between organisational confusion and
organisational uncertainty.

Having comprehensively coded all the different sorts and sources of data it was possible to allow them to ‘talk’ to each other in order to begin the conceptualisation process. In adopting a grounded theory approach I was mindful of the important contribution of ‘deviant cases’ (Silverman, 2000) and the importance of paying attention to those observations, aspects of interviews which did not confirm emerging ideas and hypotheses (Patton 1987; Rowan, 1981). I was also aware during this process of the importance of being immersed in the data as a means of generating understanding and the significance of the ‘bodily knowing’ referred to earlier, which accompanies qualitative research strategies (Coffey, 1999; Ellingson, 1998). The very nature of the analytic process in qualitative research, which is data-led enables data generation and analysis to be a cyclical, flexible, reflexive and creative process which, whilst responsive to emergent information, retains its rigour through systematic and comprehensive strategies without becoming rigid, and remains relevant by staying close to the data source (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Although reducible to some extent to definable steps, data analysis in qualitative research also defies them, transcends them and makes it difficult to capture in a linear framework!

5.4. Credibility and Trustworthiness

Prior to embarking on a piece of qualitative, ethnographic research informed by a constructivist epistemology, it is possible to outline the planned stages of investigation but not practically possible or epistemologically desirable to envisage adhering rigidly to that particular design (Punch, 1998). It is only possible to propose what might be explored and then to retain an open mind about where the research might lead, ‘to be thorough but not rigid’ (Goldstein, 1991:105). The emergent nature of the research process, however, does not preclude attention being paid to the adoption of systematic research strategies which contribute to and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process and its findings. The challenge I encountered was common to all qualitative researchers struggling to replace positivistic understandings of the validity and generalisability of research with assessment criteria which recognise the interpretive and dialogic processes of knowledge production (Reason, 1988; Silverman, 2000; Williams, 2002; Wolcott, 1994), the ‘dynamic
interchanges between the researcher, the researched and the research question’ (Brun, 1997:109) and the partial, perspectival and contingent nature of the findings.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest a twofold system for ‘validating’ qualitative research: authenticity criteria which focus on the outcomes of the research and their compatibility with the research participants’ experience of the research process; and trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which relate to the research design and processes. In striving to meet these two groups of criteria I generated ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) by sustained engagement in each of the settings and by using a variety of research methods to provide a means of ‘crystallising’ the data generated (Janesick, 2000; Richardson, 1994). These features of the research were appreciated by several participants who commented that they felt my research presence over time and space enhanced the authenticity of my findings. These comments concurred with Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1989) who considered ‘thick description’ to be an indicator of transferable and credible research. By keeping a reflective journal and an audit trail of my research processes (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, 1989; Padgett, 1998; Rodgers and Cowles, 1993) I endeavoured to make my research transparent and to meet the criteria of dependability and confirmability. As already mentioned in section 2.3.3. I established peer debriefing, supervision and research consultation relationships which afforded me with opportunities to discuss my experiences, data and findings and presented my research to seminars for further academic scrutiny. The member checks (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) performed during the course of the research and shortly after its completion in both settings, and in one setting at a later stage in the analytic process, were central to establishing the compatibility between the research participants experiences of the research process and understandings of the outcomes. Member checks are not, however, unproblematic forms of validation. The positive and confirmatory responses of the second research setting to the research findings were encouraging but team members absent from the feedback session did not have an opportunity to comment. As a consequence the feedback process in this setting did not feel entirely complete. In the first research setting the sense of an incomplete process was even greater (for full details see section 5.5. below). My findings were validated by the interview comments which indicated the experience of my researching with the team had been for the most part a positive one (see section 2.4.3. above). However, other than the
initial feedback on my departure from the setting there was no opportunity for me to discuss with the team the more detailed findings that had arisen out of the full data analysis. This was a source of frustration and disappointment for me.

5.5. Writing and Data Re-presentation

As in all interpretive research strategies the voice of the researcher is potentially powerful. I endeavoured to ensure the voices of the research participants were not silenced or objectified by my voice (Oakley, 1981; Usher, 1996) by convening, on completion of my fieldwork and after further data analysis, feedback sessions to each setting. At these meetings I provided an overview of my current ideas (Appendix Nine, Ten and Eleven). Unfortunately in the first research setting of the Sandworth Team only the initial feedback session took place as changes in personnel and a lack of response to my overtures from the new team manager prevented me proceeding with a second session. On reflection, however, the response of the two teams following my departure were in keeping with my experiences of the respective settings. The lack of sustained interest in the research findings from team members involved in the research in the Sandworth Team did not come as a surprise and neither was I surprised to be contacted by the team manager of the Hurst Centre Team to find out how I was progressing at the point that I was about to contact him to arrange the second feedback session!

Throughout the research process I was alert to issues of professional integrity and intrusion into the professional lives of the research participants and was relieved on completion of my fieldwork to hear constructive comments from research participants about their positive experiences of the research process and its impact on their practice. Whilst seeking to behave in an honest, non-judgemental and professional manner throughout and to report all findings in an accurate and truthful manner, producing the written research highlighted the ethical dilemmas such research generates. This was particularly the case when the observations and/or interviews included personal issues pertinent to participants or the expression of derogatory views about colleagues which need to be incorporated into the written accounts of the research and the verbal feedback which was given to the participants.
Reflexivity I recognised did not stop at the data generation or analysis stage as the influence of my voice and perspective was central to writing about the interpretive approach I had chosen (Coffey, 2002; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Scott and Usher, 1999). At times writing in a discrete, linear and coherent fashion about experiences in the field and in the analytic stages of the research which have been far from clear and straightforward has been challenging and frustrating. In the process of writing something of the richness of the experience inevitably has been lost. This realisation has caused me to reflect on my choice of research methodology and its epistemological implications.

At the beginning of the research design process I identified epistemological and methodological perspectives that were in keeping not only with my research topic but also with my personal and professional characteristics. My uncertainty about less familiar epistemologies and methodologies combined with my personal preference for more structured analytic processes were all ingredients in my choice of grounded theory as a method of analysis. As I engaged in the analytic stages of the research process, however, and gained a working understanding of the principles of grounded theory, its advantages as a means of identifying commonalities and of generating tentative theory were offset by my reservations about its positivistic overtones and its ability to capture the realities of social work practice and the diverse, multiple experiences and voices it embraces. I now see that in the early stages of the research my intent was on using research strategies which were comfortable for me, whilst in the latter stages I have become more concerned about research methods and forms of representation which do justice to the lived experiences of the research participants. To this end I wonder if phenomenological epistemological perspectives and more descriptive and narrative forms of re-presentation would provide a richer and fuller understanding of practitioners’ perspectives on reflective practice and the conditions that facilitate it.

One of the advantages of a methodological approach which places greater emphasis on narrative and the voice of the research participants is its privileging of the participants’ voice over that of the researcher. My own research experience involved feeding back to the participants at various stages. In different ways practitioners in both settings provided evidence of having found the research process to have been
beneficial but the nature of the feedback process was not entirely satisfactory from my perspective. The process was inevitably influenced by my presentation and presence and left me feeling my voice remained the dominant one. The positive and confirmatory responses of the Hurst Centre Team to the findings were encouraging but team members absent from the feedback session did not have an opportunity to comment. As a consequence the feedback process in this setting did not feel entirely complete. In the Sandworth Team the sense of an incomplete process was even greater. I felt my findings were validated by the interview comments which indicated the experience of my researching with the team had been for the most part a positive one. However, the incomplete feedback process, with no opportunity arising for me to discuss my more detailed findings with them, was a source of disappointment and frustration. Given the ethically sensitive data generated by this setting, feeding back challenging findings might have been a difficult experience but would have afforded me the opportunity to know how representative my findings and interpretations were of their experience.

Summary

Beginning with an acknowledgement of the origins of my interest in reflective practice as a topic for research this chapter has outlined the social constructivist epistemology underpinning the research methodology which involved two ethnographic case studies of Local Authority Children and Families Teams. The chapter has addressed issues presented by the observations and interviews conducted in the two settings, which have been informed by reflexive and feminist understandings of research and have generated data which has been analysed by drawing on principles of grounded theory. In considering the objectives and outcomes of the research I have acknowledged the contentious nature of rigour and relevance in qualitative research and indicated assessment criteria against which this research can be more appropriately judged. What became clear, however, through the whole of the research process - from its conception to its completion - was the centrality of reflexivity and the importance of it being an integral aspect of the research process and not an inconvenient addendum.

The following chapter provides the details of the two research settings briefly
mentioned in this chapter and provides the factual and contextual framework for the subsequent chapters on the research findings.
Chapter Four
The Research Settings

Introduction

This chapter contextualises the research by outlining the organisational contexts of the two settings, the composition, role and location of the two teams and the nature of practice and range of practice forums within each setting. The process of contextualising the two research settings highlighted the commonalities and differences between them and provided an indication of the significant contextual factors influencing the research findings which are discussed in the following three chapters.

1. The Organisational Context

1.1. Organisational Identities

Both research settings were statutory teams located within Local Authority Social Services Departments with remits which on paper were broadly similar - to provide family support services to families and children in need - but which in practice were operationalised very differently.

The Sandworth Team was a Local Authority Social Services Family Support Team based in a Children's Resource Centre located in a large market town, Sandworth, in a rural county (Momshire). The Local Authority had three Resource Centres which comprised a Family Placement Team, Family Support Team and Under-Eights Team. The location of the research setting Centre was in the southern half of the county, some distant from County Hall and the other two Resource Centres which served the North and West areas of the county. In addition to the Resource Centre the Southern Children and Family Division comprised four Area Children and Families Teams and one Child Health Team. According to documentation (Best Value Service Plan 2000-2003) the Sandworth Team’s department had successfully ‘refocussed’ its children’s services to enable more resources to be directed towards family support services. The Children and Families Division in which the team was located was on the verge of being re-organised in order to make financial savings and to respond to Government
directives involving merging with other Departments, in this instance Education.

The overall aim of the Children and Families Division, within which the Sandworth Team was located, was identified in several documents as ‘helping families to continue to care for their children’ (MAP 2000-2002; Best Value Service Plan 2000-2003). Within this overarching aim were several further objectives, identified in the team business plan, as the five divisional policy aims for family support: encouraging support services in the community, providing support to families, looking after children, returning children to their families and protecting children from abuse.

The second research setting was a team based in the Hurst Family Centre, located in the urban Unitary Authority of Porton. The Centre was one of three in the Authority, each of which related to an Area Child Protection and Family Support Team. Each Centre had its own manager and there was an overall Family Centres manager, Linda. Although not referred to as a Family Support Team the overall function of the Hurst Centre Team was to offer ‘a range of therapeutic and assessment services aimed at promoting family life, protecting children and enhancing the welfare of ‘looked after’ children’ (Children and Families Procedural Manual 1999:17) and to meet the departmental strategic objectives of ensuring:

- *Children in need are securely attached to carers capable of providing good enough care.*
- *Children in need are protected from emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect*
- *Children in need gain improved life chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care and social care*  
  *(Family Centres Business Plan 2001-2)*

Although not facing imminent re-organisation to the same extent as the Sandworth Team, recurrent threats to the Hurst Family Centre existed and the recent management re-structuring and re-aligning of the remit of the Family Centres underlined some of the similar organisational issues the two research settings faced.
1.2. Relationship with Area Children and Families Teams

For both research settings their primary organisational connection was with the Area Children and Families Teams who referred work to them and commissioned work from them. The Sandworth Team related to five Area Children and Families Teams - four Area based and one Child Health related - and received all their referrals from these five teams. The Hurst Centre related to the Area Children and Families Assessment Team and the Centre manager attended weekly allocation meetings in the Assessment Team where he negotiated appropriate referrals for his team. No equivalent negotiation process existed for the Sandworth Team with referrals being sent directly to the team or occasionally discussed with the Team's duty officer before being referred.

In both the Hurst Centre Team and Sandworth Team practitioners met with the referring social workers to discuss the referral prior to meeting the families and the Area Team practitioner would usually introduce the Family Support Team practitioner to the families. Practitioners attended statutory reviews on children with whom they worked and also attended Child Protection related meetings and Planning meetings on children on their caseload or being referred to the team. In both teams, however, there was evidence of poor channels of communication which resulted in the Family Support Teams not being informed by Area Teams of important meetings. Most of the contact between the Family Support Team practitioners and Area Team practitioners appeared to happen outside of the Centre. During the time of the fieldwork in each setting, I only once observed an Area Team practitioner visiting the Family Support teams.

2. Team Context

The two teams comprised a manager and between five and nine practitioners with diverse professional qualifications and full/part time employment status. The historical legacies and physical locations of the teams appeared to be of significance for the teams’ and the individual practitioner’s functioning and identity.
2.1. Team Histories and Composition

The Sandworth Family Support Team had been formed in 1998 following a reorganisation of the Resource Centre which had up until then been divided into three teams dealing with Under-Elevens, Over-Elevens and After Care. In the course of the re-organisation two practitioners who were expected to join the Family Support Team were unexpectedly redeployed to the Family Placement Team, leaving the Family Support Team understaffed in comparison with the equivalent teams on the other side of the county. In September 2000 the core members in the team were a manager, Paul (male, white) and six full time Resource Centre practitioners - four white women, Joan, Lorraine, Mary and Sue, one black woman, Lisa, and two white men, John and Mike. Only two of the existing team - the manager and Lisa - had been appointed to the team as opposed to redeployed to it. The team had one administrative worker whom it shared with another team in the building. The team was in a period of flux with several practitioners being redeployed within the Division, one practitioner about to leave and another planning to take up a seconded place on a DipSw training programme. (See Appendix Four for details of individual team members)

The Hurst Centre had a more straightforward history. The team had been in existence in its current form for six years following the transfer of practitioners between two family centres to ensure a more even skills mix. The team was comprised of an acting manager, Steve, who had taken over the managerial post when Linda was promoted to managing all three of the family centres, three qualified social workers - Anna, Maria and Kate, with a fourth qualified social worker, Julia, joining the team during the latter half of my research and five unqualified family centre workers - Sarah, Jenny, Carol, Sheila and Jane (see Appendix Four for details). Steve had previously worked in the Area Children and Families Child Protection Team before taking up the Deputy Manager post in the Centre. The overall staff group was relatively stable with four practitioners - Anna, Carol, Kate and Sheila having been employed in family centres for over six years. The administrative team was comprised of three workers - one full-time and two part-time.
2.2. Team Locations

Both teams were located in buildings previously used for residential child care provision. The Sandworth Team was based in six rooms - five on the first floor and one on the second - in a large Victorian building, previously used as a Children’s Observation and Assessment Centre. The rooms had been bedrooms and remained decorated with floral wallpaper and furnished with wash basins. Very little appeared to have been done to transform the premises into a suitable working space and the team did not appear to have considered how best to utilise what space they had. Paul and Joan had their own offices on the first floor, whilst Lorraine and Sue shared one room, Mike and John another and Mary occupied a third. Lisa, the newest team member was separated from the rest of the team as her office was located in a room on the second floor.

The Hurst Centre was a 1970s building which had previously been a residential children’s home and was occupied solely by the Family Centre Team. Whilst not purpose built the team had worked hard to make the physical environment conducive to the work they did and continued to do so with work being undertaken by the team in the family room and reception areas to improve their appearance and within the team room to ensure the desk arrangement was conducive to inclusive and cohesive team relations.

3. Practice Context

3.1. The Organisation of Practice

Whilst the two research settings had broadly similar practice remits (section 1.1) the operationalising of these remits varied considerably across the two teams.

The Sandworth Team had a standardised Family Support Team referral form for all the Area Teams to complete, which allowed the referrer to select the most appropriate service from a pre-determined list. Team meetings were the forum in which work was allocated to either team members or to sessional workers. The team employed approximately twenty sessional workers who undertook a significant proportion of
the team's referrals. Work was predominantly undertaken on an individual basis, apart from some co-working of groups. Some work was undertaken in the Centre's activity rooms but a significant proportion of the work was done away from the Resource Centre on account of the geographical area covered by the team.

In the Hurst Centre referrals from the Area Assessment Team were taken to the weekly allocation meeting and following detailed discussions decisions on how to proceed were reached that were specific to each case. Although there was no standard response to the referrals in most cases a family assessment session would be completed and the case re-discussed in an allocation meeting. At this stage alternative approaches would be considered ranging from the allocation of one worker to a family to a variety of combinations of co-working arrangements, team work using the family therapy model and groupwork. Much of the work undertaken was done in a variety of co-working arrangements (see section 3.2.3. below). Whilst workers made home visits, particularly in the early stages of involvement with families to assist the engagement process, most of the work was based in the Centre, with families being provided with transport to enable them to attend.

Both research settings were experiencing uncertainty associated with organisational changes in relation to their practice remits. Paul's arrival in the Sandworth Team coincided with the gradual reduction in staff numbers associated with organisational realignments (section 1.1), and consequently he had adopted a deliberate policy of practitioners taking on more defined roles in relation to the service users, for example not undertaking transport of children to allow more time for face to face work and more frequent use of practitioners as consultants to groups which were run by sessional workers.

The changing nature of practice in the Sandworth Team in response to the reduction in staffing and the uncertainty this generated was paralleled in the Hurst Centre with regard to changes in their referral criteria. Historically each of the family centres in the Hurst Centre’s Local Authority had developed with different emphases, despite having common objectives. The Hurst Centre had the clearest history of working with families as opposed to simply with children. In recent years the Centre has worked with a wide range of children and families endeavouring to support parents in their
care of their children in a variety of ways - practical parenting skills, individual work, counselling, group work and family work (Child Care Procedures Manual, 1999). Following a review of the Local Authority Social Services Department’s services for ‘looked after’ children, it was decided to restrict the family centres’ role to working with families where there was a risk of children being placed in care or where there were rehabilitation plans. The work in relation to ‘looked after’ children was to become the responsibility of other agencies (Family Centre Referral Criteria Document, 2001).

The new management structure, operationalised in 1999, with an overall manager (Linda) for the three centres, was also having an impact on the role and functions of the Centre. Linda had a strategic vision of the three centres working in similar ways and having as the focus of their work the family work model, which encouraged practitioners to work alongside families with their difficulties, as opposed to singling out children for individual work at the expense of the wider system.

The practice realities of both teams were inextricably linked to and influenced by their organisational and team contexts. Both settings struggled to maintain their practice in uncertain and changing organisational contexts which had a direct impact on the teams’ identities and morale, a theme which is explored further in Chapter Six.

3.2. Practice Forums

The range of forums for thinking about practice and practice-related issues in each setting was influenced by the organisational and practice contexts outlined above and was in turn an influence on them. In both settings the forums in which practitioners were observed for the purpose of the research ranged from those which had an organisational function - team and allocation meetings - through meetings which supported workers in their practice, for example various supervision and consultation sessions, to those forums which involved practice, such as the family assessment sessions in the Hurst Centre. In addition practitioners were observed interacting informally within their team settings. These forums were all identified as having an important contribution to make to workers’ understandings of reflective practice and its application. Whilst in some cases there were comparable forums in each setting in
other cases forums existing in one setting were not replicated in the other. The comparable forums are discussed first and those forums unique to a setting are discussed last.

3.2.1. ‘Team’ Meetings

The term ‘team meetings’ is a collective one which embraces a number of different forums which share the common feature of being forums attended by the whole team, with the exception of the sectional meetings in the Hurst Centre which did not include the manager.

Team meetings, as they were referred to in the Sandworth Team, were held weekly and chaired by the manager. They had a dual purpose - to allocate new referrals and to inform the team about and discuss current organisational or practice issues. All team members were expected to attend the meeting. Commitment to attending the meetings was variable, with practitioners on occasions leaving the meeting to attend other meetings.

In the Hurst Centre allocation meetings, specifically for the purposes of discussing referrals, were held weekly and chaired by the manager. As in the Sandworth Team attendance at the Hurst Centre allocation meeting varied. The forum in which team-related matters were raised in the Hurst Centre was the staff meeting. Staff meetings took place on a fortnightly basis and included all the family centre staff - the manager, practitioners and administrative staff. The chairing and minuting of the meeting was done on a revolving basis with everyone taking a turn. In addition to the allocation and team meeting forums the Hurst Centre had a forum - the sectional meeting - solely for the practitioners. Of all the meetings held at the Centre the sectional meeting was the least clearly defined. It occurred on a fortnightly basis, alternating with the staff meeting. Most practitioners understood it to be a forum for them to raise particular issues or topics and a space to think about their practice. It was apparent that of all the meetings this one took place less consistently than other forums and had the most variable attendance. Allocation meetings often encroached on sectional meeting time.

The separation of forum functions for the Hurst Centre Team into allocation and team
related matters appeared to create a clearer and more purposeful system for dealing with referrals and issues arising. It was evident in both settings that the role of the manager had an important part to play in how the meetings were conducted and experienced and their effectiveness in relation to their objectives, an issue discussed further in Chapter Seven.

3.2.2. Supervision

In both settings there was a clear departmental expectation that supervision would take place for all members of staff on a regular basis (Staff Supervision Document, undated, Sandworth Team; Departmental Procedural Handbook, 2000, Hurst Centre Team).

Supervision sessions in the Sandworth Team took place, in theory, monthly and were booked by the manager a year in advance. Despite the apparent efficiency of this system, in practice sessions did not happen reliably and cancelled sessions were seldom re-scheduled, with some workers acknowledging not having had supervision for six months. Supervision sessions had a primarily managerial style. There was an expectation that all cases would be presented in supervision, although a document on supervision stated that all cases needed to be discussed only once every six months. Most of the time discussion involved information exchange and practical problem solving. Seldom were particular issues pursued and discussions often ranged over a number of issues and frequently did not come to any clear conclusion. Paul had a chaotic, unboundaried professional style and often practitioners seemed to have reached casework decisions outside of supervision and did not want to consider another view. These characteristics of the supervision sessions and the factors influencing them which appeared to inhibit their effectiveness are discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Supervision sessions for the practitioners in the Hurst Centre were held on a three to four weekly basis and lasted between one and two hours. All the practitioners, apart from Kate, attended supervision sessions reliably. Steve took responsibility for ensuring all practitioners had regular supervision and would endeavour to re-arrange cancelled supervision sessions as soon as was convenient for both parties.
Supervision, whilst primarily managerial in function, also exhibited supportive and educative components.

In addition to individual supervision in the Hurst Centre there were several instances of co-workers being invited into an individual’s supervision session to enable the two practitioners to jointly discuss their shared cases, thereby ensuring everyone had a clear understanding of the prevailing circumstances. Some co-working partnerships were supervised by Linda and this supervision was independent of Steve’s, with Linda being accountable for the work. The complications this supervision arrangement engendered contributed to a broader issue of accountability discussed in Chapter Six.

Attempts were made in the Sandworth Team to observe Paul’s supervision sessions with his manager, Jeff, the Resource Centre Manager. The attempts, however, proved futile and the missed opportunity became an important piece of data (Chapter Six). In the Hurst Centre, Steve received supervision from his line manager, Linda. It took place in a similar manner to the supervision offered to the workers being regular (monthly), clearly boundaryed, efficiently structured but limited in its reflective stance. The significance for the development and maintenance of a reflective environment of the lack of supervision received by Paul in the Sandworth Team and the regular, but limited, nature of Steve’s supervision in the Hurst Centre, is explored further in Chapters Six and Seven.

3.2.3. Co-working

Prior to beginning my research I had not specifically identified co-working as a phenomenon which would be of particular significance. However, the differing degrees of and approaches to co-work which I observed in the two settings informed my understanding of the important and valuable contribution co-working makes to professional practice and development.

Co-working did not appear to have a high profile in the Sandworth Team. Co-work was only used for groupwork and did not appear to be thought about in a consistent manner. During the course of my involvement in the team co-working took place in relation to the Parenting Group, co-run by Sue and Mike, and was being planned for
by Lisa and Mary who were about to co-run a Social Skills group.

Within the Hurst Centre team co-working was a firmly established working practice and was a multi-faceted phenomena, reflecting the flexible and responsive characteristics of practice in this setting which sought to adapt interventions to the specific needs of the families. In addition to the co-working which happened in the reflective teams undertaking family assessment work, co-working happened with allocated cases and could involve two or more practitioners undertaking joint work with a family or individual practitioners undertaking work with members of a family, for example, one practitioner working with the parents, another (or others) working with the child(ren) and the practitioners joining together and with the family periodically. In the case of co-working which took place on a regular basis, practitioners would meet with each other outside of their sessions to discuss their progress and plans and Steve would also invite co-workers into individual practitioner’s supervision sessions to talk specifically about the co-worked cases.

3.2.4. Consultation

Unlike co-working, consultation sessions were an aspect of practice I had identified as potentially important for professional development and practice. However, the two teams’ experiences and understandings of consultation processes and systems varied considerably. Attitudes toward consultation varied between practitioners within both settings, with some practitioners expressing scepticism about its usefulness whilst others considered it invaluable and essential for practice.

Consultation sessions with other professionals were not a permanent feature of practice in the Sandworth Team. In my initial meeting with Paul he acknowledged that he was open to external input on cases he felt were beyond his expertise. Consultation arrangements in the team, however, appeared to happen on an individualised and *ad hoc* basis. Individual attitudes to consultation varied but were predominantly unenthusiastic about the benefits of consultation sessions. Paradoxically, the practitioners acted as consultants to Social Skills groups more than they received consultation themselves!
Group consultation in the Hurst Centre was an established practice. A child psychotherapist, Alice, acted as a consultant to the Hurst Centre Team on a fortnightly basis. Each session was open to all practitioners (excluding the manager) on a voluntary basis and followed a consistent format which enabled practitioners to present specific cases for discussion. Some practitioners also accessed Alice on an ad hoc individual basis to discuss specific pieces of work with her. In addition to the existing consultation forum negotiations were underway to appoint a Family Therapist to offer group consultations on a quarterly basis in relation to the family work undertaken in the team.

The implications for reflective practice of the lack of consultation opportunities in the Sandworth Team, the challenges to lines of accountability arising from the multiple consultation opportunities in the Hurst Centre and the different attitudes to consultation of individual practitioners are explored further in the following chapters.

3.2.5. Training

The diversity of training possibilities open to practitioners and their differing responses to these opportunities were features of both research settings and an indication of the differing regard with which on-going professional development was held both by the organisation and by individual practitioners.

There appeared to be some discrepancy in the Sandworth Team between documentation on staff development, which detailed the Department’s commitment to it, and the actual experience of individuals in the team (Staff Development and Training Plan, 1999/2000; MCCSSD Joint Review Position Statement, 2000). Several practitioners commented on the disappearance of a clear training pathway in the team with training opportunities appearing to be more ad hoc than carefully planned. During the time I was involved with the team some practitioners attended voluntarily, short, internal training events and all the workers were expected to attend the compulsory Framework for Assessment training. In addition to the short training opportunities Lisa, the only qualified practitioner in the team, was involved in the Post Qualification Child Care Award and Sue had secured a secondment to undertake her professional social work training, commencing in January 2001. Despite the
training opportunities taken up by the team the knowledge and skills gained from the training events remained individualised as there was no formal mechanism for feedback from these events to the team.

The Hurst Centre Team appeared to have a clear ethos around training and professional development both of which were valued highly by almost all the workers. Two forms of regular in-house training/support took place in the Hurst Centre Team. Training mornings for all three family centres took place monthly. The sessions covered a variety of topics and usually drew on the expertise of workers who would present new theoretical ideas and discuss their application in practice or explore more broadly based topics such as the assessment-change agent tension in practice. Family work support meetings were a new forum initiated by Linda in line with her objective of establishing a common basis for the work undertaken by the three centres. The aim of these meetings was to provide an opportunity for practitioners to exchange ideas and experiences of undertaking family work using the reflective team approach.

In addition to the family centre training practitioners also had opportunities to attend short in-house or more sustained external training courses. Several workers were involved in further professional training: Anna was completing her third year of a four year masters in family therapy training and Maria and Carol were completing the second year of the same course; in addition Carol was soon to commence her professional social work training on a seconded basis and Maria was embarking on the Post Qualification Child Care Award; Sarah was involved in the second year of pre-clinical child psychotherapy training and Jenny was in the first year of art therapy training. The extent of the training being undertaken in the team indicated the value placed on professional growth and development and workers were encouraged to share their training experiences with the team in sectional and staff meetings.

3.2.6. Group Supervision

In both teams workers were involved in running groups. Whilst workers from both settings acknowledged the value of supervision for groupwork, the experiences of receiving regular and appropriate supervision varied for workers in the two settings.
The Sandworth Team embraced a variety of groups that ranged from the Parenting Group co-run by Sue and Mike, Social Skills and Anger Management groups run by team members and/or sessional workers, a ‘Looked After’ Children's Group and an Independent Living Group, both of which were co-run by Lorraine with colleagues from other teams. The nature of the supervision varied and included Paul offering it to the Parenting and Looked After Children's groups, Area colleagues offering it to the Anger Management groups and team members acting as consultants/supervisors to sessional workers running Social Skills groups. Although Paul was supportive of supervision for these groups in principle, in practice it was an erratic phenomenon which depended on the tenacity of the individual worker.

During the course of my research with the Hurst Centre a Women’s group was run by two workers from the centre. Kate and Carol were responsible for the group and Sheila and Jane were in charge of the crèche and practical aspects of the group, including catering. There was an established practice of the group workers receiving weekly supervision specifically for the group, which previously had been provided by Linda, in her role as the centre manager. The change in management arrangements created an opening for an outside supervisor to be appointed and, on Kate’s request for a new approach to supervision, Steve identified a trained counsellor and psychodramatist who met weekly with Kate and Carol and used the therapeutic spiral method of supervision which drew on the supervisor’s experience of the workers relationship with her and each other to inform the supervisory process.

3.2.7. Informal Interactions

The influence of the physical and geographical location and ‘catchment’ area of the two teams on their professional identity and practices, became apparent when I endeavoured to undertake informal observations with the teams.

The geographical spread of the work undertaken in the Sandworth Team resulted in a considerable amount of time being spent travelling and out of the office. This practical reality meant most practitioners spent a significant percentage of their time out of the office on their own and frequently the office was sparsely occupied.
The physical layout of the Sandworth Team in the Resource Centre was not conducive to collaborative informal interactions. Practitioners were observed on a few occasions discussing issues with the manager, Paul, outside his office in the corridor, which connected all the different practitioners’ rooms. The staff room was used socially after the weekly team meeting and occasionally by groups of practitioners over lunchtime and there was some movement amongst the practitioners around the team rooms for the purposes of collegial conversation but the fragmentation of the team rooms inhibited informal exchanges. The conversations that did take place were observed to be primarily of a social nature and occasionally practically orientated, work related discussions. On the few occasions I observed practitioners discussing an aspect of their work with a colleague the discussion was rarely sustained and quickly dissolved into social conversations. There was evidence of some team members - Lorraine, Mike and Sue - relating socially outside of the office setting and these three practitioners appeared to have stronger connections with each other within the work place as well.

In the Hurst Centre the working practices involved most of the work being undertaken in the Centre. As a consequence, whilst practitioners were frequently engaged in private rooms, there was always a core of practitioners in the building. The team room on the first floor of the building was the primary location for the informal observations as this was where practitioners spent most of their time outside of formal sessions and meetings. The room comprised fourteen desks and was open plan and conducive to informal discussion and conversation. It was unusual for everyone to be in the room simultaneously but usually at any one time there would be two or the practitioners present. Steve’s role as the manager was demarcated by his physical separation from the team - his room was at the opposite end of the corridor to the team room and he rarely came into the team room.

A feature of this setting was the regular movement of practitioners in and out of the room, frequently in pairs or groups, as they went off to co-work with families. To an outside observer the team did not appear to have strong cliques or divisive features and within the team room the inclusive and collaborative nature of the team was evident in the numerous discussions which took place between all the workers. The team’s respect for and commitment to high quality professional practice was matched
by an equally highly valued social dimension to the team. During the course of my observations the practitioners shared a variety of social activities - meals, cinema and shopping trips - to which all the practitioners were invited. In addition to this social dimension was a strong sense of the team being aware of the importance of taking care of itself, in terms of healthy eating patterns and exercise and of the impact of personal issues on professional practice.

3.2.8. Social Work Colleagues

As has been recognised (section 1.2.) both teams related to Area practitioners who commissioned work from the teams but appeared to have ambivalent relationships with them. In the Sandworth Team, however, some workers felt that Area social work colleagues were an important source of support at the outset of involvement in a case and on-going dialogue. Relationships with practitioners in the Area teams, however, although valued by some workers, were not contentious and embraced issues of power and control over the work, an issue discussed further in Chapter Six.

In the Hurst Centre Team practitioners did not explicitly mention valuing Area practitioners as colleagues. This state of affairs might have been a reflection of the stronger team identity in this setting. In the Sandworth Team where team relationships and support were less well developed, the lack of support within the team was compensated for by individual practitioner’s relationships with Area colleagues.

3.2.9. Managers’ Meetings

The importance of the role of the manager in relation to allocation and staff dimensions in both settings has already been mentioned (section 3.1. above) and reinforces the significance of a supportive forum for managers to enable them to meet the expectations of their role effectively.

In the Porton authority, where the Hurst Centre was located, the managers of the three family centres met with the overall manager, Linda, on a monthly basis, with the venue alternating between the centres. The content of the meeting was essentially administrative and it appeared to serve an important function of enabling the managers
to debate new developments and discuss current managerial issues with their peers.

For Paul in the Sandworth Team there was no equivalent support forum specifically for Family Support Team managers. Paul’s primary source of peer support was the Area Management meeting which comprised the Area Children and Families Team managers. Paul, however, had strained relations with these colleagues whom he felt did not understand his specific role or the purpose of his team.

3.2.10. Family Assessment Meetings

Family Assessment meetings were unique to the Hurst Centre Team. The meeting had three components - the pre-session discussion of the case and planning of the session (between 15-30 minutes); the family session including the reflective conversation within the session (one hour); the post session discussion and professional debrief (between 5-20 minutes) depending on workers’ other commitments. All the practitioners in the team were expected to, and did, participate in the Family Assessment sessions. Each assessment session comprised four practitioners, two ‘doers’, who facilitated the session with the family, and two observers, who sat behind the screen for the session and who joined it half way through to conduct a reflective conversation in front of the family. Issues arising from this conversation were then taken up with the family in the latter half of the session when the observers had returned to the observation room and discussed further amongst the reflective team after the family had departed.

Summary

The outline of the organisational, team and practice contexts of the two settings provided in this Chapter has begun the process of identifying the central characteristics of the two settings, the similarities between them and their differences. Chapters Five, Six and Seven explore in more depth these similarities and differences as they were manifested in the research findings.
Chapter Five
Research Findings -
The Practitioner Context of Reflective Practice

Introduction

This chapter is the first of three chapters which address the findings arising from the data and its analysis. In the light of the data generated from the research observations and interviews in each setting, three contexts - the practitioner context, the team context and the organisational context - were identified as exerting significant influences on the formation and development of reflective practice. These three contexts have informed the structure of the subsequent findings chapters which examine in turn the influences of the practitioner, team, and organisational contexts on reflective practice. As I acknowledged in Chapter Three (section 2.1.) the case study method seeks to draw out the particular and unique aspects of the case(s) and emphasises in collective case studies commonalities and differences but avoids a comparative perspective. The unanticipated contrasting nature of the two case studies of which this research is comprised has made it difficult not to fall into the trap of comparing and contrasting their different characteristics. Each findings chapter has been structured thematically and each theme has been recognised to exist on a continuum. Whilst examples are provided that substantiate the dominant position of an individual or setting in relation to the characteristic being discussed, it was clear that these positions were dynamic. The themes identified were recognised to be common to both settings but given the contrasting nature of the two settings their manifestations were often different. Whilst the specific manifestation of a theme in each setting is detailed, attention is also paid to examples of particular issues being experienced in similar ways in both settings.

The overarching research finding (discussed in detail in Chapter Eight) which emerged was the implications for reflective practice of the inter-active relationship that existed between three contexts of practice - the individual practitioner context, the team context and the wider organisational context. This finding presented one of the main challenges encountered in the research process - the challenge of holding the tension
between the separate contributions of each of the three contexts to understandings and operationalisations of reflective practice and the inter-dependent relationship between the three different contexts. It is my hope that by addressing the findings from each context separately, in order to make sense of them and make them accessible to the reader, I have not over-simplified the complexity that existed.

Although direct observation of practice was not a feature of this research (see Chapter Three for the rationale underlying this position), from the interview and observational data generated in the two settings it was possible to explore practitioners’ experiences of contemporary child care social work, their understandings of reflective practice and the implications of these understandings for child care social work practice. I begin the chapter by outlining the practitioners’ perspectives on contemporary child care social work and suggest that, in spite of the similarities in practice experience, the diverse practice responses voiced by practitioners can be understood in terms of the different epistemological perspectives they held. In the second section of the chapter these epistemological perspectives and the different understandings of reflective practice expressed by the practitioners are explored and the important contribution made by the practitioner’s context to understanding why, how, when and where reflective practice exists or not, is emphasised. The third section considers the implications for practice of the different epistemological perspectives and understandings of reflective practice and the chapter concludes by acknowledging the benefits - for clients and practitioners - of reflective approaches to practice and the extent to which they can facilitate relationship-based practice.

1. Practitioners’ Perspectives on Contemporary Child Care Social Work

One of the intentions underpinning this research was to examine the extent to which reflective practice contributed to the development of relationship-based practice as an effective response to the uncertainty and ambiguity of contemporary child care social work. In order to complement the observational data which provided insight into how practitioners experienced and understood contemporary practice, practitioners were asked in their interviews to talk about a piece of work. The examples provided were diverse and included individual counselling work with adults and with children, family work, group work with women and with teenagers and parenting skills work.
The most common and pervasive features of all these pieces of work were the practitioners explicit acknowledgement of the unpredictable nature of their involvement with their clients and the need for interventions to be responsive to the needs of the individual clients concerned:

*Jane (HC):* I find that (relating to social worker) difficult because it’s the cross over between the work you have been given to do and two-three weeks down the line when you discover there is more to do and you have to reassess your thoughts. And I find that difficult because I go in with a game plan and it gets blown away in the first couple of weeks and I do find that difficult because I have to reassess what I am going to do and being new to it is hard because I have to ask other people, other colleagues. I don’t find it difficult meeting the clients or trying to engage them but it is if the work changes dramatically (Interview)

Closely connected to this aspect of the work was the practitioners’ experience of external pressures on them to produce unrealistic outcomes in impossible timeframes (discussed further in Chapter Six, section 3). Two additional features which were common to all the work and related to its unpredictable nature, were its complexity and emotionally challenging content:

*Lorraine (ST):* It kind of changed because from the beginning it was to go through the court process and go through the court pack because we thought the court case was going to be in February and I started working with her in November. So there wasn’t a huge amount of time to visit the courts and go through the court pack and establish a relationship with her but then the court case was postponed until July. But then between February and July she ended up being accommodated and all other issues too. And her mum got pregnant by a much younger man and there were lots of other issues around that so it went off in all sorts of other directions too. It was not just the court work it became with the foster placement and talking about relationships with her family and that she didn’t want her mum to have the baby and called the baby ‘it’. So it changed from the original referral of doing the court work to crisis work, from one crisis to the next. (Interview)
The comparable experiences of practice articulated by practitioners from both settings in their interviews did not always correspond to findings from the observational data. In the Sandworth Team discussions about practice in supervision and team meetings, whilst not devoid of the unpredictable, complex and challenging dimensions of practice, did not illustrate them as clearly as they were illustrated in the interviews, suggesting that dynamics in those particular contexts might have prohibited them being expressed (a point I discuss further in Chapter Seven, section 2.3.). In the Hurst Centre Team the distinction between the interview accounts of practice and those generated from observational sources was less apparent.

The similarities in practice experience articulated by practitioners and observed in the field were not matched by common practice responses. The diverse range of practice responses, inspite of the comparable experiences of practitioners, suggested that how practitioners engaged with their experiences of the unpredictability, complexity and challenges of practice was influenced by what informed their professional knowledge. In turn the individual practitioner's stance on professional knowledge affected the characteristics of their practice and the extent to which it was perceived and operationalised in relationship-based ways.

2. The Diverse Sources of Knowledge Informing Reflective Practice

A key feature of reflective practice is the diverse nature of the knowledges of which it is comprised. The common characteristic of both research settings was the clear evidence they provided of the existence of diverse knowledge sources, which ranged from personal, intuitive and tacit knowledges at one end of the knowledge continuum to propositional, technical-rational knowledge sources at the other end. Process knowledge situated between the continuum extremes embraced personal knowledge and practice experience integrated with propositional, technical-rational understandings and also included awareness of the unconscious aspects. All of the practitioners in both settings, with differing degrees of confidence, identified the primary knowledge sources informing their practice. Although in the Sandworth Team there was initial uncertainty about what reflective practice was, all the practitioners were able to articulate some understanding of reflective practice. Within each setting all three knowledge sources were identified to differing degrees, with some practitioners
having a predominant tendency to one knowledge source and other practitioners demonstrating a more holistic grasp and use of diverse knowledge sources. The concept of a reflective or knowledge continuum helps to overcome what could be perceived as a static and rigid classification of practitioners and settings. As I illustrate in section 2.3. below the boundaries between the different reflective groupings were blurred both for individual practitioners and in the two settings.

2.1. Technical Understandings of Practice

The technically reflective practitioner group comprised Sheila and Jane and to a lesser extent the manager, Steve in the Hurst Centre and Lorraine, Mike, Joan and Paul (the manager) in the Sandworth Team. The practice associated with this grouping of practitioners had a predominantly prescriptive and technical manifestation but was rooted in experience, both personal and professional, and intuition. Reflective practice for these practitioners appeared to be a limited, externally orientated, practical and technical exercise focussing on what was done and finding different techniques to improve their practice:

GR: So what is your definition of reflective practice?

Mike (ST): I would have to admit that I had it slightly wrong before I did my NVQ presentation. To me it seemed there were two strands - there was the reflection in your direct sessions with young people or parents in that you didn't take in what they said chicked it into your own system and then said 'Well this what you ought to do' but you just reflected it back and left them to reason things out with the support of a listening ear. I have to admit I'm not good at that. I tend to think 'Well that's silly' and occasionally I'll find myself saying 'Forget that' and then realising that is not very helpful! The other strand I decided, having read Sue's books on social work, was the most important strand which was forward planning, thinking about it afterwards and actually applying the thinking to the situation you were trying to deal with. As I say it's difficult to find the time to do that. I'm seeing DL this p.m. and I will have time today so it's unusual but often meetings get in the way. It's one thing planning but I think you've also got to be doing the bit afterwards, the
pulling it altogether and then tying it into your planning for next week. I think it would be very easy to have a plan and then not think about what you have done. That's more or less what I thought reflective practice was, thinking about it outside of the immediate context. (Interview)

The knowledge informing these practitioners' practice was primarily derived from their own personal or professional experiences. Sheila, Jane and Joan referred to their own personal and professional experiences as being significant sources of understanding for their practice, whilst Lorraine referred to her intuitive, guts-based responses. Paul acknowledged his practical orientation and focus on practice tools was a response to feelings of intimidation he experienced in relation to 'theoretically' informed practice. From Mike's perspective the ability to 'do' social work was an innate personal quality and could not be learnt - you either could or could not do it - and certain principles underpinned practice:

Mike (ST): There's only one way of working with young people - have firm boundaries and be honest with them. There is no other way of doing it. That's it. It's not exactly rocket science. (Supervision session)

There was a discrepancy, exemplified by Mike's comments above, however, between the personal sources of knowledge these practitioners drew on and their practice responses which tended to be of a technical nature. For the technically orientated practitioners the 'what' and 'how' questions - what had worked and how - as opposed to the 'why' questions, were characteristic of their approach to reflective practice with practical solutions and new strategies being prioritised over meaning, insight and understanding. This technical understanding of reflective practice appeared to be based on what practitioners did and how in order to mould the work to the individual and maximise its effectiveness:

GR: ....and I'm wondering what your understanding of what the term reflective practice means?

Lorraine (ST): I know what I said to Mike - 'I haven't got the foggiest.' But after I said that to Mike and then said that the way I work is that I reflect back
As Lorraine’s comment illustrates, this approach was characterised by practitioners describing reflective practice in technical terms which involved them thinking about what they had done, what had worked, what they could have done differently and storing up these thoughts for future situations. This understanding of practice failed to offer the practitioners a means of conceptualising and integrating the personal and professional experiences informing their practice with their technical-rational responses which would have enabled them to develop flexible responses to the unpredictable situations they encountered. The limitations of technical reflective practice appeared to be manifested in the stance of the technically reflective practitioners who did not consider reflective practice to be an essential component of their work and found reflective approaches to practice, other than those of a technical nature, a challenge to familiar and preferred work patterns. Sheila and Mike acknowledged the potential value of reflective practice but did not seek to develop their reflective abilities, whilst Jane, as a relatively new member of staff in the Hurst Centre, expressed an interest in becoming more skilled in reflective approaches but struggled to reconcile reflective approaches with her self confessed identity as a ‘doer not a thinker’.

2.2. Holistic Understandings of Practice

The overriding characteristic of holistically informed practitioners - Anna, Jenny, Maria and Sarah and to a slightly lesser extent Kate, Carol and Julie in the Hurst Centre and Sue and Lisa in the Sandworth Team - was their holistically integrated, multi-layered, open understanding of knowledge. This approach embraced the technical-rational sources of knowledge, which were central to the practice of technically reflective practitioners. In addition it included practical-moral knowledge sources i.e. experiential knowledge drawn from personal and professional contexts, which was conceptualised in relation to theoretical perspectives and process knowledge with its recognition of the unconscious aspects of knowing. For these practitioners diverse knowledge sources, whilst not uncontentious, were acceptable.
and valuable. Lisa, the newest and only qualified practitioner in the Sandworth Team, had strong views about the team’s attitude to knowledge which informed its practice and was resistant to artificial polarisations of technical-rational and practical-moral sources of knowledge:

*Lisa (ST): I think the person has got to appreciate your experience, your skills, wherever you have come from. So people to appreciate your knowledge because what I have always emphasised is that knowledge and experience, knowledge and practice are equally important. I cannot say one is more important than the other. I do appreciate people having four or five years experience but if they don’t have the knowledge, what they are practising is just going to be using their own tools, using their own values and ways of thinking into the work. And I think it comes back to supervision that the knowledge has been brushed aside and people’s experience has been more important, of course experience is important but you need to understand what you are doing as well. I don’t knock that but appreciate my knowledge, appreciate what I have done. So I think if you’re not going to say knowledge is as important as practice, I can’t work in that environment. And that has kept repeating several times and I kept saying I think both are equally important. (Interview)*

For some of the practitioners in this group, particularly those practitioners based in the Hurst Centre, orthodox theoretical frameworks were an important knowledge source for their practice. For Sue and Lisa in the Sandworth Team their understandings of reflective practice, whilst not imbued with the same level of sophistication or theoretical complexity as the holistically informed practitioners in the Hurst Centre, similarly saw reflective practice to be more than a straightforward technical exercise.

Holistic reflective practice represents the combination of technical reflection and practical and process reflection which involved the practitioners not only focussing on what they did and how but also *why* they or the clients acted or reacted in particular ways. The commonality between all the holistically informed practitioners was the recognition of the significance for reflective practice of developing self awareness, acknowledging personal and professional responses to practice encounters and
conceptualising the experiential understanding these sources of knowledge generated:

GR: What do you think it (reflective practice) achieves? What's the purpose of it?

Sue (ST): I suppose ultimately really, really good practice because you are opening yourself to criticising what you are doing. You are not going in with an arrogance that whatever I do is right. You're really questioning that what you have done and why you have done it and what you haven't done and why you haven't approached that subject for whatever reason or you're frightened of the response. Stepping back and really trying to look on the situation and amending it or patting yourself on the back or beating yourself up over it and changing it. (Interview)

The inter-play between technical-rational and practical-moral sources of knowledge was considered crucial by the holistically orientated practitioners as it ensured that the potential of the different knowledge sources was maximised. A recurrent feature of the holistically orientated practitioners was their integration of personal, propositional and process knowledge:

GR: ... Are there other sources of information or knowledge?
(other than theoretical model already mentioned)

Anna (HC): Well the family and the meeting with the people involved informs it in a way and they say what the problem is they want to work with me on, then I might then think what I've seen of them, what they present me with, what do I think would be helpful so in a way you cannot separate out the two. And the clues they give. And I think it's also a bit about me and my style, no matter how helpful I think a model might be if I didn't feel comfortable with the model I wouldn't be able to work with it so there is something about myself in all of that. I wouldn't be happy if the model was manipulative in any sort of way. So I think there are three things - the family, myself and the theoretical model all coming together. (Interview)
This group of practitioners understood knowledge as being not only holistic but also dynamic and specific to each situation and from this perspective they were able to respond sensitively to the uniqueness and unpredictability of practice. A further consequence of this perspective was the stance of the holistically orientated practitioners who considered reflective practice to be an essential, as opposed to an optional, ingredient of their practice:

*Jenny (HC):* So instead of reacting you respond, like we talked about before, you could just react to something and instead of that you are responding because you've considered things. I mean I've just been thinking back to the Area Office where they've got ten million caseloads, and they can never reflect on what they're doing and at one point when I did have a lot of cases and I was going from session, to session, to session and it just dried up because you just don't reflect and you take it all home with you. So you just end up going nowhere I think and you just go through the motions I think particularly with the type of work, how I work, you have to reflect don't you. (Interview)

This acknowledgement of the centrality of reflection for their practice was tempered, however, by the realities of practice. Several of the holistically reflective practitioners admitted that the extent to which they reflected on cases varied, according to the complexities of the case and the time constraints they were under.

In addition to the technical, practical and process components of holistic reflection, it also embraced critical reflection. Critical reflection as defined by the literature was apparent on only a few occasions when holistically orientated practitioners explicitly challenged the power dynamics manifest in practice. This was most notable and distinctive at an individual level in the practice responses of Lisa and Maria, whose ethnicities were different to the dominant culture of the research settings and for Anna in the issues raised by an assignment she had undertaken for her Family Therapy training, which involved exploring the cultural characteristics of a family of Egyptian origin. However, within the holistic approach to reflective practice there was evidence of practitioners, who, by drawing on practical-moral knowledge, were forced to question their assumptions, beliefs and values and, therefore, implicitly if not explicitly, challenge existing patterns of privilege and power. Critical reflection,
therefore, appeared more frequently as a component of holistic reflection than as a form of reflection in its own right.

2.3. Blurring the Boundaries

As with all classifications, the two broad groupings of reflective practitioners identified from this research were not without exceptions to the rule. Although these exceptions confuse the research findings they also, I would argue, enhance the trustworthiness of the research as the claim to have identified broad groupings of practitioners does not imply that these groups had rigid boundaries. The behaviours and practices of the practitioners were dynamic, fluid and, like practice, not always predictable. The identification of a practitioner with a particular grouping did not preclude them in certain forums or with certain people displaying different orientations.

Sheila as a predominantly technically orientated practitioner displayed an ability, particularly in some of the collaborative forums in the Hurst Centre, to conceptualise her practice and reflect more holistically. In the Sandworth Team Mike, despite his predominantly technically reflective orientation, also displayed in an informal conversation with me, more complex reflective understanding of his practice. Similarly but conversely, Carol (Hurst Centre) and Sue (Sandworth Team), who were included in the holistically reflective group of practitioners, admitted and demonstrated their own inclinations, on occasions, to resort to less demanding and more technical responses to practice situations. Such exceptions suggested that reflective understanding and activities differed depending on the context and that the nature of reflective practices varied according to where they occurred.

2.4. Knowledge Hierarchies

A common feature of the two groups of practitioners identified in the research was the propensity of both groups to construct hierarchies of knowledge which privileged certain sources of knowledge over others. Paradoxically whilst most of the technical practitioners claimed they based their practice on their experience or intuition they appeared to believe technical-rational foundations for practice, particularly
orthodox theory, were of greater importance than experiential sources of knowledge and that propositional knowledge in the form of theory 'should' inform their practice. In a similarly paradoxical fashion the inclusive stance on knowledge sources of holistically orientated practitioners did not preclude them acknowledging the existence of a knowledge hierarchy with several practitioners appearing to privilege technical-rational, propositional knowledge over practical-moral, experiential knowledge. However, given that self-awareness and inter-personal dynamics were integral components of the theoretical frameworks - psycho-dynamic and systemic - informing the holistically orientated practitioners, most of them valued both of the key sources of knowledge and perceived them as inter-dependent:

Anna (HC): ....because I think the therapeutic use of self is all part of systemic thinking because the whole part of systemic thinking is that you are not separate from the system. The old Milan model of systemic thinking was that you as therapist were separate from the system, and you could watch and advise but the latest thinking, post Milan, is that you are part of the system and that is why you need the team behind the screen and you become part of that and so your thoughts and your thinking and your use of yourself are all part of that. So my theoretical thinking leads me to think about myself, it's all part of the same. (Interview)

3. The Characteristics of Practice and Implications for Clients

The previous section identified the different sources of knowledge informing practice and in this section I explore the implications of the practitioners' epistemological perspectives for practice.

Referrals to the two research settings were comparable in their content, with the focus of the work being on families who raised child protection concerns and/or who were struggling to manage their children. The research findings indicated that the individual practitioner's perceptions of the nature of their practice, its complexity and appropriate responses varied according to their epistemological orientation. Given the differing emphases placed on knowledge sources informing practice by individual practitioners, in conjunction with the different organisational and team contexts of
each setting (discussed in subsequent chapters), it was not surprising to discover that how practice was constituted by individual practitioners and each of the research settings was quite different. Practice in each team embraced a variety of approaches but the key elements in both settings were the individual practitioner’s emphasis in their practice on techniques or relationships and the extent to which practitioners were able to take risks and be creative in their practice.

3.1. Technical and Relational Approaches to Practice

All of the practice, in both teams, operated in the context of the client-practitioner relationship but the importance of the relational aspects of practice, as opposed to technical aspects, varied between practitioners and across the research settings. The continuum of practice which was identified from the data spanned technical approaches to practice at one end of the spectrum and relational approaches at the other end. The tendency for individual practitioners to occupy dynamic positions on the reflective/knowledge continuum was of equal relevance in relation to these findings. Practitioners in both settings displayed pre-dominant, but not exclusive, practice traits. Once again, however, exceptions to the rule highlighted the significant influence of context on the nature and existence of reflective and relationship-based practice.

3.1.1. Technical Approaches

Although both teams exhibited technical-rational responses to practice and used different social work techniques, the visibility of technical, ‘tools-based’ responses was greater amongst the technically orientated practitioners, where they appeared to be, on occasions, the end in themselves as opposed to a therapeutic means to an end. The implications of the ‘surface’, technical approaches to practice associated with the technically reflective practitioners were evident in the limited repertoire of practice responses observed and referred to by these practitioners. When talking with the technically orientated practitioners and from my observations it was apparent that their approaches to practice were primarily dominated by the choice of specific techniques or tools as opposed to communicative and relational responses which focussed on the professional-client relationship. The ‘toolbag’ philosophy which underpinned the practice of the technically orientated practitioners in the Sandworth
Team restricted the possible options open to practitioners working with children and their families, as Paul, from his managerial perspective, acknowledged:

Paul (ST): ...... I have to be careful because I err on the side of trashing people's work saying all of it's this, it's not complex really, we all do group work, we all work with families, we all do direct work with children. If you want some methodology (sic) this technique or tool, I call it toolbags: button sculpture, genograms, life story work. They are tools to achieve something. (Interview)

On the occasions I observed practitioners in the Sandworth Team exchanging practice ideas it was usually in relation to specific tools for working with individuals. The attention of the technically orientated practitioners in both settings, whether informally with colleagues or formally in supervision or other collaborative forums, tended to be on what they had done and how, as opposed to why what had happened (or not) in the practice encounter had occurred. Mike acknowledged in his interview that the technical, tools-based approach he adopted to practice was associated with reductionist understandings of reflective practice and ran the risk of over familiarity. Mike recognised that practitioners could become dependent on specific techniques and resort to ritualised and routinised interventions which might not be as ideally suited to specific clients as they could be:

Mike (ST): ...... I think some people, I lean towards it sometimes, would say I should be being reflective but I haven't got time today, so we're just going to make it up as we go along. If you took that to extreme it would be a direct worker who just does the same thing over and over again, who has been there a long time and has lost interest. That might be something I have to guard against at some point. (Interview)

The technical understandings of reflective practice - what and how - mirrored the practitioners' practical and technical approaches to their work. Reflective opportunities were perceived restrictively with reflection occurring primarily after, and occasionally before, sessions and comprising reflection-on-action, and content-focused thinking. Little or no attention was paid to the affective, processual aspects
of the work and its impact on the practitioners. For these practitioners referrals were more likely to be 'taken as read', with prescribed techniques or approaches being proposed and unquestioningly implemented. The challenges and dilemmas arising from their practice for this group of practitioners were predominantly interpreted practically and formal and informal practice-related discussions remained at a surface level focussing primarily on practical responses. For Jane, the more holistically reflective discussions which took place in the family assessment sessions in the Hurst Centre were a source of frustration as what mattered for her was 'getting on with the job':

*Jane (HC): But I do find reflection hard. And I find when I am in the reflective team as an observer I do still find it hard because I am listening to it and I am thinking 'what we will do is this...' and I am already planning what the work will be when I'm only supposed to, because that is how I am, so. (Interview)*

Several technically informed practitioners commented that they did not feel the work was particularly complex or demanded much theoretical input and referred to their practical, skills-based approaches as 'low key'. From Mike’s perspective of ‘either you could do the work or you couldn’t’ all that he wanted to inform his practice were clearer procedural guidelines:

*Mike (HC):...What I would like supervision to offer me, and in this I'm linking supervision and management quite closely. I would like more direction for this team, so I'm not finding myself carrying more than I should be. I don't mind being there, it's just that it's probably not what I am meant to be doing. I would like more direct management which said what it wanted and we had quite strict guidelines to stay within. I might not like the guidelines I was given but it seems to me management want it both ways. The Assistant Director comes down here and says you shouldn't work with anything which isn't allocated but she isn't going to do anything like telling field work managers to do it. (Interview)*

All of the practitioners - technically and holistically inclined - acknowledged, to differing extents, the challenging emotional content of practice. However, those practitioners with a technical orientation appeared to place less importance on the
emotional dimensions of practice. From the technical perspective resolving practical difficulties was the precursor to resolving emotional ones, a position challenged by the holistically orientated practitioners. Most of the emotional expression amongst the technically reflective practitioners was directed towards the specific practicalities of the identified response or to external organisational issues which impinged on the case. There seemed to be a minimising of the significance of the emotional dimensions of the work, with several practitioners referring to the emotional impact being ‘offloaded’. In their interviews most of the practitioners felt they did not allow the work to affect them and none of them considered awareness and articulation of the emotional nature and impact of the work as particularly useful for understanding or developing their practice:

GR: Does it (emotional content of the work) ever get beneath that for you?

Lorraine (ST): No. I think at the beginning it did but at the end of the day it’s not being done to me, she did it to herself so I can’t feel the pain or anything like that. If it was someone I cared deeply about it might be different. I’m such a hard person! (Interview)

Mike was similarly clear in his interview responses that he did not let the emotional dimensions of the work affect him:

GR: So what do you do with the emotional impact of the work?

Mike (ST): What personally?

GR: Yes

Mike: Well I didn’t did I. At one point I was off work for six months and I think that points to how I deal with it because I go home and do something totally different..... That's where my life is. Work is not top of agenda. Work is something I have to do......

GR: So you separate them out?
3.1.2. Relational Approaches

The practice of the holistically informed practitioners did draw on a range of social work techniques but was primarily ‘relationship-based’, as opposed to ‘tools-based’. For these practitioners the heart of their practice lay in the relational dynamics between family members and between individuals, families and practitioners. The refusal to accept simplistic or prescriptive, technical solutions to families problems and difficult group dynamics, or to collude with polarised ‘right-wrong’ perspectives on their work, enabled practitioners to adopt relational practice responses which were open both to ‘not knowing’ what might be the best response and to the possibility of making mistakes.

The equal weight attributed to rationally and affectively derived knowledge sources and their application in relational practice was a central characteristic of practice amongst the holistically informed practitioners and indicative of their capacity to embrace the complexity of practice. The capacity of the holistically orientated practitioners to think about each situation individually, dynamically and contextually was an important feature of their practice, as often families’ circumstances proved to be unpredictable and the original referral requests could quickly be rendered null and void by more recent events. The non-prescriptive response to cases meant that each one was considered individually and flexible responses were identified. The practice of these practitioners had several distinctive characteristics. Initial discussions focussed on the contextualisation of the families’ difficulties within their wider context and the professional-client relationship was central to all ensuing discussions. By contextualising the families in their broader social setting, the practitioners by implication included themselves in the contextualising process, locating themselves as professionals in relation to the family and to their own organisational context. The engagement process and the subsequent relationship with the families was of a distinctively collaborative nature. This approach emphasised the complexity of professional involvement with families and prevented practitioners adopting a superior position in relation to solutions to families problems. In adopting this
approach to practice the practitioners' responses to families were empowering and respectful of their specific circumstances and placed the family, rather than the professionals, in the position of expert. These sorts of responses were clearly demonstrated in holistically orientated practitioners' interview accounts of their practice:

**GR:** I wondered what you saw as the main characteristics of the work you do if you had to describe it to someone?

Anna (HC): I think the first is to think systemically about a piece of work, try not to get caught up in the content of the referral but to think, we get a referral to work with a mother so to think is there a father and what impact that will have on the work, to try and think about it more systemically is the first component before I would even begin any contact. I think we could do that better and we could think about where that family fits into the wider context which I don't think we are terribly good at here. The next component I think is to really listen to what the family is saying. We get some families here who are sent, they are not customers, they are visitors so to really listen to why they have been sent and to try and make sense with them about that, to try and get some, to see if you can form an alliance you can work with. Because if they are coming because they are sent and you're doing it because you have to do it then I'm not quite sure how far ultimately that work will go. So it's like taking a step back and talking to the family about what they understand about what it is person has referred them for, where can you find an agreement somewhere along the line and if you can't then you have to step back and think why then has someone else got that worry. It might be that it is someone else's worry and it's not really a worry. And valuing the strengths of families and their resilience to situations. And being respectful and thinking about what you are doing with them rather than doing it because you have been told to.

(Interview)

All the practitioners - technically and holistically inclined - emphasised the centrality of effective engagement with families and sustained positive working relationships, achieved through dialogue which enabled everyone involved to collaboratively identify
how to move forward. The distinctive quality of the holistically informed practitioners, who engaged in relational reflective practice, however, was the attention they paid to the processes operating in practice as well as (if not more than) to its content:

Anna (HC): But you need to be reflective to get to that point to be able to think about that, to think about processes of what’s happening, not content, and that’s why it is sometimes the people outside the circle who help that. So it’s reading, it’s thinking, it’s planning, it’s being aware of yourself. It’s being aware of how that fits into wider system because the families that come here are not insular - they have extended family, are of society and we as an agency fit into other things, political things, there are things that we can do that we have to do that we might feel uncomfortable doing. So being reflective, sometimes you can’t change things but being aware of all those things and having open communication with the people you are working with and your colleagues. (Interview)

The process-based nature of holistic reflective practice complexified the reflection process, firstly by requiring practitioners to reflect on both the content and the processes - conscious and unconscious - of practice and secondly, by requiring practitioners to reflect not only on action i.e. before or after the encounter but also in action i.e. during it. Reflection-in-action appeared to be a skill acquired after reflection-on-action, more commonly associated with the technically reflective practitioners, had been mastered. All of these practitioners acknowledged that reflection-in-action was a more sophisticated form of reflective practice and was a skill they were continuing to develop:

Jenny (HC): And then it’ll start you to think about it when you’re in the sessions as well I think. Because sometimes you just kind of - I think without it (reflection) you can go through the session and not really think about what’s happening, write it up and then and then you start to think why it happened. So now I’m beginning to think about it in the session when something is said or done and thinking ‘what’s that about?’ or I’m feeling an intense feeling, ‘why am I feeling like that?’ I think I’m just beginning to do
that now. That makes sessions more vital and exciting. You feel, also it feels more exciting to work with and sometimes you go to a session and don’t know what on earth’s gone wrong, and it’s like totally ‘what was that all about?’ And then other times you are able to really think about what I’m feeling in the session and work with it there and then. (Interview)

For these practitioners the process-based nature of reflective practice, combined with the conceptual frameworks informing their practice, produced an integrated source of knowledge which embraced personal knowledge about the self, process knowledge about the self in the context of practice and propositional, technical-rational knowledge. Maria described these diverse but inextricably connected knowledge sources as the ingredients of the ‘dough’ of reflective practice! For the holistically-orientated practitioners reflective practice was a sense-making activity which grappled with uncertainty and complexity and involved acceptance of ‘not knowing’, the expression of curiosity and the posing of the ‘why’ question in relation to what was happening within particular families or groups:

*Carol (HC)*: *I mean I think it’s a broad, broad spectrum for it (reflective practice) really isn’t there. It’s like everything we do here can be reflected on and we can use that in the process – our work process really and that could be I think reflecting on our own stuff, how we, where do our beliefs come from, why we’re like we are, why do we work the way we work? And then to use that in the way we work with families we may ask a different question that nobody else might ask and so why do we ask that? (Interview)*

The practice perspectives of the holistically informed practitioners prevented them minimising the complex and challenging emotional dimensions of their work and encouraged them to attend to the details and dynamics of the families referred. In order to be able to establish realistic objectives, and to effectively respond to and survive the emotionally charged nature of the work there was a widespread recognition amongst the holistically reflective practitioners of the place of informed self awareness - awareness of their personal and professional experiences, beliefs and values - and open communication with clients and colleagues, both in relation to what the practitioners’ personal and professional experiences brought to the work and how the work
impacted on them.

The attention to emotion was two-fold, though inter-related. The first focus was on the circumstances of the families they worked with and open acknowledgement with the families and with colleagues of the emotionally demanding situations the families faced directly and the practitioners encountered indirectly. The second focus of attention, in relation to the emotional dynamics arising in practice, was on the emotional impact of the work and the significance of the emotional responses of practitioners, a focus endorsed by Kate who commented in a Women’s Group supervision session with Carol (Co-worker) and Pam (supervisor) ‘We’ve only ever got anywhere with them by sharing our feelings.’ By attending to the emotional content and processes of practice they became a resource for the practitioners rather than an obstacle:

GR: I think it was this case when it was in supervision with Carol and you with Steve and you acknowledged being very tearful and you didn’t know what to do with the tears.

Maria (HC): That was one of the first ones when she was telling us. What do we do, do we cry there? If I felt like crying I would, I can’t stop myself and I think it is an acknowledgement that you are feeling sad and I think if that were any other person out of a session I would cry or I would be sad or I would comment on how awful it was. So I don’t think we need to hide that from families either. It is part of being human. In the reasoning process I wonder if I tell somebody something painful for me and they said ‘I see what you mean’ I’d be thinking she doesn’t know.

GR: So it can become part of the process, it can become an integral part of it.

Maria: The fear would be that you become stuck in that situation and immobilised, that there is a belief that if you become very emotional you become immobilised but I think emotion can move things. (Interview)

For these practitioners practice was impregnated with thinking processes which addressed affective responses and manifested themselves in a variety of ways. Firstly,
the holistically orientated practitioners were less inclined in allocation/team meetings to make assumptions about cases or to accept anything without first subjecting it to analytical scrutiny. In the Hurst Centre, for example, a considerable amount of time was spent in the allocation meeting speculating on and hypothesising about the referrals and on-going work. Secondly, the responses of this group of practitioners to their clients’ circumstances were thoughtful and detailed. The Hurst Centre practitioners wrote ‘therapeutic letters’ to families who were proving difficult to engage. In the Sandworth Team I observed Lisa in a supervision session detailing the careful thought she had give to the engagement process with a client. In the same team Sue demonstrated the attention she paid to her affective responses in the way she recorded them in the process of writing her case notes. Thirdly, the informal theoretical conversations between practitioners in the Hurst Centre Team addressed the different responses of practitioners to the families they worked with and included their affective responses. Fourthly, the dialogue about practice issues that took place in the sectional meetings and family centres’ training sessions in the Hurst Centre Team and Lisa’s attempts in the Sandworth Team to generate more broadly based discussion of contemporary issues demonstrated the commitment of these practitioners to holistic, relational responses. Finally, the constructive responses of all these practitioners to inter-agency and organisational dynamics illustrated the breadth of their thinking about practice issues. These thoughtful working practices ensured that everything was considered significant and that all information contributed to the ‘meaning-making’ activities which practitioners engaged in. These practices however, were not simply the result of the practice perspectives and initiative of individual practitioners but were also inextricably connected to team practices, discussed in Chapter Seven.

3.2. Risk-averse and Risk-taking Approaches to Practice

The ability to practice in creative and risk tolerant ways or to be risk averse and conservative in practice was dependent on the epistemological orientation of the practitioners and connected to the technical and relational approaches to practice discussed above.

The scope amongst the technically orientated practitioners, and in particular those in the Sandworth Team, for developing practice through learning from each others...
experiences, other than about specific tools, was limited by the prescriptive and practical approaches they adopted to practice. Adaptations of specific techniques, such as the 'Keep Safe Work' Joan undertook with a girl with learning difficulties, indicated that there was scope for technically orientated practitioners to exhibit a degree of flexibility and creativity but the scope for such responses was limited by understandings of practice which primarily involved technical and standardised responses. The restrictive nature of the responses of the technically orientated practitioners to practice had implications for their effectiveness and implied that the capacity of these practitioners to deal with uncertainty and risk in their practice was seriously circumscribed. The pattern of behaviour exhibited by these practitioners in response to unexpected occurrences in their relationships with clients involved seeking out alternative tools which 'might' be more appropriate, rather than considering why the approach and tools they had been using had not worked:

*Joan (ST): NP is the second child I have done 'Keep Safe Work' with who has learning difficulties. So I have to adapt younger material and that's difficult because you don't want to patronise them and that's quite difficult and it's the balance between what you are hearing and what you know they know because they are not always the same. With N it is even more difficult because I have to think who do I go to now for the right materials. If I see anything I take them. (Interview)*

Opinion varied amongst the practitioners about whether reflective practice could be learnt or was an innate quality, with most practitioners indicating that the extent to which practitioners were reflective in their practice was related to individual motivation. The holistically orientated practitioners, however, believed that reflective practice could be learnt and saw themselves as in the process of becoming more skilled as reflective practitioners. For these practitioners openness and creativity in their practice and tolerance of risk were important means of achieving this learning. It appeared significant that almost all of the holistically orientated practitioners in the Hurst Centre and those practitioners, Lisa and Sue, in the Sandworth Team who were open to more holistic and creative responses, were engaged in or about to embark on further training. The existence of a commitment to professional development had the effect of creating in practitioners an attitude of openness to new ideas and a refusal to
become stuck in routinised and ritualistic practice. In a conversation between Maria and Sarah there was recognition that undertaking further training whilst still practising was demanding on practitioners but ultimately helpful, as it ensured that simplistic understandings were not imposed on what they knew to be the ‘messy’ nature of practice. For Maria theoretical frameworks were essential to enable her to make sense of the complexity of her practice experiences and of critical issues such as power, gender and culture. As a consequence of their openness to development these practitioners maintained a level of critical awareness, which in turn ensured new knowledge, from whatever source, was appropriate and effective.

The practice responses of these practitioners were diverse and spanned the spectrum, which Maria in the Hurst Centre Team described as being from ‘conceptual thinking to painting’ and which Anna acknowledged as infinite:

Anna (HC): ... There is not just one way (to work), there are as many ways as you can think of and then as many ways as other people can think of to do the same, to work with people and them to work with you. (Interview)

Openness to different approaches to practice and to creative, ‘risky’ responses was abundantly evident amongst the holistically informed practitioners. Risk-taking behaviour was understood to involve practitioners adopting creative and innovative strategies with clients which, by implication in relation to child protection cases, involved re-defining notions of risk. These definitions of risk were broader, less defensive and less procedurally restrictive. All of the practitioners - technically and holistically orientated - perceived themselves as engaged in helping families ‘move on’, ‘change’, or ‘see things differently’ and saw themselves as ‘non-experts’, although their capacity to tolerate ‘not knowing’, a characteristic associated with the non-expert position, did vary according to the orientation of the practitioner. The open and creative responses of the holistically informed practitioners were connected to their ability to tolerate uncertainty, ‘not knowing’ and the realisation they could get it wrong. Kate voiced a view of several practitioners in her recognition that ‘the permission’ afforded to practitioners to make mistakes was crucial to their creativity. In the Hurst Centre, Carol and Kate’s comments about their willingness to engage with the depth and complexity of group work, with the support of group supervision, illustrated the ability of this group of practitioners to engage with risk and uncertainty:
Carol (HC): ....And she’s (Pam, groupwork supervisor) enabled us to use our co-working and our reflective kind of skills to develop in the group which I wouldn’t have done before. So I suppose enabling things that might not have happened with another supervision, and she has made us think about our feelings and how I impact on the group and what we might use and not use. And in a way it’s to think again like you don’t have to think about rights and wrongs and you have to go with what feels best and what fits with the group. (Interview)

In another instance four practitioners in the Hurst Centre undertook a complex and challenging assessment of a family where there were concerns about sexual abuse. The confidence of the practitioners in their approach enabled them to operate in an uncertain and risky situation in a transparent and open fashion with the families, to avoid polarised and risk averse solutions and to relate in an inclusive and collaborative manner to reach an agreed recommendation. The Area Team’s response to the same case had been to devise increasingly rigorous contracts with the clients in an attempt to eliminate any possible risk!

4. The Implications of Reflective Practice for Practitioners

The transparency of the holistically reflective approach engaged with the uncertainty and risk of practice in ways which were potentially empowering and emancipatory for clients. It also had empowering potential for practitioners who benefited from the recognition that there were no ‘right’, ‘wrong’ or absolute answers and that solutions resulted from collaborative negotiations:

Kate (HC): I think it (reflective practice) benefits everyone. It benefits you because you think about the way you have worked. It also must benefit the client because you are thinking about ways to be more helpful or ways to make things work or putting things in different way which will ultimately achieve whatever aim is and I think it is really important in this sort of work, in any sort of work, to be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it and how it could be different but in this sort of work in particular where there is no right or wrong really. (Interview)
The responsive and individualised practice responses were not only beneficial to clients, as identified above, but also to practitioners and as an indirect consequence to the organisation. From the comments of the practitioners it would appear that the risk of burnout was significantly reduced for those practitioners practising in an holistically reflective and, therefore, individualised and responsive manner:

> Jenny (HC): You have to be reflective or you just wouldn’t survive. You can’t just lay down the method of working for the group or something, it just doesn’t work like that and the families here are so demanding and so difficult, you have to get really involved if you are ever going to like, I guess change anything, because that’s what we’re here for really and because it’s such a personal process and you get so involved you just have to have some kind of reflective process to make that work and you get really stressed I think and then you wouldn’t know how to engage all the family because you’d be too stressed. I know what stress is like because you just can’t seem to give anything of yourself, you just feel like you’re breaking down so you wouldn’t be any use to a family at all. I know that some social work practitioners operate like that. (Interview)

Interestingly the practitioners in both settings who had encountered ‘burnout’ in their professional lives were the practitioners who had predominantly technically reflective orientations, appeared to be least interested in developing reflective approaches to practice and expressed limited interest in further professional training to enhance their skills or knowledge. For those practitioners interested in enhancing their reflective skills there was the potential for them to achieve greater professional and personal realisation and for the organisation to benefit from more integrated and autonomous practitioners who received sufficient professional satisfaction to stay in practice.

**Summary**

The findings of the practitioner context of reflective practice has highlighted the similarities in practitioners experiences of practice but simultaneously acknowledged the diverse practice responses to these experiences and their implications for the
development of relationship-based practice. The disjuncture between professional experiences and professional responses appears to be accounted for by the different understandings held by practitioners of what informs practice and the nature of reflective practice. The distinctions between the two broad types of reflective practice - technical and holistic - and their manifestation in practice, suggest that the scope for relationship-based practice to exist is enhanced when practitioners demonstrate holistic reflective practice with its emphasis on relationships, flexibility and creativity, all practice features compatible with relationship-based practice. The implications of these findings are discussed further in Chapter Eight.

The recognition that the broad groupings of practitioners were not a static or absolute phenomenon but more helpfully understood in relation to a continuum of reflective practice suggests that reflective practice is not simply derived from the personal and internal persuasions of the individual practitioner. It is also derived from the space for reflective practices generated by the macro, organisational, and meso, team, contexts. Reflective spaces offer practitioners opportunities to 'think' and 'feel' as well as 'do' and facilitate relationship-based practice as a response to the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary social work. The significance of these wider contexts, their inter-dependence and the quality and quantity of the space they afford for the development of reflective practice is the focus of the following two chapters.
Chapter Six
Research Findings -
The Organisational Context of Reflective Practice

Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored practitioners’ experiences of practice, the knowledges informing reflective practice and their implications for practice. The conclusion of the chapter emphasised the distinctive but fluid nature of these individual perspectives and epistemological positions and suggested that in addition to the individual influences on the nature of reflective practice, external factors existed which also exerted an influence on the quality and quantity of reflective practice, its capacity to promote relationship-based practice and the combined impact of relationship-based and reflective practice on the conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, risk and change which epitomise contemporary social work.

In this chapter I address the organisational context which provides the macro setting in which the micro, individual context of reflective practice discussed in the previous chapter and the meso, team context of reflective practice discussed in the following chapter are located. The obvious progression of enquiry after the micro, individual context is to the meso, team context. It is necessary, however, to have an understanding of the wider organisational context before examining the team context findings, as the team context occupies a pivotal position between the individual practitioner and the wider organisation. The team context both mediates and is moulded by the individual understandings of reflective practice and the opportunities and constraints on reflective practice arising from the organisational context.

The importance of the organisational context for practice was apparent in both settings. Recent or imminent organisational changes, and the uncertainties and insecurities associated with them, were realities for both teams and reinforced the contingent and unpredictable macro context of social work practice, which relationship-based and reflective practice seek to address. The organisational contexts of the two research settings had three significant features. The first feature concerns issues of professional identity which were informed by how the teams understood
their professional role and functions within the wider Social Services Department, the theoretical thinking underpinning the organisation’s functions and the wider organisational ethos and relationships which the teams both contributed to and were influenced by. The second feature relates to the prevailing management structures and their implications for the operations of the teams. The third characteristic arises from the tension between the realities of practice and the organisational expectations and imperatives which impinged on it. Whilst the core organisational features were frequently evident in different ways in the two settings, some manifestations were common in both settings. It was important to recognise that although the manifestations of the core features of the organisational context were in many instances particular to the setting, the core features per se were pertinent to both. By integrating the knowledge acquired of how the two settings highlighted different aspects of the same core features an enhanced understanding of the significance of the organisational context for reflective practice can be attained.

1. Professional Identities and Relationships

Issues of professional identity and how these were established and operationalised were central features of the two research settings. Understandings of professional identity were informed by organisational policies and by theoretical/conceptual frameworks which underpinned the teams and their practice. The continuum of professional identity ranged from clarity of identity to confused professional identity. Clear professional identity was associated with explicit procedural statements, guidelines, organisational objectives and theoretical/conceptual perspectives. Confused professional identity arose from a lack of coherent policy documents, procedural statements, objectives and theoretical positions and from the uncertainty and insecurity engendered by recent or imminent changes in work remits and organisational structures. The two teams’ relationships with their wider organisational contexts, most notably the Area Children and Families Teams commissioning their work, were also influenced by the clarity, or lack of it, that existed with regard to professional roles, responsibilities and remits.
1.1. Organisational Identity

At the first team meeting I attended in the Sandworth Team a discussion developed between the practitioners which focussed on the different understandings that existed about the team’s purpose and function. With hindsight, this discussion was symbolic of the confused position the team found itself in and was an aspect of the team’s functioning which persisted throughout my time researching with them. The team manager’s comments about his understanding of the team’s identity highlighted its ambiguous nature and the competing influences on its identity:

\[Paul\ (ST):\ The\ thing\ that\ fascinates\ me\ is\ trying\ to\ bring\ those\ things\ together in\ a\ team\ which\ has\ not\ got\ a\ statutory\ role.\ It\ hasn’t\ got\ a\ life\ of\ its\ own,\ it hasn’t\ got\ a\ reason\ to\ be.\ Its\ reason\ to\ be\ is\ defined\ by\ millions\ of\ other people\ or\ the\ people\ we\ serve\ and\ the\ people\ I\ perceive\ we\ serve\ are\ the users, not\ the\ field\ work\ teams, not\ field\ practitioners.\ (Interview)\]

Whilst it was possible to identify the broad objectives of the team from documentation gathered in the course of my research I failed to obtain any documentation which stated explicitly the role and function of the team. The ambiguity about the role and function of the team was reinforced by the admission of the Resource Centre manager that there was no explicit eligibility criteria for referrals to the team:

\[There\ was\ no\ protocol\ as\ such.\ The\ referral\ sheet\ in\ use\ now\ was\ also\ in use\ then. Members of the team would regularly attend fieldwork team meetings to discuss their work and to maintain the appropriateness of referrals. They did not want to become too restrictive in order to maintain their flexibility of response. (E-mail response from Jeff, Resource Centre Manager to GR)\]

Whilst flexibility in practice can be helpful the lack of boundaries around practice in this context appeared to be disabling, rather than enabling. Most of the practitioners understood the team’s primary purpose to be the prevention of placement breakdown but how they understood this and how it was interpreted by the fieldwork teams
seemed extremely vague and variable. As a consequence each fieldwork team appeared to interpret the role and objectives of the Family Support Team differently and use it according to their own idiosyncratic definitions of eligibility. Two of the four Area Children and Families Teams commented in their team business plans on the need for the Sandworth Team to provide a ‘clearer understanding of eligibility criteria to allocate a practitioner’ and the need for allocation priorities to be clearly resolved.

Part of the confusion appeared to lie with who was responsible for prioritising cases, as Mike observed in his supervision session with Paul:

Mike (ST): When I was travelling up to that course last week with Pete, (Area social work practitioner) we were talking about obvious things and he said ‘We’re tending not to use your team at the moment because we don’t feel we get the response we want. So I don’t suppose you’re doing much work for my team.’ So I said I am but for non-allocated cases so I suppose we’re not getting what we want from you and you say you’re not getting what you want from us. (Supervision session)

From the practitioners’ perspective the flexible approach promoted by the Resource Centre manager and reinforced by their team manager, rather than being helpful, placed inappropriate managerial responsibilities on them and was experienced as counter-productive and a source of frustration and further confusion. The confusion and uncertainty engendered by the lack of clear referral criteria was manifested in the team by their confused understanding of which referrals should be prioritised, uncertainty about which work it was appropriate to take on and scepticism about the value placed on the work they undertook. The practitioners’ perceptions of their own and the team’s roles suggested that too loose a definition of the team’s role affected their sense of identity, purpose and value, and, therefore, generated ambiguity and uncertainty and impaired rather than enhanced their practice. At a team meeting attended by the new Assistant Director for the Children and Families Division the issue of prioritising work, the respective team’s responsibilities and the impact of the uncertainty on the Family Support Team’s practice were addressed at length:

Sue (ST): I think we need to be told what we should do for now if teams won’t i.e. group work if appropriate, core assessment work. At present that file is
full of referrals and we can pull out what we fancy.

Mike: It almost sounds like we want to be spoon fed.... We’re all busy all the time but whether all of its relevant in your terms or field work managers’ terms we don’t know.

Assistant Director: That doesn’t sound at all like you’re wanting to be spoon fed. In a sense any service needs to know what is there for and what its priorities are and if you’re feeling, kind of straws in wind....... Sounds like there is an idiosyncrasy about what you pick up and what is urgently required is some clarity about what priorities are and I would have thought it should be determined at Area level. (Team Meeting)

Within the team meeting context the lack of clarity around the boundaries of the meeting and within the meeting in relation to its purpose and structure emphasised the confused position the team felt itself to be in and combined to undermine the effectiveness or usefulness of the forum for practitioners. Practitioners in their interviews commented on their concern that the team meeting was not being used effectively and their frustration with its ill-defined purpose, comments which appeared to act as a metaphor for the overall state of the team:

GR: How do team meetings help in any way? I’m interested as that is the one place where everyone can be together.

Joan (ST): Except we are not. It has become far more noticeable that we are not all there and you are lucky if there are many there. And that bit has become far less effective. And it’s no one’s fault. The team has dwindled, people are doing other things and they are not as effective as they were.

GR: What was it that used to be more effective about them?

Joan: We used to have more discussion about referrals or what was coming up.

GR: So that has all pared down has it?

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Joan: It's been taken over by other things, all the bits of paper that are coming out and to be quite honest to you can only take so much in and then you turn off, like I did yesterday.

GR: Is that because the nature of what you are hearing is quite difficult?

Joan: Yeah but for your own sanity you have to put it aside else you'd just give up doing it.

GR: Quite a hard balance how much do you need to know, how much do you want to know.

Joan: Yeah and you can only take so much on board. I feel better if they are shorter. I feel we can cover more in shorter time but if they go on too long, the last hour I've lost it.(Interview)

For the Hurst Centre Team its role and identity did not appear to be a significant cause for concern for practitioners and organisational issues in general were not a high priority for people. The aims and objectives of the team, discussed in Chapter Four, were made explicit both in the Centre's business plan and in the Departmental procedural manual. The implications of professional and organisational clarity for the Hurst Centre Team were manifested in the concentration in their allocation meetings on the content of the referrals as opposed to the rights and wrongs of whether the referral should have been made to them in the first place. This level of clarity was reinforced in this setting by the clear liaison role that Steve, the manager had established with the referring team, which ensured that any ambiguities in the referral process were resolved before the referral reached the allocation meeting.

In the Sandworth Team their identity and responsibilities were a recurrent topic of conversation formally, informally and directly with me. From my observations in the Hurst Centre there was little evidence of issues of identity being the source of much discussion in either formal or informal settings. The absence of organisationally derived uncertainty in the Hurst Centre was explained, in part, by the clear organisational framework that the team operated within and the managerial structures
discussed in Chapter Seven, section 1.1) which contained the uncertainty associated with professional identity and purpose and created a secure place from which to operate.

The two teams displayed different manifestations of issues relating to organisational identity but in both instances the organisation's identity had significant repercussions for the nature of professional practice. The two settings also shared some common experiences around organisational identity, most notably in relation to the uncertainty surrounding organisational changes which had occurred in the Hurst Centre Team and were about to take place in the Sandworth Team. The Sandworth Team's confusion over their role and function was exacerbated by the uncertainty prevailing in the wider organisation. The Social Services Department was about to undergo a re-structuring which was engendering considerable insecurity about the immediate future and long term viability of the team. The recurrent discussions in team meetings about the most recent developments highlighted the context of uncertainty in which practitioners were operating. All of the practitioners acknowledged feeling differing degrees of apprehension about the imminent changes and it appeared that a considerable amount of energy had to be used in simply defending themselves against the uncertainty and anxiety of unknown change. The consequences of practitioners concentrating on their professional survival were evident in several comments made in interviews which ranged from practitioners admitting to switching off in team meetings because they could not take any more information about changes, through it impacting on practitioners' ability to put energy into their professional development, to it impacting on relationships with young people:

*GR:* It's just interesting to see how much you can take, over what length of time, not knowing, how much you need to know and how much should be held back from you. Because I just wonder what impact it has on people's energy levels?

*Lorraine (ST):* I think you do the same amount of work but you don't feel you are achieving so much from it. Before kids didn't get on my nerves but with everything else that has gone on certain kids just rubbed me up the wrong way and I could feel myself becoming really short. I hope that I notice myself doing
The Saadworth Team’s confused organisational identity, uncertain future and ineffective management structures and strategies undermined both the professional confidence of the team and individual practitioners within it and the team’s capacity to promote itself and its place in the wider organisational arena. The absence of organisational clarity forced the team to rely on external influences, primarily emanating from the Area Teams, to determine their practice remit and organisational identity.

Whilst the Hurst Centre’s identity was more explicitly defined in the documentation reviewed, it was, like the Sandworth Team, not immune to threats of closure on financial grounds or to the perpetual presence of changes in their working brief and the associated challenges these posed to the professional identity of practitioners. However, as a consequence of the recent introduction of clearer and more integrated managerial boundaries, which enabled practitioners to focus on their practice, whilst the managers (Linda and Steve) acted on their behalf in the wider organisational context, the Centre had experienced a consolidation of its identity within the Department. During the time of the research the Centre was in the process of being re-defined procedurally with its responsibility for working with ‘looked after’ children being removed from its remit (Team Business Plan 2001; Children and Families Procedural Manual 1999). A Family Centres training day had been held prior to my research to outline the proposed changes. There appeared to be a clear understanding about the imminent changes within the Hurst Centre and a sense that, whilst not all staff were in agreement with the changes, they were being openly and effectively managed by Linda and Steve and the managerial implications were not the practitioners responsibility. Although the shift in emphasis in their work was a significant change for the Centre it did not undermine their established identity as a therapeutic setting within the wider Children and Family Division. The implications of these changes were greatest for the psycho-dynamically orientated practitioners who felt the individual work they undertook with children was undervalued. Several of these practitioners made comments about the uncertainty they felt about the value attributed to their work they did/had done which echoed the feelings voiced by the Sandworth Team practitioners. For practitioners committed to more systemic
approaches to practice the changes served to clarify and reinforce the theoretical identity which the team had already established (see section 1.2. below).

The clear management of the changes to the referral criteria and its effective introduction by Linda and Steve, however, ensured there was minimal ambiguity about the brief and role of the family centres within the wider departmental structure. The sense of a Centre with clearly boundaried internal and external organisational identities appeared to be a key feature in the creation of a creative and supportive practice environment. Furthermore, the clearly boundaried position of the team contributed to its positive self image and sense of self worth and was conducive to reflective approaches. From its professionally confident position and reflective perspective the Hurst Centre Team was able to determine its place in the wider organisational context, rather than be defined by it, as appeared to be the case for the Sandworth Team.

1.2. Theoretical Identity

A second source of professional identity for the teams was the theoretical frameworks which underpinned their practice. Theoretical frameworks were ‘the meat on the bones’ of the organisational framework of professional identity discussed in the previous section. In this respect the two teams exhibited markedly different understandings of theoretical perspectives of professional practice and the professional identities associated with them.

The Sandworth Team had no explicit theoretical model which it adhered to and appeared to operate on an ad hoc basis and individualised understandings of professional practice. None of the practitioners acknowledged explicitly a specific theoretical framework informing their practice, although Lisa was keen to introduce theoretically informed thinking into the team. Sue was developing her theoretical understanding prior to beginning a professional social work training course and the theoretical influences on Mike’s practice, derived from years spent working in a psycho-dynamically run therapeutic community, were occasionally apparent in his comments about cases. As with their procedural roles and functions, each practitioner appeared to be in a position of individually interpreting his/her own theoretical position and the nature of his/her practice. The lack of a cohesive theoretical identity
or explicit theoretical discussion at a collective level appeared to contribute to an individualised ethos in the team. The request, voiced by the team, that its procedural brief should be defined by the Area Teams or senior management appeared to derive, in part, from the absence of a theoretical commitment in the team which influenced how the practitioners in the team wanted their team and their practice to be defined.

The history of the Hurst Centre was rooted in Linda’s commitment to systemic approaches to practice. The Centre was founded on a belief in working systemically with families and in an understanding of the importance of practitioners thinking about their responses to families as a unit rather than individually as evidenced by Linda’s comments concerning the role of all the Centre staff:

Linda (HC): *It’s important that the whole experience is welcoming... And also job satisfaction for administrative staff who can feel quite left out...and they are representatives for us to outside world.* (Interview)

The implications of this organisational perspective were the existence of a very shallow, inclusive organisational hierarchy which encouraged everyone’s skills to be respected, developed and fully utilised and which acknowledged the role senior managers played in ensuring theoretical thinking informed management practices and was not confined to the direct practice arenas. Linda acknowledged the importance for her of being, along with the Centre managers, linked into theory and policy and familiar with the details of cases and suggested that the shortcomings in the organisation lay higher up the management hierarchy where strategic thinking was not so good:

Linda (HC): *We (managers level) make those links, no one else does. Service managers tend to be reactive and opt for care proceedings route. Don’t think or doubt but just make a good case. It’s just the case of looking at the detail because everything is made up of lots of little cases. Detail is everything and sometimes a little vignette can tell you the whole story. So your observations are really important.* (Interview)

Linda’s theoretically integrated management - practice approach, grounded in
systemic thinking, was also evident, albeit to a lesser extent, in Steve’s approach to management. There appeared to be a coherence between how the organisational context of the family centres was thought about and managed systemically and how the practitioners experienced and approached their practice as evidenced in Carol’s comments:

*Carol (HC): But I think the whole role of the family centre is very much in the direction – very much systemic direction, family therapy direction, everything needs to be thought about systemically. We need to see as many members of the family as possible whatever the case might be. And that’s not wrong, that’s right. I think that is right. And we get more of an idea – but I think that’s been created over the years, and we’re just moving all the time to that more and more to that. Or more co-working, more systemic thinking, more – I think we do more planning and more thoughts go into it. We may be restricted on time and resources but I think more thought goes into it.*

*Interview*

### 1.3. Organisational Ethos and Relationships

In endeavouring to understand the influences on professional identity in each of the two research settings it was important to acknowledge the wider organisational context in which they operated and by which their identity was influenced. Both settings experienced constraints on their practice on account of their relationships with their commissioning Area Teams, who were themselves affected by the changing and demanding nature of contemporary social work practice, and struggled with issues of power and control in relation to the Area cases referred to them.

The overwhelming feature of the organisational culture in which the Sandworth Team was located was one of confusion surrounding the team’s identity and role within the wider Children and Families Division (see section 1.1 above). A culture of confusion, uncertainty and insecurity pervaded all the forums I observed and was a recurrent feature of interview responses. The insecurity, confusion and low morale which pervaded the team and was acknowledged by practitioners in it, stood in stark contrast to the recent findings of the Joint Social Services Inspectorate/Audit Commission.
Review commending 'the variety of support services provided through the Resource Centres and the creative flexibility with which they are applied to the needs of individual families' (Report of the Joint Review of Social Services, 2000). The team felt unable to identify with and endorse these findings given its current experiences.

The Hurst Centre Team related primarily to the Area Office Assessment Team as they commissioned work from the Centre. Although geographically quite close to each other I gained the impression that the Area Office was experienced as distant and working with a very different ethos to that of the Family Centre. All of the practitioners felt the wider organisational context in which the Centre operated was not only unsupportive of their reflective stance but rather dismissive of it, as Kate discovered from comments made to her student who went to work in the local Area Office:

Kate (HC):... I have heard said of us, my student told me this actually, when she went back to the Area Office, they said to her 'Stop reflecting and just bloody get on with it, you've been too long at that Family Centre!' Which I think sums it up really! (Interview)

Although the Hurst Centre had clearly defined and well-managed relations with the Area Team and, to a lesser extent, with other agencies, it did experience shortcomings in these relationships, similar to the shortcomings experienced by the Sandworth Team. How these shortcomings were experienced and responded to differed between the two settings, with the Sandworth Team’s responses appearing to be defensive and the Hurst Centre’s responses more thoughtful and informed.

The Sandworth Team appeared to have quite tenuous and unequal links with the Area Teams and outside agencies, which were evident for example in terms of the ignorance of the Area Teams about the remit of the Family Support Team:

Paul (ST): You read something in Community Care about family support teams and think 'Wow! Why can't we be like that?' and you go and see them and they're in as much chaos as we are... and I struggle with the perception of field work teams 'Well you do social skills groups, so I made a referral to
you, so why hasn't it happened then? ’ And they see them as discrete packages you can just slot in and do that or ‘Can I have Resource Centre worker this week?’ No you can't they're all working too hard.’ (Team meeting)

Referrals from the Area Teams were never challenged and several practitioners commented on being ‘told’ by Area social work practitioners not to engage in certain aspects of the work as that was not their responsibility, which appeared to create some difficulties for practitioners who felt the divisions being drawn were artificial and unworkable:

Lorraine (ST): What informs what I do is what is on the referral and I go from there but more often than not other things come up. With the particular girl I am working with at the moment the social practitioner wants me to work on the self harming and relationships in her family. And other things have come up about her hygiene but the social practitioner doesn’t want me to touch that, but in a way I’ve got no choice because that is going to come up and affect parts of the conversation. (Interview)

As a consequence of these apparent, but unchallenged dynamics, the Sandworth Team appeared powerless and unable to assert itself within its wider organisational context. Furthermore, Sue referred to the negative perception of reflective approaches to practice which she believed were seen as ‘skiving’ and resulted in her adopting a defensive stance in relation to reflective practice.

For the Hurst Centre issues of power and control were equally apparent but were openly acknowledged, dynamic and a source of debate, as evidenced in the allocation meetings where referrals were keenly discussed and frequently referred back to the Area Team for clarification or reconsideration of the referral request. From comments made it was apparent that Hurst Centre practitioners’ experiences of the Area Team were of practitioners being faced with enormous pressures, without time or space to think. The consequences of these organisational pressures for the Hurst Centre Team appeared to be two-fold. Firstly, although the brief and organisational function of the family centres had been clearly established in Departmental procedures and policy documents the lack of understanding amongst Area Office practitioners of the family
centres' approach to their work impaired the capacity for practitioners in the two settings to effectively relate and communicate from within their procedurally identified roles and inhibited the potential for the Hurst Centre practitioners to hold more reflective conversations with their Area Office colleagues. According to Maria the Area practitioners perceived family centres as dealing with the 'soft', touchy-feely aspects of practice, whilst the Area Teams were engaged in the more serious, challenging and 'hard' dimensions of the work. For Maria, however, the engagement of the Centre practitioners in sustained relationship-based practice, which embraced and worked with the painful and powerful emotional issues presented to them by families, was as, if not more, challenging than the procedurally driven work she perceived the Area Office Teams to be engaged in.

Secondly, the incentive to retain a reflective ethos in the Centre was wholly dependent on the commitment of practitioners and managers in the Centre and was not encouraged within the wider context:

*GR: Do you think the organisation... the organisation which is this Centre and the wider organisation, Social Services, do you think there is an understanding of it (reflective practice)?*

*Anna (HC): Err, no. Here, yes, in this particular one small agency. Obviously it wouldn't be happening if it wasn't being allowed to happen, we wouldn't be, we are allowed to co-work, we are allowed to have time to plan to talk and that enables us to work in the way we want to. So here I think it's an accepted way of working but it could be prevented. It's not, it's not seen as a positive but I think, my experience of working with colleagues from the Area Office they are not given the time or the space to do the thinking and reflecting, they forever seem to be reactive rather than proactive and they seem to be chasing and if they could just stop and think what they are doing they could save themselves a whole load of stuff and sometimes it's our, what we are doing is to say to them, can we have a meeting, can we talk, can we do that and that is not seen as very high priority because there is that to do, that to do, dashing, so I don't know how much impact we have on them. I'm sure they see us as examining our navels half the time, what do they do, have they only got ten
This sense, arising in both settings, of it being solely the responsibility of the Centre practitioners and managers to promote reflective practices generated defensive responses towards reflective practice. Furthermore, practitioners in both teams were affected by the insufficient commitment from the wider organisational context to understanding and promoting reflective practice. As a consequence practitioners in both settings objected to the responsibilities for meeting their own professional developmental needs which they felt were inappropriately placed on them.

2. Management Structures

As with issues of professional identity the implications of the management structures for professional practice in general and reflective practice in particular lay in the degree of clarity or confusion which surrounded the roles and responsibilities associated with the existing structures. The place of the management structures on the clarity-confusion continuum had implications for the effectiveness of management strategies in each of the settings.

Both of the team managers acknowledged the importance of their relationships with middle and senior management and voiced differing degrees of scepticism about their effectiveness. For Paul, in the Sandworth Team, his difficulties were primarily associated with his relations with Jeff, the Resource Centre manager, who represented middle management. Paul’s relationship with Jeff was strained and, according to Paul, unsupportive. Paul felt Jeff did not understand the nature of the team or the work they undertook. On his own admission, Jeff did not feel he was in touch with practice and saw himself clearly as a middle manager. My attempts to observe one of Paul’s supervision sessions with Jeff failed and despite my overtures to Paul no subsequent sessions took place during my time with the team. This occurrence was not unfamiliar to Paul who indicated in his interview that formal supervision was erratic, unsatisfactory and occurred approximately every six months. For Paul one implication of the ineffective support structures was a feeling of not being listened to and that
one of the unfortunate repercussions of his situation had been the visiting of his own issues on his team:

*Paul (ST): It’s not an excuse really but I feel I have not supported my team, you have not witnessed me supporting my team. I’ve done the best I can and I’ve felt a failure in that but the wingey bit, the bit where I ramble on for hours, like I’ve started again now, is about the fact that I have nobody listening to me. Yeah, I have supervision, we talk about this that and the other but effectively he has no idea what we do, he doesn’t really know what we do because it’s too difficult to deal with, he hasn’t got any answers. I don’t want him to give me answers. I don’t want him to give me two staff, he can’t I know he can’t, just some recognition, some supervision and I’m knocking that back to my team and that is very, very poor in my practice. (Interview)*

Given his isolated and unsupported position Paul acknowledged how much he valued the team meeting for support but recognised too the potential for mis-using this forum for his own ends. The lack of support for the manager was an organisational reality acknowledged by Sue and Joan in their interviews, as well as by Paul.

Whilst there was evidence in the Sandworth Team’s department of a flat management hierarchy enabling practitioners to have contact with the senior management (Assistant Director and Director), contact with middle management seemed more difficult, with Mike stating that he had never met the Area Manager. Despite the relatively non-hierarchical management structure, opportunities to participate on working parties and documented procedures promoting communication between management and practice (Joint Review Position Statement, 2000), practitioners still appeared to experience a significant distance between the levels in the Divisional Management structure. They felt that they had little influence over how decisions were reached. At the team meeting which the Assistant Director attended Paul expressed considerable frustration and disillusion about the relationship between his team and the Area Teams as he felt middle and senior management did not understand the idiosyncratic management structures which existed, a view he reinforced in the research findings feedback session:
Mike (ST): ....do you think, after what you told me in supervision yesterday about the seeming lack of knowledge about what we do as a team from direct line managers just above your level, do you think we’d be able to invite them to our team meetings?

Paul: They’ve been invited but they don’t come. I mean I’ve never got diaries out and said this is the day you’re going to come. It’s been talked about but never got to. Maybe within a new structure that needs to happen.

Mike: If what you told us yesterday about the lack of knowledge about what we’re doing certainly .......(laughing in disbelief).

Paul: The Family Support managers have never met as a county group. Family Placement do, Youth Justice do, Residential do, but Family Support managers, if I go back to under eleven’s, over-eleven’s were never invited to County, to divisional management meetings, so last two meetings I’ve been to around the divisional, more or less that core group, it’s the first time we’ve ever talked about our practice...... It’s the first time ever in county meeting with Assistant Director there and two Area managers, have actually been able to talk about what we do do. Peter (Area manager) came up with things which either he has assumed or been told by someone else or wants to hear or whatever, which clearly isn’t our stuff. And I know that Greg (Area manager) has also had to accept that fact that he didn’t know what we were doing and indeed was very uncomfortable with what we were doing.... What have we become? And nobody really knows. We know what we’ve become. We know what we can do best. We know how flexible we are. You ask each individual social worker, each individual Fieldwork manager, the two Area managers, Assistant Director she’ll give you different story depending on who she is speaking to.(Research findings feedback session)

On the one occasion, a team meeting, when I had the opportunity to observe Paul relating to a senior manager, the Assistant Director, it was interesting to observe his more boundaried and assertive behaviour. This ‘exception to the rule’ in terms of Paul’s professional presentation suggested the experience of being listened to by a
senior figure had positive repercussions for his managerial identity.

In the Hurst Centre, Steve had a positive relationship with Linda his immediate line manager, with whom he met regularly for supervision and Family Centre Managers’ meetings. Linda, however, voiced her lack of confidence in more senior managers who, she believed, did not fully understand the strategic thinking required by Family Centres. Linda also saw herself as an important mediator between the Family Centres and Area Teams. Although the limited amount of time spent in the Hurst Centre discussing wider organisational issues has been deemed to be a positive feature (section 1.1.), in part attributable to the Centre’s contained organisational identity, there was a danger of the Centre becoming insular and isolated from its wider organisational context. This potential pitfall was acknowledged by some practitioners who recognised they did not always take sufficient interest in what went on outside of their work setting and endorsed by Linda who, in her capacity as a mediator, ensured the Family Centre did not become too insular and removed from the realities of the other social work settings to whom the Family Centres related:

*Linda (HC): I don’t want them to be stressed out like their colleagues (in Area Teams) but at same time they have to be realistic and move towards Area Office colleagues.*

*Linda acknowledged her liaison role of explaining each setting to the other.*

*Linda: We just mirror the family. Family doesn’t get on with social work practitioner so we take on the family’s issues and we don’t get on with social work practitioner. We’ve got to model the conciliation method! So I interpret those people to Family Centre and back again. (Interview)*

Linda modelled in her accessibility to practitioners the importance of maintaining practice-management connections and of modelling a ‘hands on’ relationship-based as opposed to a distant, procedurally-based managerial style. In her management approach Linda countered the distant and procedural senior management ethos that had existed when she had managed the Centre. Similar to the Sandworth Team the Hurst Centre had not been without threats to its existence. However, its survival
appeared to be attributable to the manager’s relations with the senior managers and her ability to promote and defend the therapeutically orientated nature of the Centre’s work in a climate dominated by Child Protection. Whilst all the practitioners acknowledged their existence was always perilous, they had confidence in their immediate and senior managers to defend their corner when required, enabling them to concentrate on their practice.

3. Organisational Expectations

A common characteristic of both research settings was the recurrent complaint by practitioners that what was expected of them from other professionals and what was feasible given the nature of the work were incompatible. The continuum along which the teams’ experiences of organisational expectations were located ranged from greater or lesser compatibility between the teams’ and the wider organisational practice expectations. All the practitioners in both settings acknowledged the frustrations they felt in not being able to do their job as well as they would like to. In relation to this core feature the two teams’ experiences were broadly similar, although how these experiences were responded to did differ across the two teams. The causes of the frustration were two fold: time pressures and timescales, derived from the wider political context’s attempts to respond to the uncertainty and risky nature of practice, which were incompatible with work that involved establishing meaningful relationships with people experiencing psycho-social difficulties; and secondly, pressures arising from the incompatibility of organisational objectives or collegial expectations and the practitioners’ understandings of their role.

The predominant feature of the Sandworth Team was its focus on ‘doing’ and practical responses - the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of practice as opposed to trying to make sense of the ‘why’ of practice. However, the details of the cases presented in their interviews and to a lesser extent in supervision sessions exhibited work that was challenging, unpredictable and required flexible responses. It seemed that the reality of the work was not entirely compatible with the organisational expectations manifest in the Departmental SMART - Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Time-limited - objectives and in recommendations arising from research undertaken in the Children and Families Division, which had involved Sandworth Team members. One key
recommendation arising from the research the team had engaged with prior to my involvement with them was for cognitive behavioural therapy to be adopted more widely as an effective means of working with children and families. Paul voiced two concerns about this finding: firstly, he acknowledged that the members of his team who provided cases for the research had felt insufficiently consulted during the research process and were sceptical about its findings; and secondly, he was concerned that none of his staff were adequately trained to adopt the proposed style of practice. The incompatible expectations posed the question of whether practitioners’ responses to their work were determined more by organisational imperatives than by professional assessments and beliefs. Practitioners’ comments in their interviews endorsed the tension between the realities of the work and the broad expectations of the organisation manifested specifically in the expectations of Area social work practitioners:

Joan (ST): ....After a while it can become quite repetitive and sometimes it was ever so difficult to focus on that (anger management) because of everything else that was in their lives of the young person and we were under a certain amount of pressure to provide certain length pieces of work, plans in advance, this is the programme, one off piece of work type touch and it's finished and one of the frustrations I found was that it was not as straightforward as that and certainly I agonised over that and a parallel to that is the discussion we had about BM (client) because that started off as social skills and anger management but so much other stuff comes in to actually focus on that anger management is quite difficult. Is that making sense?

GR: Yes I think so. What I understand you are saying is that there’s a tension between...

Joan: Time constraints, resource constraints and actually spending time with the young people, giving them the opportunity to talk but also to look at the issues that are there and a lot of other bits come in. (Interview)

The scope of practice in the Hurst Centre was similarly tempered by the existence of
pressures on practitioners to practice within time and procedural frameworks which were not necessarily conducive to relational and reflective approaches to practice. The two sources of pressures identified by practitioners as affecting their capacity to work in their chosen reflective manner were firstly, the pressures generated by having to conform to externally imposed timescales and procedures for the completion of pieces of work and secondly, internal pressures arising from the complications of timetabling work which was of a collaborative nature.

On several occasions in supervision sessions, informal settings and interviews practitioners highlighted the pressures they were under to meet what, in their opinion, were unrealistic timescales to complete a piece of work. For Steve the pressures he was under to allocate work were evident in his comments about having several cases he was ‘sitting on’ and unable to present to the allocation meeting. The implications of these pressures were commented on by Anna who had observed how the sectional meetings were being squeezed out by the allocation meetings, which preceded them. The pressure of work had also impacted on the family assessment sessions where there was a realisation that the opportunity for professional feedback with colleagues after the session was not being taken because of practitioners’ time commitments on other cases. These workload pressures had become more acute in recent months with the introduction of the Department of Health’s Framework for Assessment which had rigorous time-frames and documentation requirements. In these circumstances practitioners, in this setting and in the Sandworth Team, acknowledged the challenges involved in establishing meaningful relationships with families and the pressures imposed on them to produce written reports which had to comply with legal or procedural requirements:

Anna (HC): "...if you are not reflective you become reactive to situation, if you haven't thought about what has happened since last time you saw a person and going into next time how they would feel if you hadn't, because I think that would show to clients that you hadn't had a chance to mull through and I don't think that is very valuing of the time they spend with you or if you hadn't had chance to plan what you were doing with them and it's just 'What are we doing today?' because it takes time, that business I was saying to you about the content and the process, that's where the reflection takes place, when you
are in session with client it is very easy to get hooked into same conversation and I wonder how many people have they had that conversation with and if they have told it to best friend, partner and now it’s me.....So being reflective I think is being valuing of people you are seeing and giving time and energy to think about what they have said and going back to them with further thoughts or just a different question which you wouldn’t have asked if you hadn’t been........ And for the teams I think the work would just start to be going from one thing to another to another and it would breed dissatisfaction and I think one of the things reflective thinking enables is satisfaction with the work you are doing - a job well done. (Interview)

The comments of practitioners in both teams indicated that they did not feel reflective practice was valued or promoted by the organisation and that whilst it might be talked about by individuals the reality was it did not happen as often as some practitioners would like it to because of time and workload pressures:

Sue (ST): ......but I think it’s something you need to have time to do with out feeling you are skiving. It is that sort of feeling that I should be moving on to something else now but sometimes you don’t get a chance to do it because it’s been manic and you get to next thing and realise you haven’t planned it, what am I going to do. (Interview)

Both teams had difficulty meeting the expectations of their wider organisational contexts but responded to these difficulties in different ways. In the Hurst Centre, the need to identify realistic work objectives for the challenging work they undertook involved the practitioners and the managers recognising the legitimacy of appropriate support systems:

Anna (HC): Sarah and I feel we are going to need some holding, some supervision together. What I am afraid of is that because they have got such powerful processes, the mother and daughter, and Sarah works with mother and I work with the daughter that we don’t re-enact those in our working relationship and we need to be aware of what is going on and if we are called in to defend our person that is not going to be any good, we need to be aware
of the processes, and say ‘Isn’t that interesting I feel very defensive’ and talking about it and not doing it. So we do feel we need some place to go to unravel that.

Steve: What do you suggest?

Anna: All we said is that we need some supervision to be on top of this. If we’re not on top of this we’re not going to be any help to them. (Supervision)

For the Hurst Centre practitioners it was clear that using sources of support was a sign of professional integrity and not weakness. The Sandworth Team appeared to have a less assertive response to the external pressures that they faced and, in keeping with the relatively powerless position the team occupied within the wider organisational context, practitioners succumbed to the pressures and modified their practice accordingly:

Mike (ST):…… I sometimes struggle in working out where to go from there when you’ve seen what you think the problem is and then you’re trying to work out where to go, because sometimes the problem is so huge that me seeing someone once a week for ten weeks is barely scratching the surface. I started working with a lad after Christmas called L, who has been looked after since he was four years old…….He’s angry and I’m trying to work on his anger. But he’s got twelve years of it. It doesn’t happen over night……. Where I have a problem is the system which expects that all I do should be measurable. And I don’t think that’s how things are when you are working with people. I don’t think things are measurable but I find myself trying to come up with things that are measurable when the better side of me knows I shouldn’t be……. I think it’s just realising how impotent I am in changing the things I think which needs changing. And I think it’s at that point I get dragged into doing the things which are measurable. The more I think about it the measurable stuff is nonsense. You can tick it off, you can say you’ve done it, it looks good on the file. I don’t think it means anything. (Interview)
Summary

The overview in this chapter of the wider organisational contexts of the two research settings provides data on the features of organisations which play an important part in the construction of contexts in which reflective practice has the potential to develop. The findings in relation to the wider organisational context exemplify the tensions and pressures arising from contemporary practice and the organisational responses to them. These research findings, however, go further than the literature which identifies organisational epistemological perspectives as the pivotal feature in the development, or not, of reflective practice. This research suggests that the scope for reflective practice is dependent not only on organisational epistemological perspectives but on the clarity of professional identities and relationships, the management structures which support them and the extent to which these features of the organisation facilitate the existence of reflective spaces which can counter the pressures to meet externally imposed objectives.

A characteristic common to each of the identified core features of the organisational context and capable of connecting the different manifestations of these features across the two settings is containment. Each of the features identified represents in different ways forms of containment for practitioners and managers. The organisational context of the Sandworth Team with its confused professional identity, ineffective management structures and difficult relationships with colleagues displayed characteristics of an uncontained setting. The Hurst Centre organisational context afforded a greater sense of containment through clear management structures and identities. The efforts of the Sandworth Team manager and practitioners to create greater containment through establishing a clearer organisational identity and relationships resonated with the experiences of the Hurst Centre Team and underlined the importance of a containing organisational context for professional practice.

In the final findings chapter I consider the team context, its intermediate and interdependent position between the individual practitioner and the organisational context and its role in creating conditions - safe, secure and containing spaces - which facilitate the development of reflective practice.
Chapter Seven
Research Findings -
The Team Context of Reflective Practice

Introduction

The previous two findings chapters have explored the individual and organisational contexts and the extent to which they created space in which reflective practice could develop. The third and final context to be considered is the team. In both of the research settings the basic organisational unit was the team and it was this context out of the three identified from the data which provided the most prolific data. Two key, inter-dependent features of the teams were identified: firstly, managerial issues relating to the dilemmas inherent in the manager’s role and professional identity and the attributes and working practices of the team managers; and secondly, team characteristics, particularly the team culture and dynamics. In writing about the findings from the team context my awareness of the complexity and interdependence of the intra-contextual and inter-contextual relationships has been heightened. Within the team (intra-contextual) the characteristics of the manager’s role and his/her personal and professional attributes clearly informed and influenced the team’s identity, characteristics and functioning but simultaneously the manager’s role and functioning were influenced by the team’s identity and behaviour. In a similar vein the inseparable nature of the three contexts of reflective practice, referred to in the previous two findings chapters, was evident in relation to the team context. The team occupied a pivotal position between the individual practitioner and organisational contexts and was both influential on these two contexts and influenced by them.

1. Managerial Identity

The crucial role played by the team manager in both settings was mentioned in Chapter Four. Managerial identity in the team context was concerned with two key issues: firstly, how the managers understood their managerial role and responsibilities and secondly, how, in conjunction with the personal attributes of the managers, these roles and responsibilities were operationalised. The importance of understanding the findings in relation to a continuum is equally applicable in this context. The
management continuum ranged from clear managerial identity and responsibilities to confused understandings of role and associated responsibilities and included the issue of personal-professional boundaries.

1.1. Managerial Roles and Responsibilities

Both team managers and several of the practitioners in each setting acknowledged the challenges faced by the team manager who had to straddle the manager-practitioner boundary in teams where the range of work undertaken and the knowledge and skills this embraced was considerable. The two managers had to simultaneously juggle management demands to realise organisational objectives and targets with the diverse professional needs of practitioners involved in a wide range of work. Neither of the managers felt they had received sufficient training for their managerial roles and Steve commented explicitly on the inadequate training he had received which had focused on the bureaucratic, as opposed to the inter-personal, dimensions of the manager’s job.

For both managers the challenges of their role arose from the complex and potentially incompatible expectations of it. For Steve this was manifest in whether he chose to simply manage the team and Centre or chose to adopt a more therapeutic role in relation to the practitioners and their practice. It was widely recognised by Steve, Linda (overall Family Centres manager) and several of the practitioners that the role of the Family Centre manager was a difficult one to effectively operationalise. Steve had chosen to adopt a predominantly managerial interpretation of his role. The combination of Steve’s managerial capabilities and the clear organisational context which supported his approach, enabled him to maintain firm boundaries around managerial and practitioners’ responsibilities by, for example, accepting managerial responsibility for advocating with Area Teams and other agencies on behalf of any practitioners who felt at an impasse in their negotiations. Steve’s actions protected practitioners from the additional demands and pressures that they faced and ensured their involvement in cases was appropriate and contained. In spite of the clearly defined managerial aspects of his role, Steve acknowledged, not altogether happily, that he felt his role was restricted by the limited scope for more therapeutic input, an issue he raised in relation to his supervisory relations with practitioners who had far greater theoretical knowledge and understanding (section 1.2.2.2. below). For Steve his
role involved him ‘tinkering’ with practice and being primarily focussed on the practical tasks of caseload management and building maintenance:

Steve (HC): And so I’m – I think my style is – I’m nominally the manager here. It’s a team of a variety of skilled practitioners who know what they want in terms of what they need to get on. And so to a certain extent I feel like I’m in a position of tinkering really with the machine. It’s been working, you know all the Family Centres seem to have pretty stable staff groups, but these experienced practitioners they know what they want. I’m really only in a position of tinkering. I’m bringing the work in, I’m making sure that the staff are well supported and happy and managing their work well, and making sure the building doesn’t fall down on their ears and that everything is running well. And it’s a good atmosphere here, you know that’s, I see that as my job. (Interview)

In the Sandworth Team the complexities of the managerial role and identity were manifest in Paul’s blurred professional boundaries and his ambivalence about the remit of his managerial position. Paul’s attempts to resolve his ambivalent feelings about his professional identity involved him resorting to taking on practical responsibilities, not always appropriately, which added to the existing confusion surrounding the team’s organisational identity. Rather than using his practice experience, indirectly through supervision, for the benefit of practitioners, Paul appeared to need to intervene directly. For Paul there appeared to be a struggle, which he acknowledged in his interview, about wanting to retain a practitioner identity, whilst having managerial responsibilities and he did not appear to have satisfactorily addressed this tension to prevent it intruding on his managerial role:

Paul(ST): There is a fundamental question - what do you do Dad for a living or what are you, are you a social work practitioner, a manager, a team leader, what is it that you do? It is that thing which fascinates me and keeps me in what I describe as an operational manager’s post really because I like, it’s how you marry those things together and I’ve found that incredibly frustrating professionally and the reason it drove me into this type of work, provider services rather than purchaser side, case manager side was I’m not
For practitioners in the Sandworth Team Paul’s confused understanding of his managerial identity made it unclear how he differentiated between the manager’s and the practitioners’ remits. As a consequence practitioners were observed discussing issues, such as resolving the problems of inadequate Duty cover, arising from the small size of the team, and taking on responsibilities for liaising with the Area teams, which were more appropriately part of the manager’s remit.

Although, unlike Paul, Steve had opportunities to discuss with Linda the complex demands faced by Family Centre managers, both he and Paul experienced shortcomings in the level of support they received from their line managers. In Paul’s case the support was virtually non-existent. He received erratic and inadequate supervision from Jeff, his line manager. Paul felt Jeff had little understanding of what the team did or the difficulties they were facing. As a consequence of his experiences Paul acknowledged he did not actively seek supervision, had only had a few supervision sessions in the three years he had been in post, and recognised his tendency to adopt a similarly dismissive approach to the supervision of practitioners in his team.

Steve’s supervision with Linda, whilst on a regular basis, was essentially a management exercise and on Linda’s own admission, was ‘boom, boom through the agenda’. It was evident that Steve did use the space provided by these sessions to air professional dilemmas and concerns sessions but there were few opportunities to reflect on the issues raised in more depth. In light of Steve’s supervision experiences it
was not surprising to discover that his supervision of the practitioners had a predominantly managerial flavour to it as well. From Steve’s perspective the managerial nature of his post did not demand a reflective stance and he did not perceive himself as operating with one, to the extent that he expressed ambivalence about the usefulness of a reflective approach for his role:

Steve (HC): I mean you know, I’ve got you know, I’m working, I’ve got a lot to do, so I don’t sit and think about it very much and I’m not looking really for clarification of my role. Except sometimes as things come up which I can see as potential hazards, then I will think about those specific issues. But I’m not spending a lot of time thinking about or being worried about the role of the Family Centre Manager. There clearly is a role in negotiating referrals and managing the allocation of work, being accountable for the work that goes on here and being a line manager for any key decisions on the work and management and supervision, you know the well being of the staff. Budget for that. So that’s the job and that’s fairly clear. (Interview)

The limitations of the line management support available for the two team managers were offset to some extent by the existence of alternative support systems. For Steve the other source of support he identified as helpful was the regular monthly Family Centre Managers meeting which provided him with a safe space to share current issues and concerns. Paul, however, did not benefit from such a forum, with the nearest equivalent being the Area Children and Families Management meeting which included the Area Team Managers and other middle managers, such as his line manager, but did not include other Family Centre Managers as they were located in another part of the Children and Families Division. Paul’s experiences of these meetings appeared to be undermining, as opposed to enabling, as he felt isolated in his particular role and misunderstood by many of his Area based colleagues. Paul was forced back even further onto his own resources and, as he acknowledged in his interview, inappropriately onto team forums for support.
1.2. Manager’s Attributes and Working Practices

1.2.1. Personal-Professional Boundaries

In both settings practitioners made positive remarks about their respective managers, although the Sandworth Team’s comments were restricted to positive remarks about Paul as a person, rather than as a professional. All the practitioners in the Sandworth Team acknowledged Paul to be a ‘nice man’ but identified numerous professional shortcomings, which impacted on their own professional experiences. Throughout my time with the team there were references to Paul’s personal circumstances, which practitioners indicated had intruded into the professional context, to an inappropriate extent, over the previous eighteen months and had affected his ability to undertake his responsibilities and the practitioners’ ability to depend on him:

Mike (HC): I go in (to supervision) pretty much knowing what I want to say and what I’m doing because, I don’t know if anyone else has said this too you, but supervision has become much more consistent since you’ve been here. The alternative was to go into supervision and hear Paul’s problems for an hour and half. Initially I was quite happy to try and support him but it went on for too long. We were talking about this at my NVQ last week and saying the worst sort of supervisor is the one who when you say ‘I’ve got this problem’ says ‘You think you’ve got problems’ and Paul did that to us all for a long time and he wonders why people have become touchy with him. Everyone likes him but they’ve become touchy with him and he ends up arguing with them and feeling picked on. He also does not listen, he talks back at you. (Interview)

Several practitioners commented that they felt exposed and unprotected as a direct result of Paul’s pre-occupation with organisational and personal issues, which took his attention away from the team and the personal-professional issues which practitioners faced. Observations of Paul’s formal and informal behaviour confirmed the practitioners’ comments and experiences. Paul’s breaching of personal-professional boundaries contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. The poorly defined and unsafe space generated by Paul’s behaviour and exacerbated by his unsupported status within the organisation, acted as a deterrent to reflective practice.
Paul openly acknowledged the difficulties he had encountered personally and professionally in recent months and the negative repercussions they had had for the team. Whilst Paul appeared keen to re-establish clearer boundaries the observations I made indicated that this was proving difficult for him to achieve.

Steve had already joined the Hurst Centre as a deputy manager before his promotion to acting manager. Although this internal transition in role had potential complications for his relationship with the practitioners he appeared to have managed the transition effectively as evidenced by positive remarks practitioners made about Steve’s handling of the various forums in the Centre - staff meetings, allocation meetings, supervision sessions - and illustrated by Carol’s interview comments:

Carol(HC): From a personal point of view, thinking about Steve personally I think, because of him coming, I think he was in a difficult position – I mean this is just my thoughts about it – he was in the Area Office. I remember taking quite a few of his cases actually and working with him, alongside him doing that, some work there. Then he came here and he had to switch from that role of like co-working with us say from the Area Office to being – I mean I know that happens to quite a lot of people maybe. And I don’t know, I don’t know whether that shift was a bit difficult because he wanted to be like friends or alongside us and the rest of it and it’s taken a while for that shift to happen, but I think that has happened now and he’s in charge and he’s the – he is the manager. He has a great deal of respect – I mean we’re a strong team, we’re a strong group of women in there, and I think he can feel quite intimidated by us all maybe sometimes. But I think he respects what we do and how we do it and maybe how we say it. From one – I mean he hasn’t done the family therapy training, which he acknowledges, and like sometimes that bit’s a bit missing so he may not know where we’re coming from. But he always listens to where we’re coming from and takes that on board and thinks about what we say and uses it, acknowledges it and goes with it. And allows us to develop the way we want to develop really. (Interview)

In the Hurst Centre the clearly demarcated professional responsibilities established by Steve were reinforced by a physical separation of the manager and practitioners within
the Centre and by a clear separation between the professional and personal lives of the
manager and practitioners. From practitioners’ comments the personal-professional
boundaries surrounding Steve’s post had not always been as clear cut as they now
were but had developed as he had become established in his post. Whilst practitioners
acknowledged that Steve did not frequent the team room very often they did
experience him as accessible and felt able to drop into his office when necessary. The
maintenance of appropriate personal-professional boundaries within the wider work
context was evident in the absence of research recordings of observations or comments
which indicated inappropriate or blurred boundaries. The clearly demarcated
boundaries in the Hurst Centre however, were not used defensively to avoid
addressing the complex and challenging personal-professional dynamics of the work
but created a safe space within which personal or professional issues impacting on
practitioners could be appropriately addressed.

1.2.2. Managerial Style

Although exhibiting marked differences in managerial styles the two teams shared
some experiences with regard to the limitations of the role of the team manager.

1.2.2.1. Managerial Supervision

Managerially defined supervision, which was predominantly focussed on caseload
management, was a prominent feature in both settings and appeared to exist at the
expense of a more integrated supportive-managerial supervision. Whilst the managerial
aspects of supervision were appreciated, particularly by the more technically
orientated practitioners (Sheila and Jane in the Hurst Centre; Mike, Joan and Lorraine
in the Sandworth Team) overall it appeared that supervision served a purpose for all
the practitioners but was not as far reaching in its effectiveness or reflectiveness as it
could have been. This was attributable in part to organisational pressures which
prohibited the managers from engaging on a ‘deeper’ level with practitioners, and in
part to the managers’ perspectives on practice.

In the Sandworth Team Paul’s own experience of unreliable and ineffective
supervision (see Chapter Six) was mirrored in his supervisory practice with his team.
all of whom perceived supervision to be erratic and of limited usefulness. Supervision sessions had a chaotic feel to them: they often started late with no fixed time duration; they were insufficiently protected and were frequently interrupted by telephone calls, of both a personal and professional nature which undermined the value of an uninterrupted thinking space; and despite having an agenda it was not uncommon for Paul to divert the conversation off on a tangent which resulted in unfocussed, disjointed and incomplete discussions. Paul avoided the more emotive aspects of supervision material and had difficulty sustaining more in depth, internally orientated discussions, as illustrated in Sue’s third supervision when Paul failed to pursue the feelings of unease expressed by Sue:

*Sue (ST) mentioned two comments from a child in her sessions that had made her uneasy and querying abuse.*

*Sue: There were two things they said that made me wonder about father. A, the older one said ‘I get embarrassed when.....’ and she said ‘I get embarrassed when I get out the bath and daddy looked at me funny....’ Two things which made me feel uncomfortable this morning. So I don’t know if something is going to come out with this as this is first time the children have had direct work. So I’m thinking ‘Oh shit’.*

*Paul: Did you know social worker before?*

*Sue: I’ve not met social worker before.*

*Paul: I quite like social worker.*

*Sue: I’ve not spoken to her since I started piece of work. She’s not phoned at all. I must admit I’ve not phoned her.*

*Paul: She would trust you implicitly because you’re a Resource Centre worker.*

*Some discussion followed about practicalities of Sue helping mother get to*
review meeting.

Sue: So it’s not an easy one. I think its going to be quite difficult.

Paul: What’s the refuge like?

Sue describes it.

Paul: Right. Sounds like quite a tasking piece of work. (Supervision)

Paul’s tendency to direct discussion towards more practical, external issues or towards his own, as opposed to the practitioners’, responses to situations ensured that supervision remained on a ‘surface’ level and its full potential was not realised. Paul’s unfocussed approach served to confuse practitioners rather than clarify their thinking and frequently, as Lorraine commented in her interview, involved Paul misjudging how, when and where to intervene in a case, which left practitioners feeling inappropriately or inadequately supported. From the supervision feedback sessions it appeared that the combination of Paul’s self-confessed insecurity around theoretical frameworks, the ‘threat’ posed by the substantial amount of practice experience of individual practitioners in the team - in particular, Sue and Mike - and the sensitive professional legacies of some of the practitioners (Joan and Mike) meant Paul had difficulty exploring with practitioners what was informing their practice:

GR: Would you like more kind of ‘Can we look at what I did in that session’?

Mike (ST): No. It doesn’t feel important.

Paul: Why?

Mike: Because I feel I can sort out stuff like that constantly outside of supervision with little chats around the place with either yourself. Sue, there’s not many people, this is problem, something I’ve talked to you about before. There’s very few people I would go to in this team to discuss anything like that because, it may sound conceited, I don’t think I’ve got much to learn
from anybody else but Sue.

Paul: That is difficult to challenge

Mike: What's that?

Paul: The word I come up with is arrogance, on occasion your innate ability, your knowledge, your depth of experience of working with young people is quite difficult to challenge.

Mike: Yeah.

Paul: ...in the sense that, I dunno I find it..... I feel I'm down here somewhere looking up and I don't know how I can challenge that because he might wipe the floor with me if I come up with some theory or piece of practice, 'why are you doing that Mike'?  (Supervision feedback session)

As a consequence of Paul's position both the theoretical and the experiential origins of practitioners practice remained unexamined and the practitioners resorted to autonomous practices in the face of ineffective or non-existent responses from Paul (see section 2.3 below).

In the Hurst Centre all the practitioners made positive comments about Steve's role as their manager and appreciated his low key managerial approach which afforded them considerable autonomy whilst providing a safe, protected and supportive working environment. Practitioners comments about their experience of Steve's actions in supervision sessions and in allocation meetings indicated their appreciation of his managerial capacity to offer clear practical advice, to summarise what was happening and to ensure the focus of the work was retained:

Carol(HC): I mean I know it differs for other people. For me I feel that supervision with Steve I find it quite concrete and quite good because I think it's on a kind of practical level. What it doesn't do and perhaps it should do for me maybe make me think more or reflect to myself why did you do that or
what do you think you could have done differently, or how do you think. I mean maybe there should be some more of that. But I also quite like the fact that his supervision is very, is quite practical and it’s like ok, so you’ve done that, and this is what needs to happen next isn’t it? And this is what blah blah blah. And I find that quite safe.

GR: Right. So it’s supportive rather than challenging in a way. It could be more challenging perhaps, but actually you find it quite...

Carol: He hangs on to cases and rounds them off nicely and sorts them out and puts them into little boxes in a way. And looks after them. Keeps it ticking over. (Interview)

A significant implication of Steve’s managerially defined professional identity, however, was the voicing by several of the Hurst Centre practitioners of dissatisfaction with the nature and depth of their supervisory experiences with Steve, although there was a simultaneous acknowledgement that what they would like and what was realistic to expect from one manager was probably impossible to achieve:

Sarah (HC): Well what’s good about it (supervision) is that he lets us be autonomous and I really like that style, his management. We can be, we are allowed to be autonomous, and for me that works very well. I don’t like very directive forms of management. I suppose on the downside sometimes, I suppose the danger of that is that sometimes one might not feel as contained as one could do. I think the main difficulty that I have sometimes is that I, my theoretical knowledge is greater than the manager and so sometimes I feel that I am constantly having to argue my case about what I’m doing.

(Interview)

From observing supervision sessions it was possible to note the predominant managerial and accounting nature of the supervision sessions, evident in the phrases practitioners used in their interviews to describe the purpose of supervision such as ‘to catch up on cases’ (Jenny) and ‘there are some new outcomes you need to know’(Maria) and Kate’s interview remarks:
Limited attention was paid to the process issues in the cases discussed, their mirroring in the supervision session or to the emotional impact of the work on the practitioner. More often these emotionally expressive conversations took place between practitioners informally or in other forums. The supportive component to supervision was compartmentalised into a separate section of the supervision session when Steve would ask how they were generally and if they had any concerns, as opposed to it being integrated into helping the practitioners deal affectively and reflectively with their cases, thereby promoting their sense of professional competence and well-being.

1.2.2.2. Managerial Tensions

Steve, in his capacity as manager of the Hurst Centre, acknowledged that one key limitation of his managerial role was his experience of practitioners being theoretically more informed than he was, which had the potential to be quite destabilising for the supervisory relationship, as Anna acknowledged:

Anna (HC): Maybe Steve is different with different people and I wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that he is able to respond to different peoples needs and levels and I suppose what might happen in my supervision is that he might feel he doesn't have the same level of training as I have in family therapy and in some way that leads him to the type of supervision that we have. He is just checking out that I am doing all the statutory things and that he feels I am competent and unless, if there was a big issue I would take it to him to discuss it and if I am not doing that I am working with them in a way that is ok. But that's a guess. (Interview)
As a consequence, in some of the supervision sessions the educative component revolved around the practitioner educating the manager, as opposed to *vice versa*. Observations were made of Anna introducing new ideas from her training to Steve in her supervision sessions and in a similar fashion Sarah informed Steve of principles of psychoanalytic thinking.

In the Sandworth Team, Paul, like Steve, was open to acknowledging there were areas of practice he was less knowledgeable about and was happy for practitioners to access consultation for specific pieces of work. This was not a common practice, however, as supervision sessions did not appear to be sufficiently focussed for this suggestion to arise with any regularity and the use of consultation arrangements did not appear to be an integral component of the organisation’s functioning. Consultation arrangements were on an individual, as opposed to a team, basis and would be in the form of a short term arrangement for a specific piece of work, as opposed to a sustained support forum for practice. Although Steve voiced some reservations about the role of external consultants in the Hurst Centre Team as an alternative means of meeting the diverse and advanced requirements of the practitioners he was sufficiently open to new ideas and ways of thinking and to the requests of practitioners to experiment with new consultation arrangements:

*Steve (HC):*... And as I don’t really believe that anybody’s got the true answer to how to work with families then I suppose that this arrangement (outside clinical consultants/supervisors) is as good as anything really. It gives the staff the benefit of a wide availability of ideas and providing that we don’t do anything really stupid or dangerous, then I think we can manage any conflicts as we go along. I certainly wouldn’t sit there and dismiss anybody’s point of view out of hand. I don’t think that we do that and equally if I felt that we were, needed to take a different line to the clinical supervisor’s suggestion then I feel we could discuss that, tease it out. (Interview)

In order for collaborative spaces to exist and be effective required the team manager’s active facilitation and management of them. Neither manager voiced any opposition to consultation forums for practitioners but Paul’s lack of managerial initiative made them of low priority in the Sandworth Team. In the Hurst Centre Steve’s reservations
about the usefulness of consultation forums was offset by his recognition of their potentially positive consequences for both clients and practitioners:

*Steve (HC):* *... (Reflective practice) Must increase job satisfaction if you feel like you’re giving a good service as a result of well thought out objectives and the benefit of a reasonable amount of input from thought. I think, hopefully, we will be working more effectively because we will be clear about what we are trying to achieve and the method that’s right will have a lot more thoughts, ideas, to put in to the family, rather than just doing it on a whim. And hopefully it will be a safer and all round more manageable style of working and will be more confident way of working. People will, staff will feel if they’ve thought through, reflected with others and know what they are going to be doing that they will present a more confident way with clients, which in turn will give them confidence, and feel more manageable for everybody. If you have a practitioner who comes into your family who sounds like they’re confident about the outcomes and how things might work out and seems to have thought about what it’s like for you and others, that’s reassuring isn’t it? And that is infectious in a way isn’t it? (Interview)*

From the practitioners’ perspective there was some recognition that reflective forums and practice could be construed by some managers as a threat to their authority and that for it to be perceived positively required a confident manager able to allow his/her practitioners considerable autonomy:

*Julie (HC):* *... a lot of managers would consider that (additional supervision/consultation sessions) quite threatening because they would be quite concerned about what was being said and be quite paranoid about that. Some work places have a belief that if you let practitioners have time to go into themselves they can run away with that, don’t give too much free rein because they can go off on tangents and not achieve what you want them to achieve, the real work. (Interview)*

This perspective was mirrored in comments made by Paul which indicated how threatened he felt by the enhanced expertise of team members who received additional
consultative support. Paul’s comments reinforced the unsupported and isolated position he occupied.

2. Team Practices and Dynamics

Three aspects of the teams were identified which were of significance for the development of reflective practice: firstly, the extent to which the team exhibited individualised or collaborative approaches to practice; secondly, and connected to the first feature of the teams, the nature of communicative practices within the team; and thirdly the levels of professional confidence and self esteem exhibited by the team. Whilst each team had dominant traits, the behaviours of individual practitioners within the teams did vary along a collaborative-individualised practice continuum. As has been acknowledged in Chapter Five individual ‘exceptions to the rule’ existed as did areas of overlap between the two teams’ identities.

2.1. Collaborative and Individualised Practices

In the two research settings it was apparent that their team ethos and practices were significantly different. The Hurst Centre Team placing greater emphasis on collaborative working practices, although Jane and Sheila, the two technically orientated practitioners in this team were less inclined than their colleagues to work in this way. Within the Sandworth Team the dominant approach to practice was an individualised one. There was some evidence of collaborative practices and of interest in developing them but at the time of the research it was limited to the co-running of groups and was not exhibited in other aspects of the team’s functioning.

A central characteristic of the Hurst Centre Team was its openness to creative and collaborative approaches to practice. These ranged from a variety of co-working relationships, reflective family therapy teams, through joint co-work, clinical and group supervision to informal team room conversations and all of the team collaborating in decorating the family room in the Centre! In their interviews all except one of the practitioners (Jane) identified ‘the team’ or colleagues in general, as opposed to specific individuals, as the first place they would go if they needed support or advice about their work. From my observations it was possible to note the
inclusive atmosphere within the team room which involved everyone feeling able to communicate with each other and evidence of the team thinking carefully about how new workers or students could be incorporated into the team. The open and supportive environment which existed in the team had not always existed according to some practitioners. The current positive atmosphere was partly attributed to the personalities in the team but there was recognition of the part played by the collaborative working practices which had become established in recent years. The value placed on talking and collaborative work was illustrated in a meeting Anna and Kate convened to discuss cases they were co-working. In this meeting they focussed on one case and the appointments the family had failed to attend. Despite the lack of progress they had made with the family Anna and Kate remained attentive to the family’s circumstances and committed to thinking about it collaboratively. The collaborative practices within the team afforded cognitive and emotional space for the practitioners which enabled them to reflect on their practice in a safe and supportive context, as illustrated by Carol’s interview comments about dealing with difficulties in her practice:

Carol (HC): The team is great. That kind of like being able to share anything with any member of the team I think is really valuable and it’s almost like if you share something with one member of the team and they might not be able to help you or Maria might know something about that, or Anna she might, or there’s a book on that, or there’s that. Always a kind of like something to think about and some member of the team to be of help really, at whatever level. I don’t know I just said that really because I think it’s a really good team and we respect each other, the team. I think we all know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and we are all very different and you know some people might be a bit scary and some people might be a bit I don’t know. But we do gel as a team I think. There’s not like this real bitchiness stuff that goes on. I think the actual team is really good. (Interview)

As a consequence of the collaborative ethos underpinning the Hurst Centre, which was in part the result of the systemic perspective of Linda, the overall Family Centres Manager, most of its practitioners acknowledged their reflective practice was located in collaborative forums. These forums enabled them, through reflection-on-action, to
develop the skill of externalising their internal cognitive and affective processes, which was identified as an important component of reflection-in-action. The type of reflective forum varied depending on the practitioners' reflective and theoretical perspective. Technically reflective practitioners were the least inclined to generate collaborative or communicative opportunities preferring to get on individually and 'do' the work. Amongst the holistically reflective practitioners, systemically orientated practitioners preferred group/team forums and psycho-dynamically orientated practitioners opted for dyadic forums. Whilst the benefits of individual reflective spaces, which were preferred by the technically reflective practitioners, were not entirely discounted, the importance of their co-existence alongside collaborative forums, which offered opportunities to think and talk about practice with colleagues was of particular importance to all the holistically-orientated practitioners:

Anna (HC): So there are components of it which make you reflect about yourself ..... and a lot of that is thinking about you as therapist and you as yourself, what is embedded in you, what have you taken on from society. So lots of that sort of stuff, but not individually and I think the idea probably is that if you are working in group you have to do it as a group. (Interview)

The composition of the Hurst Centre Team, outlined in Chapter Four, highlighted the diversity of knowledge, skills and orientations to practice embraced by the team. The advantages of the skills mix within the team, recognised by all the practitioners, was in the wealth of knowledge and range of responses offered to specific problems:

Sheila (HC): ..... the team have so many personalities within the team, we have a wide skill base and personality base and that is in itself is such an advantage to have. Someone will say 'Have you thought of it this way, have you done that, just take a deep breath, now what has gone on and I can understand your frustration and why you are so concerned but have you thought about....' and that is sort of loose supervision within the team and that is good because they are looking at it, you are amongst this chaos, this stuck process and they say have you thought about what process you are going through and it is like reflective stuff and within ten minutes you are 'oh yeah'. (Interview)
The positive effect of the skills mix in the Hurst Centre Team was attributable to the resistance within the team (which was not entirely successful, as there was some evidence of practitioners feeling 'pigeonholed' in particular roles) to placing practitioners in polarised positions and to the integrated understanding of knowledge sources, discussed in Chapter Five. Given the theoretical diversity embraced by the Centre’s practitioners it was surprising that it did not create more tensions than appeared to be the case. A partial explanation for this was offered by Sarah who, from her psycho-dynamic perspective, acknowledged that she would find it difficult working collaboratively with some theoretical perspectives but that, for her, the commonalities between her approach and that of the systemically-orientated practitioners - notably the emphasis placed in both approaches on self-awareness, communication, narratives and relationships - outweighed the differences. The commonalities between the diverse theoretical perspectives and approaches to practice, in conjunction with the open, collaborative atmosphere within the team enabled practitioners to perceive the different approaches embraced by the team as compatible and complementary:

*Carol (HC):*..... *And I sit in the middle of that (range of approaches) so that’s me now maybe wanting a bit about therapeutic but let’s hang on to my practical face, and the others are the other way. And if we didn’t have that mix and if we were all right down the top end of the therapeutic bits, the wishy washy things, we’d lose sight of the other stuff. (Interview)*

The atmosphere of respect for each others' views and ideas and absence of negative undercurrents which were a positive repercussion of the diversity and openness of the team were aspects of the team’s functioning that all the practitioners appreciated. According to some of the practitioners (Anna, Carol and Maria) these team characteristics were inextricably connected to the systemic, social constructivist theoretical perspective of the team. The inclusive, non-expert, respectful and empowering relationships with clients that this perspective encouraged was mirrored in their professional relationships with each other:

*Anna (HC):*..... *I think people feel safe and I’ve never, I’m not privy to every conversation here, but I’ve never talked about someone else’s work in a*
The collaborative nature of the Hurst Centre Team was not without its tensions: the time required to both organise and become familiar with collaborative working practices; the different reflective orientations and theoretical perspectives held by the practitioners; and the challenges and risks of transparent and open working practices. The tensions arising from practitioners’ differing perspectives were articulated most strongly by the technically orientated practitioners in the team. For Sheila and Jane co-working was not the unconditionally positive experience described by most of the practitioners:

**GR:** Do you find co-working useful for you?

**Sheila (HC):** Sometimes. Sometimes I find it quite frustrating because I haven’t worked out what, I can see where they are coming from, I can see what they are saying but sometimes I find that frustrating as it is slowing up the processes. Also the serious practicalities are that because we are all working on different levels actually physically getting together to plan something, but that actually helps to ground me, right we need to plan but because we are often working in different directions we don’t get time to sit and plan. (Interview)

The challenges and ‘risks’ of collaborative work, which included less confident practitioners feeling undermined or overwhelmed by the volume of alternative ideas collaborative working practices could generate were recognised by several practitioners:

**Anna (HC):** I think co-working is always a risk because you are exposing
On balance, however, it was acknowledged that if the anxiety collaborative approaches generated was appropriately contained the benefits outweighed the drawbacks.

The recent history of the Sandworth Team and the uncertain and confused organisational context in which it found itself (see Chapter Six) appeared to be significant factors in its current functioning. One aspect of the team which made a significant contribution to the team’s behaviours was the accommodation it occupied. The small rooms located on separate floors in the building and in narrow corridors accommodated only one or two practitioners and precluded the informal exchanges observed in the Hurst Centre. All the practitioners and Paul acknowledged both in their interviews and in informal conversations with me that the team was at a low ebb:

GR: Mike, that has been really useful. Is there anything you want to ask me?

Mike (ST): You being here has helped the team to sort things out.

GR: In what way?

Mike: Supervision is more focussed than it ever was before and it takes place more than it did. At one point last year I went without supervision for seven months because it just got cancelled and Paul is a bit of a sod for this. If he has meetings coming up the first thing that goes is supervision, everybody's. It's helped people think more about what they are doing. I'm not saying we've come up with great conclusions because you've been here through an extremely difficult period and it continues to be an extremely difficult period.
All of the practitioners acknowledged that individuals were simply getting on with their own work or as Sue stated ‘building their own empires’ and practitioners identified specific colleagues as sources of support as opposed to the collective team. Despite the difficulties within the Sandworth Team informal collegial support, as in the Hurst Centre, was an aspect of the team practitioners valued. The individualised ethos of the team was apparent in the amount of time practitioners spent working in isolation, in part an unavoidable consequence of the team’s large geographical catchment area, but also attributable to the reluctance of practitioners to co-operate in team activities and the predominantly individualised understanding of reflective opportunities. All of the practitioners described undertaking reflective practice individually, identifying car journeys as the place where they reflected most as well as other places such as at the gym and in the bath! Of the two regular collaborative forums which existed in the team - supervision sessions and team meetings - only one practitioner (Lisa) identified supervision with their team manager as a reflective forum and nobody mentioned team meetings. Practitioners who experienced ‘occasional’ collaborative practices such as the Parenting Skills group which Sue and Mike co-ran and the Anger Management group co-run by Joan and Lorraine, made positive comments about the benefits of being able to discuss issues arising and to exchange ideas with a colleague or in the case of the Anger Management group with the group’s external supervisor.
The paucity and erratic nature of collaborative forums in the Sandworth Team precluded collaborative opportunities for reflective practice becoming an established feature of the team. Practitioners had developed their own specialisms with little or no sharing of their skills and knowledge in the team and there was clear evidence of polarised views on which sources of knowledge were most relevant for practice. The individualised working practices and the lack of collaborative forums for discussing their work contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust and a lack of respect for each others’ practice. In several of Lorraine, Mike and Sue’s individual supervision sessions with Paul, comments were made, with both sarcastic and serious intent, which indicated their ambivalent feelings towards team colleagues. Most of the comments focussed on their sense of inequity in workload allocation and Paul’s failure to address this issue:

Mike (ST): Because I don’t feel that the other two full time practitioners who are going to be left do not take as big a share of the work. For me there’s no way round saying that, that’s how it is. I largely see that as your job to sort out. Telling me that one person is going to struggle if you put too much pressure on her doesn’t make a lot of difference to me, it’s got very little to do with me.

Paul: I appreciate that. It’s got something to do with you in the sense that we are a team, we’re still a team whether we like it or not, even if we’re just names in pile as it were. I would appreciate you telling me how you feel about that. I don’t want to patronise you in any way Mike but you are a king pin to us and I am concerned that my actions would put you back under pressure. If my telling you how appalling the other two people are I apologise for that. (Supervision session)

Paul’s reluctance to undertake the Business Excellence Model (a Quality Protects initiative to promote team and individual appraisal and enhance performance) was based on his belief that the team was not in a position to do the task. This decision, however, reinforced the fragmented nature of the team and failed to comprehend the potential benefits of examining the functioning of the team and issues in relation to their current practice that this exercise offered.
A team day convened towards the end of my involvement with the team focused on the individualised nature of team practices and people following personal agendas as opposed to team agendas and concluded that they all needed to respect each other more and be less judgemental towards each other. One means they identified of achieving this was the creation of a collaborative forum to discuss their practice.

2.2. Communicative Practices

An integral component of collaborative practices is the opportunities they generate for practitioners to talk and discuss their work. The nature of the collaborative practices in the Hurst Centre Team ensured that within the team communication was happening all the time in a variety of forums and formal and informal ways. The significance of good communication was particularly evident in the allocation meetings and the comments of both Steve and the practitioners about these meetings bore out the importance of collaborative and communicative practices for the team’s ethos and individual’s practice:

*Steve (HC):* The allocations is an opportunity for people to, is a group supervision thing really isn’t it? A group supervision by the group for the group and is a key part to the work because it is an opportunity to agree about how we work. So it’s that really. Within that is an opportunity for every aspect of the work to be thrashed out really. You know individual work versus parental work, whether we start with family assessment session, whether we know the family, the history, what we’ve tried, what approach should be taken, the pros and cons of safety aspects, how it relates to the Area, how we’ll review it, get them involved, other agencies, what their role is. Everything that is about our work at the Family Centre can be encapsulated in that. So to me it’s very useful. In terms of allocating it’s quite cumbersome, and probably quite different to experiences you’ve had with allocations (Interview)*

The staff meeting which Steve described as being a ‘thermometer’ for him to test the well-being of the Centre staff was identified by most of the practitioners as an important forum for communication between all the workers, practitioners and administrative staff, within the Centre:
Anna (HC): And staff meetings, well I think they are crucially important too, even though we may only be talking about cups or plates or desks, but if those things aren't talked about then they can disrupt the whole place, the fridge being cleaned out, if those basic items haven’t got a space people fall out over them all over the place. (Interview)

Co-working was valued by most of the practitioners as a place for knowledge and skills exchange. The communicative activities associated with co-working took place in the co-worker and family assessment sessions. Family assessment sessions also provided an important space for addressing professional development issues, although there was an acknowledgement that this aspect of the sessions was often marginalised and squeezed out:

*Anna (HC) acknowledged that it was hard work and that Sarah and Carol did really well and asked if Sarah and Carol had worked much together - no. It had gone well, particularly their ability to talk to each other in the session.*

*Carol: And it’s great if you can have a conversation, if you can look at each other and you can say have you got anything else...*

*Sarah: I’ve learned that technique from Anna and then if you get stuck you’ve always got something to fall back on, you have your colleague.*

*Anna: And you can talk about your stuckness and you can just say ‘I’m really feeling....’*

*Carol: That's right. I always say 'I was thinking Maria, shall we try...' (having acknowledged she does this a lot with Maria) actually in front of family, 'I'm not sure... could we try this?'

*Maria: You propose something and I say 'I'm not sure and maybe the family could help us'. About not being the expert and you don't know really.*

(Family Assessment Session)
Despite some of the shortcomings of supervision (section 1.2.2.1.) the consistency of communicative approaches in supervision sessions and Alice’s consultation sessions created safe and containing communicative spaces for practitioners. Several practitioners commented on the importance of informal team conversations which embraced and integrated the different dimensions of practitioners’ personal and professional lives:

Sheila (HC): ..... And I think if we don’t look after each other and support each other in our personal bits and pieces or our enjoyment or in the work itself then how can that person then perform? Then you have the knock on effect of that person not performing to the level they are able to or expected to perform, we then have to pick up the pieces any way. So there is a bit of a double edge, if we are not picking up the pieces and ensuring people are safe and well and supported it comes back on us anyway. And that is not meant to be looking after your own back, but that mothering, the nurturing stuff becomes part of the ethos. I don’t think it is even spoken about, there is an ethos, a written ethos to ‘care for each other’.(Interview)

One of the most noticeable features of the informal observations, which reinforced the inseparable relationship between collaborative and communicative practices, was the positive and inclusive atmosphere which the communicative practices in the team generated and the openness to new ideas and learning. This finding was evident in observations of informal discussions between groups of practitioners in the team:

Returned to room to find Anna, Sarah and Maria sitting around Maria and Anna’s desks talking about a case they had co-worked together. Sarah commented that although they had different theoretical perspectives what they all had in common was a reflective stance which was open to all possibilities. Maria commented that for her working in a particular theoretical framework through her training it was important to have alternative theoretical frameworks around to prevent her becoming too narrow in her focus. (Fieldnotes)

Kate’s interview comments endorsed the importance of communicative practice within
Kate (HC): There is more discussion here, more so than the other Family Centre I was at. It's a bigger team but also there is a lot of discussion about sessions, plus you've got Alice as well. So there are opportunities to talk about, not in supervision with Simon because that is much more about caseload management, but there are opportunities and I think people here would be open to say I need to talk about this and there are places you can go if you feel you need to talk about it. (Interview)

The importance of maintaining open channels of communication underpinned all the practices in the team and was influenced by Linda's managerial style which included maintaining a communicative managerial role with the practitioners:

Linda (HC): Trouble is the more I will get pushed up to only do organisational things. And my conviction is that managing to get involved in training and case discussion is the real secret of keeping this thing going well. (Interview)

Julie, the practitioner who joined the team during the course of the research endorsed my observations about the team’s communicative practices:

Julie (HC): ...I am quite struck by how in-depth the team do talk about things in terms of their work and how much they discuss and deliberate and hypothesise and it is significant to me seeing them do that really. (Interview)

During the course of the initial findings feedback session to the team I referred to two of my preliminary findings as being related to the collaborative and communicative ethos that existed within the setting, findings which were affirmed by Carol who commented:

Carol (HC): Co-working and talking fit us. Just those words, co-working and talking seem to describe us. (Feedback session)
The team's response to this remark was concurring laughter!

The quality and quantity of communication within the Sandworth Team was limited. Informal conversations were usually between two or three practitioners and invariably social in nature. In team meetings referrals were generally taken as straightforward requests and in these meetings and supervision sessions work was dealt with in terms of prescriptive 'packages' - anger management, self esteem work, group work - and did not involve an exploration of the complexities of practice but focussed on the 'how' and the 'what' - the practicalities of the work - more than the 'why' - the dynamics and relational aspects of the work. It was noticeable in team meetings how discussions seldom involved all the practitioners and were often dominated by those with the strongest voice or opinion - Sue, Mike and Paul - and on his own admission by Paul's monologues, which contributed to the disjointed communication patterns that characterised these forums and his supervision sessions with practitioners. When discussions did develop they rarely had a clear outcome or ending and several practitioners commented on not being listened to or feeling 'heard' by Paul. The powerful expression of views in these meetings, particularly by Mike, also seemed to inhibit freer communication patterns, with instances of Lisa's views being dismissed or interrupted by Mike's rigid opinions. In her interview Lisa corroborated my observations expressing considerable concern about the poor communication within the team and reluctance of practitioners to listen to each other:

*GR: What would you have liked to have happened with that dissertation (which had been shared with the team)? How would you have liked the team to respond?*

*Lisa (ST): Perhaps have a discussion, be a bit more proactive, just communicate. Communicate it.*

*GR: Does that happen anywhere in the team, the discussions?*

*Lisa: No it doesn't, you see that's why...*

*GR: And that frustrates you I can see it on your face.*

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A consequence of the limited nature of collaboration and communication in the Sandworth Team was the polarised and unexamined status of the different sources of knowledge valued by practitioners. Neither of the two main communicative forums in this setting - team meetings and supervision sessions - contained theoretical discussions, despite some practitioners saying they would appreciate that. The team did not take time to exchange experiences of training they had undertaken or discuss wider social work issues which would have offered opportunities to explore theoretical and experiential knowledge. The limited nature of the team discussions in general was indicative of the both the team’s low morale and the limited interest amongst practitioners in information exchange and professional development. The combination of the small number of collaborative forums within the team and their limited remit, the individualised working practices and the physical constraints of the team’s accommodation fostered exclusive communication patterns between a few, as opposed to all, practitioners.

Towards the end of my research the team began to express an interest in establishing a forum where they could discuss cases and exchange ideas, a development which suggested there was interest among some, although not all, of the practitioners for more transparent, collaborative and supportive ways of practising. This initiative appeared to have been generated by Sue and was welcomed particularly by Lisa, both of whom were identified with more holistically reflective understandings of practice. For both Sue and Lisa the effects of a forum which encouraged transparent and collaborative approaches to practice would be two fold - the enhancement of the
individual practitioner’s practice and the improvement of team relations:

GR: *What do you think it (collaborative forum to discuss practice) would achieve?*

Sue (ST): *I think it would build up better relationships between us as practitioners because we’re working in vacuums and we don’t know what the others are doing. And there is also this underlying feeling at the moment that some individuals in the team are not pulling their weight and it could reduce that mystery if that is not the case or it would provide a forum to say why are you only working with a few cases, which we don’t feel Paul is challenging this. It would be an open way of acknowledging practitioners are busting their guts and that practitioners are carrying an awful lot and give them opportunity to say ‘Things aren’t too good for me at the moment, I can’t take on any more’ and it might reduce this air of hostility which is sometimes around. You have to acknowledge that is there… Paul is not taking responsibility for what he feels. He doesn’t like confrontation.* (Interview)

This expression of an interest in the establishment of a collaborative reflective space was an encouraging sign and indicative of the potential for conditions to exist that were conducive to the development of more communicative and, therefore, collaborative and reflective, practices.

2.3. Professional Confidence and Self Esteem

At an organisational level the degree of professional confidence of the two teams was recognised in terms of their capacity to define their remit and their relationships with the Area Teams (Chapter Six, section 1.1.). In the team context professional confidence was also identified as a key feature, which contributed to the dominant working practices and ethos of the teams and was a product of them.

The professional confidence and positive sense of self esteem associated with the Hurst Centre Team was acknowledged on an individual level by most of its practitioners and was also apparent at an organisational level in terms of the clearly
defined professional and theoretical identity of the team and the manager’s articulation of his respect for the quality of practice undertaken by the practitioners, which the practitioners recognised and appreciated:

Kate (HC): He trusts us, I feel that he trusts enough, he knows that he has got a good team here and he does appreciate and value us and he would fight to keep what we have got even though he doesn’t always fully agree and fully understand what we do and he might not understand why we need all this supervision to talk about stuff. I think he can be persuaded. (Interview)

It was apparent that the respect for individuals and commitment to professional development exhibited by the managers not only allowed practitioners to develop their areas of interest and expertise in the Centre but also for these skills to be drawn on and utilised within the Centre. As Anna indicated the initiative for the development of the family therapy model operating in the Centre had largely come from the practitioners and been a bottom-up initiative. The professional respect and autonomy afforded to practitioners was an aspect of their work setting which they particularly appreciated. As a consequence all the practitioners, with the exception of Kate and Sheila, were committed to professional development. Kate’s position was straightforward and connected to her health and recent illness. Sheila’s circumstances were more complicated. She voiced no wish to develop professionally as she felt undervalued and was exploring a change of career. The combination of collaborative and communicative practices and their contribution to confident practitioners was also closely connected to the creative and risk-taking practices associated with individual practitioners, identified in Chapter Five.

The collaborative practice approaches which addressed some of the shortcomings of the manager’s role were significant in the promotion of practitioners’ professional growth and development. They did have, however, the potential to reduce the team’s and practitioners’ confidence and positive self-esteem through the creation of a fragmented practice context. Confused lines of accountability between practitioners and the different supervisors and consultants to whom they related, particularly when these were professionals from outside of the Department, presented the biggest challenge. On several occasions in supervision sessions with Steve references were
made in relation to specific cases to contradictory views which Alice, the child
psychotherapist who consulted to the Centre had expressed. Conversely in one of the
consultation sessions Sarah referred to her negotiations with Steve over continuing her
individual work with an eight year old girl in terms of needing to ‘argue’ the case with
him:

Sarah (HC): To be honest I didn’t feel up to arguing it with Steve and I
didn’t have my thoughts in order either as to how to put it to him.
(Psychotherapy Consultation Session)

These circumstances highlighted the importance of the manager maintaining open lines
of communication with the various supervisors and consultants to ensure avoidable
confusions did not arise. The benefits of a professionally confident and creative team
were directly experienced by the practitioners who expressed ‘job satisfaction’. The
indirect benefits to the organisation were experienced in terms of responsive and
responsible practice and a stable and autonomous workforce. The familiarity between
practitioners, arising from team stability, was acknowledged by several practitioners
as an important ingredient of a strong and confident team identity. The collegial
familiarity within the team influenced and was influenced by the team’s collaborative
and communicative practices and contributed to creative, reflective practices.

For practitioners in the Sandworth Team their sense of professional worth and self
esteem was significantly undermined by the confused and insecure organisational
context in which they were located. These insecurities and negative experiences were
compounded by the individualised nature of the team context. During the course of my
research morale, professional confidence and self esteem were at a low ebb for all the
members of the Sandworth Team. The team’s stability and viability was under
threat both from the organisational changes and from individual practitioner’s career
moves, many of which were motivated by their negative experiences within the team.
The organisational influences on the team context were exacerbated by complex
relationships between Paul as the team manager and the practitioners. The
organisational constraints on Paul’s role as a manager and his own professional
shortcomings had the combined effect of forcing practitioners to develop, out of
necessity, autonomous practices which in turn made it more difficult for Paul to
adequately supervise their practice beyond the purely managerial level. It was apparent from their accounts that most practitioners reached decisions about their cases outside of supervision, either on their own or in conjunction with the social worker involved. For Mike, Sue and Lorraine this ‘forced’ autonomy over their practice was manifested in the presentation of a fait accompli in supervision and the use of supervision simply to account for their work and to offload:

*GR: So how do you use supervision? What do you feel that it should offer and does offer?*

*Sue (ST): Oh God!! For me it is mechanism for me to tell Paul what I am doing. And I'm sure you've noticed it's usually telling him not asking him. It's informing him where I have got to on the work where I'm going to next and the opportunity to say how you feel about cases, why you are bringing them to an end, sometimes asking for back up if social practitioners are resisting what you are doing or what you want to do. That is what I get from it, chance to offload, offload what is happening, what's been difficult, what's been good and sometimes my own development as well. Paul doesn't always have a lot to give back. The bit he said the other day about A's case and arranging a contract meeting when he moves, it's not very often I get things like that back and I was like 'Yeah what a good idea'. So I don't often get a lot out of it, a lot to take away and do but that is how I use it. (Interview)*

As a consequence of the managerial shortcomings and the lack of alternative sources of support practitioners had low expectations of what was available to enable them to develop professionally, displayed limited interest in practising creatively and little motivation to ensure their professional needs were met.

**Summary**

The two key features of the team context - the role of the manager and the characteristics of the team - identified in this Chapter as being pertinent to the development of reflective practice were closely inter-linked with each other and with the organisational and individual contexts discussed in the previous two chapters. The
professional confidence of the two teams and potential for reflective practice and reflective spaces to exist appeared to be related within the team context to the existence of collaborative and communicative practices and to clearly defined manager-practitioner relationships which provided containment for practitioners engaged in challenging work. Furthermore, the potential for reflective practice was closely connected to, influential on and influenced by, the two other contexts of reflective practice - the organisation and the individual. The professional confidence and reflective potential of the teams had implications for their capacity to assert themselves within their wider organisational context and to contain the uncertainties and anxieties arising from the organisational context. It also had implications for the professional development of individual practitioners within the teams, the extent to which they felt safely contained and supported and their capacity to practice in holistically reflective ways which were creative, risk-taking and responsive to the practice uncertainties they encountered.

In the following chapter the significance of the findings of the research covered by the last three chapters is examined and related to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.
Chapter Eight
The Implications of the Research Findings for Reflective Practice in Contemporary Child Care Social Work

Introduction

The argument underpinning this thesis begins by acknowledging the steady emergence, in recent years, of risk-averse, bureaucratic approaches to child care social work practice in response to the uncertainty, ambiguity and risk inherent in contemporary child care social work. Despite the domination of these approaches in both the child protection and child welfare arenas the recurrence of child care tragedies and persistence of large numbers of families in need of social work support bear witness to their shortcomings. If the uncertainties, ambiguities and risks inherent in social work practice are to be effectively addressed, approaches are required which challenge these ineffective bureaucratic approaches which have as their primary objective the elimination of uncertainty and risk (Cooper et al, 2003). Effective, alternative responses to the demands of child care social work need to be realistic. Such approaches need to engage with and manage, as oppose to control or deny, the uncertainty, risks, complexity and unpredictability of human behaviour. In Chapter One I argued that the emergence of relationship-based practice is an approach to practice which offers this possibility and that for this approach to become established requires practitioners and managers to become accomplished reflective practitioners.

Reflective practice involves acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual and practice encounter and the diverse knowledges required to effectively address the complex issues these encounters generate. As the literature review in Chapter Two highlighted understandings of reflective practice are complex and problematic and there is a paucity of empirical evidence relating to social work practitioners’ understandings and experiences of reflective practice. In order for reflective practice to develop as an effective and integral component of relationship-based practice in particular and contemporary social work practice in general, an enhanced understanding of what it is, why it is an appropriate approach, what it achieves and how it is promoted needs to be developed.
The argument outlined above constituted the backdrop to this research which has sought to contribute to the existing understandings about reflective practice by addressing the key research objectives outlined in the introductory chapter. The preceding three chapters have addressed these objectives by identifying the key research findings arising from the data. In this chapter I examine the implications of these research findings by identifying the type of reflective practice - holistic reflective practice - which appears to be most pertinent for the development of relationship-based practice and the internal, individual and external, collective conditions which are most conducive to its development and sustenance. The concept of ‘safe spaces’ for the promotion of reflective practice has been a recurrent theme throughout the research findings. I consider how such ‘safe spaces’ can be facilitated and suggest that they are contingent on two key factors: firstly, on the interdependent relationship between the three contexts of reflective practice - the practitioner, the organisation and the team - being recognised and strengthened; and secondly, on the specific characteristics of these contexts which contribute to the containment of the uncertainty and complexity of contemporary child care social work being identified and promoted. The final section of the chapter develops the concept of safe spaces and containment and outlines a model for the promotion of reflective practice drawing on the theoretical ideas of containment associated with Wilfred Bion (1962). I conclude the chapter by acknowledging the potential of this model to facilitate reflective practice but simultaneously acknowledge its limitations associated with the research from which it is derived.

1. The Significance of the Research Findings for Understandings of Reflective Practice and Their Contribution to the Development of Relationship-based Practice

The research identified two types of reflective practice - technical and holistic reflective practice. Given their distinctive characteristics and manifestations in practice these two modes of reflective practice had differing contributions to make to the development of relationship-based practice and to the management of the uncertainties and ambiguities inherent in contemporary social work practice. The greater potential of holistic reflective practice to contribute to the development of relationship-based practice and the management of uncertainty arises from the compatibility between the
perspectives and practices of practitioners engaged in holistic reflective practice and
the key features of relationship-based practice. The following four sub-sections
examine these areas of compatibility between holistic reflective practice and
relationship-based practice and identify some issues which require further attention.

1.1. Understanding the Knowledge Sources Informing Reflective Practice

The emergence of interest in relationship-based and reflective practice has been in
response to the shortcomings in social work practice which have been attributed to
reductionist understandings of human behaviour, the privileging of technical-rational
knowledge in practice, the polarised approaches to different sources of knowledge
(Boud and Knights, 1996; Fisher, 1997; Gould, 1996) and the corollary of these trends
- restrictive, bureaucratic approaches to practice (Howe, 1992, 1996; Parton, 1998b).
The research findings from the individual context of reflective practice broadly fitted
into the three types of reflective practice - technical, practical, critical - identified in
the literature (Bengtsson, 1995; Clarke et al, 1996; Clift et al, 1990; Hatton and Smith,
1995; Knowles, 1993; Kondratt, 1992; Moon, 1999; Morrison, 1997; van Manen,
1977). In addition the process level of reflection introduced in Chapter Two was also
evident within the research findings where it was a constituent component of holistic
reflective practice. The pertinent question arising from the research-derived
understandings of reflective practice was how technically reflective practice was
differentiated from holistic reflective practice and how these distinctions influenced
the development of relationship-based practice and the management of uncertainty in
social work practice.

Technically-orientated practitioners appeared to experience the uncertainty and
complexity of practice and draw on their own personal and professional experiences to
try to ‘make sense’ of their practice experiences but lacked an adequate conceptual
framework which could integrate the complex and challenging nature of their practice
encounters. In contrast, the integrated and conceptualised approach to reflective
practice associated with holistically-orientated practitioners ensured that this group of
practitioners embraced and responded to the complexity of human nature recognised
by relationship-based practice and the uncertainty, ambiguity and risk inherent in such
practice (Howe, 1994, 1997; Howe and Hinings, 1995). As a consequence of their
outlook, the risk of holistically-orientated practitioners resorting, in the face of social and political pressures, to reductionist understandings of human behaviour and to restrictive, bureaucratic approaches to practice, was significantly reduced.

One issue that arose from these findings was the existence of knowledge hierarchies amongst both the technically and the holistically-orientated groups of practitioners which highlighted the vulnerable position holistic reflective practice occupied. The prioritising of technical-rational knowledge sources over other sources of knowledge by the holistically-orientated group of practitioners, as well as the technically-informed practitioners, suggested that under pressure practical-moral knowledge sources could be at risk of being abandoned and replaced by predominantly technical responses to practice. The epistemological vulnerability of holistically-orientated practitioners is particularly pertinent in the prevailing social and political climate that endorses evidence-based practice as one of the key ways, if not the key way, of identifying and developing effective practice (Gould, 2000; Lishman, 2000; Trinder, 2000). This research has identified, however, an understanding of practice which the narrowly defined evidence-based approaches fail to grasp - technical competence does not necessarily enable practitioners to understand the subtleties of practice i.e. why given two similar families, a particular approach works with one family and does not with another. The holistically reflective practitioners demonstrated their ability to avoid relying on technical-rational knowledge in isolation and to embrace the complex, practical-moral origins of human behaviour (their own as well as the clients'). Process reflection, with its recognition of the unconscious sources of knowledge and their influence on behaviours (both clients' and practitioners'), had an important role to play in understanding the idiosyncracies of individual cases. The vulnerability of the potential of the holistically reflective stance underlined the importance of such approaches to practice being protected and encouraged.

The finding in relation to knowledge hierarchies and the vulnerability of holistic reflective practice supports the literature which emphasises the importance of developing understanding of epistemological influences on practice (Munro, 1998; Ward and McMahon, 1998). In order to understand more about how knowledge hierarchies are constructed and operate, as a means of developing enhanced epistemological understanding, further research is required, possibly as Rolfe (1998)
advocates by practitioner-researchers. Further research into understandings of practical-moral knowledge such as tacit knowledge, intuition and practice wisdom must not fall into the trap, however, of privileging these sources of knowledge over technical-rational knowledge. Paradoxically, whilst the findings from this research endorsed the perspective on reflective practice that exists in the literature, i.e. the important role of non-rational sources of understanding for practice, the research has also re-asserted, in its finding about the importance of conceptualisation for reflective practice, the significant contribution made by technical-rational knowledge to the development of an advanced understanding of reflective practice, which embraces both practical-moral and technical-rational knowledge. For the holistically-informed practitioners their attachment to a theoretical framework, which embraced an understanding of the importance of the self in practice, provided them with a secure base for drawing on their experiential knowledge and their self awareness, recognised in the literature to be crucial components of reflective practice (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Dean, 1989; Fahlberg, 1994; Hindle and Miller, 1997; Mumford and Banks, 1988; Simmonds, 1988a).

The challenge that faces holistically informed practitioners is to hold the diverse sources of knowledge in tension. To this end practitioners need help in developing what Bower (2002) refers to as an internal professional structure (see Appendix Twelve). In Bower’s model practice is informed by technical-rational and practical-moral knowledges which are integrated in practice by practitioners adopting the third position - the reflective position (my term) - which allows them to conceptualise the different sources of knowledge and to draw on these knowledges to inform their practice. For the holistically-orientated practitioners this internal professional structure was in some cases well established, in other cases embryonic. In relation to the technically-orientated practitioners most of them had progressed from the most unintegrated epistemological ‘either-or’ position - either one source of knowledge or another - to a ‘both-and’ position. What had not yet been achieved by this group of practitioners, however, was the integrated, third position - the reflective position.

1.2. Understanding the Client

The strength and value of holistic reflective practice, identified in Chapter Five
(section 2.1.), lay in the importance it placed on the unique, complex, unpredictable and irrational nature of human behaviour and its capacity to contextualise it. The relational and processual understandings of practice articulated by the holistically informed practitioners demonstrated a clear compatibility between their approaches to practice and those, according to the literature, that relationship-based practice requires in order to effectively respond to the uncertainties and ambiguities of contemporary practice situations (Agass, 1992; Howe, 1997, 1998; Parton, 1998a; Schofield, 1998; Sudbery, 2002). The combination of relational, communicative practice and openness to alternative perspectives increases the capacity of holistically-orientated practitioners to respond sensitively and in empowering and emancipatory ways to the specific and unique needs of each client (Blaug, 1995; Horwath and Morrison, 1999; Turney and Tanner, 2001). As a consequence, holistic reflective practice promotes practice that is fundamentally relational, dynamic and situated, a form of practice which is recognised as important in the literature for the development of relationship-based practice (Woodhouse and Pengelly, 1991). By contextualising the client(s) and ensuring that both the individual and structural aspects of each client’s circumstances were equally addressed the holistically-orientated practitioners responded to concerns about relationship-based practice being too individualistic in orientation. Furthermore, holistic reflective practice overcomes the danger of resorting to ritualistic and routinised responses in the face of uncertainty and complexity. Each client was seen as unique, affording opportunities for practitioners to help them towards creative resolutions.

1.3. Understanding the Role of the Professional

The attention paid by the emerging models of relationship-based practice to the re-conceptualisation of the nature of human behaviour has had implications not only for how clients are perceived by practitioners but also for how practitioners understand themselves in their professional role (Ash, 1992; Ash, 1995; Brandon et al, 1998; Farnfield, 1998; Lishman, 1998; Nathan, 1993; Palmer et al, 1994; Preston-Shoot, 1996b; Spratt and Houston, 1999; Ward, 1998a; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). The development of reflective practice as a component of relationship-based practice enables practitioners to engage with the complexities of the self in professional practice and avoid the temptation (and risk) of resorting to a ‘safe’ reductionist
An enhanced understanding of the ‘self’ was one of the key characteristics of practitioners engaged in holistic reflective practice. The holistically-orientated practitioners appeared to have grasped the importance of open, integrated understandings of practice and in line with the literature, recognised the inseparable nature of the personal-professional relationship. The benefits of this stance of practitioners were similar to the benefits for clients. Practitioners experienced the emancipatory and empowering qualities of holistically reflective practice and acknowledged the sense of professional well-being, motivation and autonomy that it generated. These experiences confirmed the literature which identified these professional qualities to be both ingredients and outcomes of effective, reflective practice (Bulman, 1994; Clarke et al, 1996; Knowles, 1993; Moon, 1999).

1.4. Understanding the Organisational Context of Practice

In Chapter Two I refer to the importance of practitioners being able to think about the context in which they practice and its impact on their activities. Holistic practitioners displayed awareness of organisational tensions and constraints on practice emanating from both the internal organisational and wider external professional contexts. This awareness was apparent in practitioners’ endeavours to make sense of behaviours within their organisation, such as those emanating from the Area Office where opportunities for reflective practice were perceived to be negligible, and behaviours exhibited by other professionals. Such understanding enabled these practitioners to ‘make sense’ of the obstacles they encountered and to work with them as opposed to perceiving them as inevitable and unavoidable. Technically orientated practitioners were less inclined to make sense of organisational issues and generally expected managers to resolve them. For these practitioners the adoption of ‘institutional defences’ (Menzies-Lyth, 1988), i.e. working practices which avoided having to face the demands, shortcomings and anxieties generated by the organisational context, were not uncommon.

The importance for the development of relationship-based practice of the open-minded reflective responses of holistically orientated practitioners to organisational
issues is reinforced by the increasingly multi-disciplinary context of practice which is evolving within a culture of mistrust and poor communication (Cooper et al, 2003; DH, 2003). Such contexts require social work practitioners not only to work in the best interests of clients through relationships with them but also through positive relationships with the other professionals working with their clients. Without an holistic reflective understanding the potential for obstructive professional relationships to develop is considerable.

2. The Conditions that Promote Holistic Reflective Practice

If, as the implications of the research findings discussed in the previous sections of the chapter suggest, holistic reflective practice has a significant role to play in the development of relationship-based practice and the management of uncertainty in a world of increasingly recognised risks, then it is imperative that the conditions which nurture and promote this form of reflective practice are identified and understood. In keeping with the literature review of conditions promoting reflective practice, the research findings have been grouped into internal and external conditions which are examined below for their implications for the development of reflective practice. An integral feature of these two groups of conditions, which was identified by the research, was the inter-dependence that existed between them. The significance of this inter-dependent relationship for the promotion of reflective practice is the focus of the penultimate section of this chapter.

2.1. Internal Factors Influencing Reflective Practice

Reflective practice in the literature is associated with practitioners who exhibit openness, mindfulness, responsibility and wholeheartedness (Dewey, 1933; Goodman, 1984; Reid, 1994). This literature-based finding was borne out in the research findings which indicated that practitioners with these qualities were able to embrace and to engage with the complexity, uncertainty and risk of practice, identified in the literature as obstacles to the development of reflective practice (Ferguson, 1997; Parton, 1998b; Spratt and Houston, 1999). The commitment to conceptualising and developing their practice, which characterised practitioners capable of holistic reflective practice, was in keeping with the literature based characteristics of reflective
practitioners - open-minded in their willingness to explore alternative perspectives and address uncertainty, complexity and risk, mindful and whole-hearted in their ability to engage with the content and process of practice encounters and responsible and responsive in terms of their commitment to work in partnership with families in relational and empowering ways. The capacity to conceptualise and integrate the different sources of knowledge which inform practice enabled the holistically-orientated practitioners to develop an internal professional model (Bower, 2002). The internalisation by holistically-orientated practitioners of this model of practice provided some explanation for the existence of such practitioners in contexts which were not conducive to reflective practice, as it created an internal reflective space when external spaces were absent. The findings of this research which highlighted the willingness of holistically-orientated practitioners to engage in introspection and draw on practical-moral knowledge for their practice endorsed the findings of Korthagen and Wubbels (1995). These two researchers explored the characteristics of reflective practitioners and concluded that internally-orientated practitioners were more likely to develop reflective capabilities, as opposed to externally-orientated practitioners.

The fact that all the holistically-orientated practitioners were engaged in or about to embark on further sustained training provided further evidence of the significance for their reflective status of a committed and open-minded stance. This finding suggested that rather than a professional qualification in social work being a key criteria for distinguishing reflective practitioners, what was of greater importance was the individual practitioners’ motivation to undertake any form of sustained relevant training.

For the holistically-orientated practitioners epistemological openness was inseparable from their willingness to use collaborative and communicative means for exploring new epistemological perspectives. These approaches in turn generated, and were generated by, safe reflective forums. These forums provided a supportive context in which to be professionally vulnerable and open to the stance of ‘not knowing’, which has been identified in this research and in the literature as integral to holistic reflective practice (Connelly and Clandinin, 1992; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Hess, 1995). The interdependent relationship between practitioners’ epistemological openness, collaborative and communicative practices and reflective forums prevented either internal or external
factors dominating the formation of reflective practice and reinforced the key research finding about the need to attend to the inter-connected contexts of reflective practice.

2.2. External Conditions influencing the Development of Reflective Practice

As Boud and Walker (1998) acknowledged in their paper ‘Promoting Reflection in Professional Courses: the Challenge of Context’ reflective learning and practice have been widely accepted across a range of professions and considerable attention has been paid to what reflective learning and practice comprises, whilst minimal attention has been paid to the conditions that facilitate it. In their paper Boud and Walker acknowledge the important part played in reflective learning by the context of reflective processes and the constraints the macro, organisational context can place on the potential of reflective activities. Taylor’s (1999) response critiques and develops Boud and Walker’s thinking about the contextual influences on reflection in social work education but does not address the contextual issues impacting on reflective practice in social work practice. Whilst the ideas and thinking underpinning Boud and Walker’s and Taylor’s papers are pertinent to social work practice, literature which specifically considers the contextual influences on reflective practice within social work practice appears to be non-existent.

The research findings indicated that in the two settings there were common conditions which appeared to be conducive to the creation of a reflective, containing ethos, reflective spaces and to holistic reflective practice. These findings complemented some of the external conditions identified in the literature as being incentives for reflective practice and developed them further. Firstly, clarity of organisational and professional expectations, roles and responsibilities was identified as an underpinning feature of all the external conditions that facilitated reflective practice. Secondly, the research found that for the complex requirements of reflective practice to be met multiple reflective forums needed to exist. Thirdly, collaborative and communicative practices were essential for the development of reflective practice. Fourthly and finally, an effective facilitator was crucial for ensuring the three previous conditions prevailed as far as possible.
2.2.1. Organisational and Professional Clarity

The focus in the literature on the individual characteristics required for reflective practice has resulted in less attention being paid to the organisational and collective conditions which encourage its development (Boud and Walker, 1998; Taylor, 1999). Where the organisational and collective conditions have been acknowledged in the literature it has been primarily in relation to the epistemological positions of organisations and their capacity to facilitate or block reflective practices (Boud and Walker, 1998; Clarke et al, 1996; Moon, 1999; Palmer, 1994; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991; Taylor, 1999). The research findings placed less emphasis than the literature on the existence of compatible epistemological perspectives, as neither of the settings were located in wider organisational contexts which practitioners felt were conducive to reflective practice. Instead the findings arising in the organisational and team contexts of reflective practice emphasised the importance for practitioners of clarity in relation to organisational expectations, professional roles, responsibilities and identities and the impact of these on professional relationships. The findings also identified that the barriers to reflective practice created by unclear and confusing organisational structures were exacerbated by the uncertainty associated with organisational change, a feature of practice acknowledged in the literature as antithetical to reflective practice (Hughes and Pengelly 1997; Morrison, 1990). The association of organisational change with bureaucratic and managerialist approaches to practice reinforced the incompatibility of these organisational characteristics and their underpinning epistemological positions for reflective practice.

According to the literature, and as acknowledged in Chapter Two and developed further later in this chapter, containment of the uncertainties and anxieties of professional practice was crucial for effective, reflective practice to exist (Boud and Walker, 1998; Goodman, 1984; Henkel, 1995; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999; Pietroni, 1995; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). The research findings endorsed the importance of containing dimensions of reflective contexts. It appeared that reflective practice was possible (but challenging) in epistemologically unsympathetic organisational contexts provided there was adequate organisational and professional clarity, which enabled reflective practices and spaces to develop within the individual and team contexts. In the absence of organisational and professional clarity, practitioners were faced with
uncertainty arising from both the practice arena and from within their organisational and professional context. This uncertainty contributed to the heightening of their own professional uncertainty, confusion and insecurity. Practitioners located in confusing and changing team and organisational contexts experience their professional energy being diverted into surviving the uncertainty and anxiety associated with the organisational and professional role confusion they encountered. As a consequence of these dynamics the energy available for practitioners to develop the qualities of openness, wholeheartedness and mindfulness associated with reflective practice and for engaging in reflective activities, is depleted. The practitioners least open to reflective practice - to integrating thinking, feeling and doing - appeared to be those who were most affected by organisational uncertainty and confusion and who felt the least organisationally and professionally contained. Although some practitioners appeared to be able to exhibit embryonic holistic reflective practice in contexts of organisational confusion and uncertainty the challenges of achieving this in such contexts were considerable and these practitioners were the exception as opposed to the rule.

Clear organisational expectations in the form of management structures, procedural guidelines and explicit professional roles and responsibilities for teams and individual practitioners appeared to be of fundamental importance for the development of reflective practice beyond the most basic technical levels. In contexts where practitioners were clear about the organisational and professional expectations on them the potential for holistic reflective practice was enhanced. The boundaried and containing organisational experiences helped practitioners manage the uncertainty and anxiety generated by the external organisational and professional demands on them and provided a safe and supportive space in which professional development could occur. Where practitioners felt ‘held’ by clearly defined organisational 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.

2.2.2. Multi-faceted Forums for Reflective Practice

The review of the literature in relation to reflective forums identified their crucial role,
and in particular the role of supervision, in maximising the potential for reflective practice by providing practitioners with a psychologically containing, intellectually challenging, relationship-sensitive environment which attended to inter-active, interpersonal processes (Agass, 1992; Ash, 1992; Ash, 1995; Copley and Corryan, 1997; Dearnley, 1985; Fisher, 1997; Howe et al, 1999; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). The identification of holistic reflective practice, however, which embraced a diverse range of knowledge sources, highlighted the multi-faceted nature of reflective practice and the need for diverse reflective forums to meet the multiple requirements of reflective practitioners. As the literature on the multi-functional nature of supervision highlighted, meeting the multiple requirements of practitioners in one forum is challenging and often not realisable (Brandon et al, 1998; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Cooper et al, 2003; Hetherington, 1996; Nathan, 1993; Rushton and Nathan, 1996; Sawdon and Sawdon, 1995). Prior to undertaking the research, supervision sessions were identified as the forum in which reflective practice was most likely to be nurtured. However, the shortcomings of supervision as a forum for reflective practice that were identified in the literature were also evident in the research findings. In both settings supervision met the basic managerial requirements of practitioners but failed or struggled to offer the supportive components, which were identified by the holistically-orientated practitioners as vital for their practice.

One solution suggested in the literature and in operation in one of the research settings, was the separation out of the different tasks of supervision into alternative forums (Brandon et al, 1998; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Hetherington, 1996). The literature based criticism of this simplistic solution to an intrinsically complex problem - risk of confused lines of accountability (Rushton and Nathan, 1996; Sawdon and Sawdon, 1995) - was a reality for the practitioners engaged in the research. Both the literature and the research findings endorsed the importance of clear lines of communication between managers and other facilitators for the effectiveness of multi-faceted arrangements for practitioner support to be maximised (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Nathan, 1994).

The research findings similarly resonated with the literature findings which identified the importance of a range of good quality reflective forums which offered practitioners a containing, thinking space (Boud and Walker 1998; Clarke et al, 1996;
Cooper et al, 2003; Copeland et al 1993; Ward, 1998b). The different aspects of reflective practice - procedural and technical issues, conceptual thinking and 'not knowing', conscious and unconscious processes, personal and professional responses and self awareness - which were identified from the research findings as requiring containment, underlined the role multiple reflective forums could play in achieving this. The existence of diverse reflective opportunities which cover the technical, practical, process and critical aspects of reflective practice - team training mornings, supervision, consultation sessions, co-working meetings, informal collegial conversations - ensures that the different aspects of the reflective process and practice are catered for. Personal resistance to the development of reflective practice, accessible particularly by attending to the dynamics of process reflection, could be addressed in one or other of the available forums. As a consequence the potential for practitioners to experience containment and feel able to develop holistically reflective practice could be enhanced. A range of reflective forums also contributed, as has already been noted (section 1.1.), to the creation of internal professional structures (Bower, 2002) and internal reflective spaces. These internal structures and spaces complement (or compensate for) the external spaces, nurture the qualities in individual practitioners associated with holistic reflective practice and strengthened the connections between the internal and external influences on the development of reflective practice.

2.2.3. Relational, Collaborative and Communicative Team Practices

Cooper et al's (2003:54) examination of current issues within the child protection system in the UK emphasises the demanding nature of this area of practice and refers to the 'interactional and reflective work required to sustain their (practitioners') openness, and the openness of the professional system' (my parenthesis). The opportunities for practitioners to work together and to exchange ideas and talk about their work in a variety of different forums which were identified as an important finding of this research, reinforce both Cooper et al's observation and the literature which recognises the crucial role team settings and relationships play in meeting the diverse needs of reflective practitioners, referred to in section 2.2.2. (Kearney, 1999; Masson, 1990). Furthermore, a range of reflective forums contributes to the creation of a working ethos which encourages collegial support and an atmosphere of trust, respect and openness. Such an atmosphere and ethos is significant in nurturing the
qualities in individual practitioners which were important for the development of holistic reflective practice (see section 2.1). The combination of a conducive ethos and diverse reflective forums creates spaces in which practitioners can address their resistance to the complexity, risk and uncertainty with reflective strategies (Ferguson, 1997; Parton, 1998b; Spratt and Houston, 1999). Although the literature acknowledges the value practitioners placed on collaborative forums (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Calderhead and Gates, 1993; Cox et al., 1998; Fitzgerald, 1994; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Loughran, 1996; Moon, 1999; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991) these studies have tended to relate primarily to reflective learning contexts and have not identified reflective forums in the practice context or the specific features of them which encourage reflective practice to flourish. The lack of attention in the literature to issues such as co-working in team settings did not correspond to the value placed on it in the research. For all the holistically-orientated practitioners collegial relationships, collaboration and communication were fundamental to the development of their reflective awareness, skills and practice. These two features of reflective forums were identified in the research as vital for the development of spaces in which practitioners could be open to learning from their mistakes, vulnerable about their uncertainties and able to develop their ability to ‘not know’ which within the literature were important aspects of reflective practitioners (Connelly and Clandinin, 1992; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Hess, 1995).

An important implication of collaborative and communicative practices for reflective practice and its contribution to the promotion of relationship-based practice was the connection between collaborative and communicative practices in the team setting being mirrored in the practice arena and vice versa. This connection was referred to by practitioners in the Hurst Centre, although it was not observed as direct practice was not the focus of this research. In settings where practitioners and teams operated in collaborative and communicative ways practitioners experienced this as a means of encouraging its replication in the practice arena in the form of respectful, relationship-based, empowering and emancipatory practitioner-client relations.

An additional aspect of the collaborative and communicative practices identified from the research was the importance of their existence beyond the boundaries of the team and the specific reflective forums in which they were primarily located. The
recognition of this feature of team practices illustrates the significance of the interconnected nature of the contextual conditions influencing the development of reflective practice. As Boud and Walker (1998) recognised the nature of specific reflective spaces and strategies was constrained by macro contextual influences. The research confirmed this in its recognition of the vital roles of the team and senior managers who ensured that the organisational dimension of collaborative and communicative practices - the clear communication channels and collaborative opportunities between the teams and the wider organisational context - existed and worked effectively. The organisational dimension of collaborative and communicative practices was connected to the first characteristic of effective reflective forums - organisational clarity - as one implication of such practices was practitioners who felt understood, supported and confident in their professional practice and development. The existence of communicative and transparent working patterns, which spanned the individual-team-organisation spectrum, encouraged ‘joined up’ and open thinking to exist. Organisational honesty and transparency about what was and was not feasible in terms of team remits and resources, in turn contributed to organisational and professional clarity.

Collaborative and communicative forums and practices provided crucial opportunities for practitioners to engage with practice in a reflective manner and to begin to develop the personal qualities integral to holistic reflective practice. However, as the literature acknowledged and the research findings concurred, such practices are not easily established and require commitment from practitioners to be sustained (Boud and Walker, 1998; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). The time and workload pressures being experienced by practitioners and managers in both the research settings posed a threat to the established collaborative and communicative practices. These practices were at risk of being engulfed by epistemologically incompatible perspectives and organisational pressures to adopt procedurally-orientated responses which involved working with clients in more restrictive and less relational ways. The fight to retain the thinking spaces for their work was a challenge for practitioners committed to effective and reflective relationship-based practice (Boud and Walker, 1998; Clarke et al, 1996; Cooper et al, 2003; Copeland et al, 1993; Preston-Shoot, 1996b).
2.2.4. Open and Contextually Connected Facilitators

The final key condition identified from the research findings as being of importance for the development of holistic reflective practice was the role of the facilitator of reflective practice, which in relation to the research was primarily the manager, and to a lesser extent senior managers and consultants.

The research findings confirmed the views expressed in the literature which emphasised the central role of the facilitator in the development of reflective practice (Boud and Walker, 1998; Johns, 1998). Most of the literature on the role of the facilitator in reflective practice has focussed on the relationship between the facilitator and individual practitioners (Johns, 1998) and the micro context of reflective practice, which in social work practice is predominantly associated with the supervisory relationship. The findings of this research, in conjunction with Boud and Walker's paper (1998), whilst not dismissing the significance of the personal and professional qualities of the facilitator, placed greater emphasis on their pivotal role in ensuring that individual, team and wider organisational contexts were compatible and collectively conducive to reflective practice.

When the role of the team manager as facilitator is considered in relation to the three preceding conditions for reflective practice the central importance of his/her position becomes very apparent. If the manager struggles to manage and contain organisational uncertainties and expectations, the organisational and professional clarity, which has been identified as a fundamental condition for the development of reflective practice, would be impaired. In the absence of clear organisational and professional remits, for his/her own role and that of his/her team, the likelihood of the manager feeling sufficiently confident and secure to encourage the formation of diverse reflective forums and relational, collaborative and communicative practices would be diminished. Without such forums and practices the potential for meeting the diverse requirements of reflective practitioners and nurturing confident, autonomous reflective practitioners would be similarly diminished.

Settings which encourage holistic reflective practice require managers to be able to respond to the challenges generated by the managerial and supportive aspects of their
role. Neither of the research settings had managers who perceived themselves as particularly reflective. The distinguishing feature of the setting which was more conducive to holistic reflective practice appeared to be the manager’s understanding of the value of reflective practice and his willingness to facilitate the existence of reflective spaces. Managerial styles which are open-minded and embrace and value reflective practice and managerial skills which promote its development were identified in this research as the crucial qualities of managers. In this setting, which was supportive of the managerial role, the manager maintained clear strategies which minimised the intrusion of organisational uncertainties on the team. Furthermore, the manager protected and promoted the reflective capacities of practitioners through the establishment of diverse forums and team practices. In this respect the potential for reflective practice was as much, if not more, to do with the manager’s support for forums and practices which encouraged reflective practice and ability to co-ordinate them, as it was to do with the manager’s relationship with individual practitioners.

A further significant finding of this research has been the importance of the managers’ professional needs being met in order for them to be capable of holding the tension created by the multiple demands of the organisational, team and individual practitioner contexts. These findings corroborated the growing recognition in the literature that the multi-faceted expectations of managers and the needs they give rise to have not received adequate attention and are under-researched (Kearney, 1999; Martyn, 2000). Although in the two research settings personal qualities were identified as contributing to the functioning and effectiveness of the team managers they were inextricably intertwined with organisational circumstances. The significance of this research finding lies in the recognition that the effectiveness of team managers is seriously compromised if adequate and appropriate support is not provided. This finding suggests that attention must be paid to how the needs of managers are contained and their professional development sustained in the face of the persistent uncertainties arising from within the organisational and practice arenas. If the professional needs of managers are met, their ability to promote reflective and relationship-based practice and to manage the uncertainties and risks which they, their organisations and their team members face, will be enhanced.
2.3. The Inter-dependence of the Internal and External Conditions facilitating Reflective Practice

In the literature it was possible to identify two primary sources of influence on the development, or not, of reflective practice. Firstly, internal factors associated with the individual practitioner and in particular their capacity to engage with uncertainty, complexity and risk (Borland, 1995; Connelly and Clandinin, 1992; Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Hess and Mullen, 1995; Lishman, 1998; Spratt and Houston, 1999). Secondly, external factors associated with the contexts in which practitioners practised and more specifically the prevailing organisational epistemological perspectives (Clarke et al., 1996; Moon, 1999; Palmer, 1994; Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1991). The literature-based nature-nurture debate in relation to the development of reflective practice has focussed more prominently on the internal, individual conditions which promote reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995; James and Clarke, 1994; Moon, 1999; van Manen, 1977, 1995) and paid less attention to external contextual factors. The ‘exceptions to the rule’ in the research findings, when a practitioner’s reflective stance was contrary to what might be expected given the prevailing external conditions, reinforced the emphasis in the literature on the powerful influence of the individual practitioner’s perspective on the development of reflective practice. The research generated further evidence, however, which endorsed views expressed in recent literature on reflective learning, that acknowledged the important influence exerted on the development of reflective skills by the creation of appropriate reflective contexts (Boud and Walker, 1998; Taylor, 1999).

These research findings, which resisted polarised and binary thinking and identified the importance of both the individual, internal and collective, external influences on the development of reflective practice, offer a possible solution to the nature-nurture debate but simultaneously raise important issues not substantively addressed in the literature. The challenge for practitioners lies in holding the tension between the individual and organisational contexts of and influences on reflective practice and in maintaining an holistic and inclusive perspective on the conditions that promote reflective practice. It is not possible to privilege one set of conditions - internal or external - over the other. For optimal conditions for practice in general, and holistic reflective practice in particular, to exist the three contexts identified need to be
considered as inter-dependent entities.

The research also highlights the significant contribution of the team and team manager to optimising this inter-dependence and the creation of reflective spaces. The team appears to have an important role in promoting reflective space(s) - secure, internal spaces, evident in practitioners’ attitudes, perspectives and practices and safe, external spaces where reflective activities can take place. Given the paucity of literature, and more particularly research into the nature and role of teams in social work, enhanced understanding of their contribution to the development of reflective practice needs to be developed. In a similar vein given the dearth of research into managers’ experiences in social work practice in general and their understandings and practices of reflective practice in particular, there is a pressing need, heightened by the recommendations of the Climbie Inquiry (DH, 2003), for further attention to be paid to the influence of the team manager’s role on the development of reflective practice. This research suggests that where, when and how reflective practice takes place is dependent on how it is understood individually, how it is facilitated organisationally and how these contexts for reflective practice relate to each other. The team manager has a substantial role to play in determining how both individual and organisational factors impinge on reflective practice and in the creation of safe and containing reflective spaces. A further important implication of the research findings is the recognition that for a manager to be able to function effectively and reflectively it is imperative that their professional needs in general and reflective practice needs in particular are adequately acknowledged and addressed. In the concluding chapter these areas for future research are further addressed.

3. Containment as a Feature of the Inter-dependent Relationship between the Internal and External Conditions facilitating Reflective Practice

In the reflective practice literature review (Chapter Two) containment was identified as an essential characteristic of forums which promote reflective practice (Pietroni, 1995; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). All of the conditions - internal and external - discussed in this chapter, which were identified as directly significant for the development of holistic reflective practice and, by implication, significant for the development of relationship-based practice, can be understood in terms of their
contribution to the creation of safe spaces. Safe spaces have the potential to contain, in a variety of ways, the uncertainty, complexity and anxiety arising from contemporary child care social work practice. Firstly, the integration by holistically-orientated practitioners of their technical-rational and practical-moral knowledges helps them create internal reflective spaces which make sense of and respond to - contain - the complexity and uncertainty encountered in practice. Secondly, organisational and professional clarity, which was identified as fundamental for permitting teams and practitioners to occupy clear professional spaces, addresses - contains - the uncertainty and confusion arising from constantly changing and unclear organisational contexts and their repercussions for the professional identity, confidence and effectiveness of practitioners. Thirdly, multiple forums for reflective practice ensure that the different ‘needs’ of reflective practitioners are appropriately responded to - contained - in a range of reflective spaces. Fourthly, in a similar vein, the existence of collaborative and communicative practices prevent practitioners from working in isolation and provide spaces in which relationship-based practice with colleagues (as well as with clients) can be developed and uncertainty can be safely articulated, thought about and responded to - contained. Finally, the team manager, directly through supervision and team meetings, and indirectly through encouraging alternative reflective forums and practices and establishing clarity within the team and its wider organisational context, provides safe - containing - spaces and relationships in which practitioners can develop their reflective practice.

From the findings of this piece of research there are grounds to propose that for reflective practice to make an effective contribution to the development of relationship-based practice, attention must be paid to increasing the potential of the three inter-dependent contexts of reflective practice to contain the uncertainty and anxiety engendered by the challenging nature of contemporary child care social work. Bion’s (1962) understandings of individual and collective containment, derived from his work as an individual and group psychoanalyst, are particularly pertinent for the findings of this research. In the following section Bion’s conceptual framework of containment has been drawn on to make sense of the findings of this research and to contribute to the development of a theory of reflective practice.
3.1. The Multi-faceted Nature of Containment

The research findings highlighted a connection between a containing context, a contained practitioner and the existence of holistic forms of reflective practice. However, containment was not a one dimensional phenomenon. Bion’s concept of containment focuses on the emotional containment provided by the relationship of the ‘container’ with the ‘contained’. By developing Bion’s conceptual ideas of containment and introducing the concepts of organisational and epistemological containment it is possible to theorise the findings of this research. The combination of emotional, organisational and epistemological containment, I suggest, creates an overarching form of containment - holistic containment. Holistically containing settings acknowledge the inter-dependence of the diverse contexts and types of containment and provide the optimal conditions for the development of holistic reflective, and by implication relationship-based, practice.

3.2. Emotional Containment

Emotional containment is the understanding of containment most clearly aligned to Bion’s model. It acknowledges the importance of secure relationships for individual or group well-being, whether they be the practitioner-manager relationship or practitioner relationships with consultants, their team or individual colleagues. Such relationships afford practitioners a space where unthinkable experiences can be processed and made thinkable and manageable. If practitioners do not experience positive emotional containment there is a serious risk of false or insecure professional autonomy emerging. False autonomy arising from insufficiently containing experiences equates, in Bion’s terms, to an individual’s impaired functioning and limited ability to cope with anxiety provoking situations and to a group’s inability to perform the primary task for which they exist. Its manifestations in practice include low staff morale, defensive, de-personalised practices and burnout. Conversely, positive autonomy is closely connected to practitioners who are self-aware and located in emotionally containing contexts. Such contexts positively recognise the dependency needs of practitioners. By providing appropriate support mechanisms they ensure that practitioners do not have to focus on their professional survival but can direct their intellectual and emotional energies to thinking about both the technical-rational and practical-moral
dimensions of practice. A containing professional relationship and/or positive experiences of safe space(s) for discussing practice issues, appear to be the most important emotional containers for practitioners. The findings of this research suggest that it is possible to identify two aspects of containment which come under the umbrella of emotional containment. Although emotional containment overarches these specific aspects, its effectiveness is reduced if these particular aspects of containment remain unaddressed.

3.3. Organisational Containment

Organisational containment focuses on issues of organisational, professional and managerial clarity but equates to something more than simply procedurally-informed practice. For the technically reflective practitioners practice which was primarily procedurally-driven was considered to be an acceptable and essentially sufficient professional response. The risk of this position lies in procedures becoming institutional defence mechanisms to the uncertainty and anxieties of practice (Menzies-Lyth, 1988). For the holistically-orientated practitioners procedures were a necessary but not sufficient form of organisational containment for developing their reflective capabilities. The effectiveness of organisational containment from their perspective related to the context in which it was operationalised. Crucial to its effectiveness was the existence of managers and management structures which could act as containers for the anxieties that practice and organisational uncertainty and change generated. In Bion’s terms the manager becomes the container for the unprocessed experiences of practitioners. Through clear management strategies the manager can contain ‘the unthinkable’ and enable practitioners to establish a commensal relationship with their organisational context which promotes their ability to engage thoughtfully with the organisational dimensions of their work.

Without a thoughtful, containing context in which practitioners can process the feelings aroused by their organisational context and professional practice the effectiveness of increasingly numerous and rigourous procedures is undermined. The recurrence in the 1990s of child care tragedies, in spite of major organisational restructuring and policy reconfigurations, provides confirmatory evidence that organisational and procedural responses per se are a necessary but insufficient form of
containment for effective and reflective social work practice. Stevenson’s (1999:96) acknowledgement of ‘the extraordinarily pervasive nature of what has become the unbalanced search for certainty and safety through procedures, in practice and in training’ highlights the extent to which organisational containment is sought after but misconceived. Narrowly understood and operationalised forms of organisational containment generate risk-averse, defensive and restrictive practice; they become institutional defences as opposed to dynamic relationships and are ineffective as a consequence. They engender a false belief that risk can be extinguished provided the prescribed procedures and practices are followed. For the potential of organisational containment to be realised it must be implemented in the context of containing, thoughtful managerial relationships.

3.4. Epistemological Containment

The primary distinction between the technically and holistically-orientated practitioners was the capacity of the latter group of practitioners to integrate and conceptualise the different sources of knowledge informing their practice. Epistemological containment, helps makes sense of these different reflective orientations. Epistemological containment is evident in contexts which embrace and value the dyadic relationship of technical-rational and practical-moral sources of knowledge and which promote communicative and collaborative forums and practices. Such epistemologically containing contexts facilitate practitioners’ capacity to discuss and conceptualise their multi-faceted understandings of uncertain, contentious and complex issues. An important feature of this aspect of containment is the nature of the container which is embodied primarily in collegial and team relationships. These relationships afford practitioners the space to process their practice experiences and through thoughtful conversations and discussions to transform the undigested material of practice encounters into theoretically informed responses. Although colleagues are a significant feature of this aspect of containment, the role of the team manager in encouraging containing collegial relationships must not be overlooked.

A significant consequence of epistemological containment is the creation of practitioners who are committed, mindful and responsible. Such practitioners are open to experiencing and making sense of uncertainty and complexity and have developed
an internal professional structure (Bower, 2001). This provides personal epistemological containment and is complemented by, and complements, existing external forums of epistemological containment, such as supervision and consultation arrangements and co-working relationships.

3.5. A Model of Holistic Containment for the Promotion of Reflective Practice

Bion (1962) recognised the relevance of containment for groups as well as individuals and these research findings have similarly highlighted that the relevance of containment for understandings of reflective practice involved individual and collective experiences of containment and their inter-relationship. It was not restricted to an individual practitioner’s (contained) relationship with their line manager (container). The significance and effectiveness of containment for reflective practice is less than optimal if its different aspects and contexts are considered in isolation from each other. For example, practitioners may experience positively containing relationships with their colleagues but if organisational issues are not sufficiently contained by the manager they can impair the effectiveness of the emotional and epistemological containment provided by colleagues. The different aspects and contexts of containment, therefore, need to be considered inter-dependently in the form of holistic containment. The notion of organisational containment makes sense of the external structural and collective influences on the existence and maintenance of reflective practice and requires an effective manager to contain them. Epistemological and emotional containment make sense of the influence of individual practitioner’s internal understanding on the development of reflective practice and are promoted by both positive managerial and collegial relationships. The application of an holistic, systemic perspective, which includes both the individual and the collective contexts of practice, illuminates the inter-dependence between them, offers an holistic understanding of containment and provides the key ingredients for a theoretical model of holistic containment for the promotion of reflective practice.

From the findings of this research there are grounds for claiming that these conditions represent a ‘truth’ for those involved in their construction which may have wider generalisability. Given this claim it is possible to outline a model of reflective practice which illustrates how the three inter-dependent contexts of reflective practice - the
Model of Conditions for Holistic Containment

Inter-dependent Contexts for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice

Inter-dependent Conditions for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice

Holistic Containment for the Facilitation of Reflective Practice
individual practitioner, the team and the organisation - and the five internal and external core conditions of reflective practice - integrated understandings of knowledge, organisational clarity, multi-faceted reflective forums, collaborative and communicative activities and facilitative team managers contribute to the formation of safe, emotionally, organisationally and epistemologically containing spaces. Such spaces in contemporary child care social work contexts enable practitioners to make holistic sense of practice and to develop their reflective abilities. Diagram One seeks to illustrate the complexities of the contexts and conditions which promote reflective practice and how the conceptual framework of containment helps make sense of them.

In promoting this model I am aware of two important caveats to its wider applicability. Firstly, the model has arisen from the research findings. Some of its general features have been explored with some of the research participants but the complete model has not. Further research could involve exploring practitioners' responses to the proposed model. Secondly, inherent in the subject matter of this model - reflective practice - is the recognition that knowledge is of a contextually and relationally contingent nature. Researchers and practitioners are required to recognise the nature of the claims the model makes and to retain an enquiring and open mind.

Summary

The findings of this research and the literature suggest that holistic reflective practice has an essential role to play in the development of relationship-based practice. When the core features of, and conditions for, holistic reflective practice and relationship-based practice are compared the parallels between the two practice perspectives are readily apparent. Both approaches consider relational, communicative approaches to practice, which value equally the psychological and social origins of distress, to be fundamental to effective social work practice. To support these approaches they embrace holistic epistemological perspectives which recognise the unique and complex nature of human experience and the contingent and situated nature of knowledge. Although direct practice was not observed as part of this research the extent of the overlap between reflective and relationship-based practice that has been identified from researching practitioners' understandings and experiences suggests that neither approach can exist without the other - that for relationship-based practice to exist and
be effective requires holistically reflective practitioners and holistically reflective practitioners, by implication, engage in relationship-based practice.

In the second half of this chapter the conditions which facilitate reflective and by implication relationship-based practice are outlined. The theoretical framework of containment is introduced and drawn on to make sense of the conditions identified. A model for reflective practice is introduced which suggests that the potential for reflective practice can be maximised in social work contexts which offer practitioners safe, contained spaces where they can explore their thoughts and feelings about their practice before acting.

The following final chapter draws together the research findings and discussions informing this thesis, considers their potential contribution to existing knowledge and proposes possible future areas of inquiry.
Chapter Nine
Reflective Practice, Reflective Spaces - Thinking and Talking about Social Work Practice

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of this thesis I drew on the metaphor of the journey as symbolic of the experience of undertaking this research. In this chapter the journey, in one sense, reaches its destination, the conclusion of my research. In another sense the journey is simply pausing, to draw breath, to see where it has reached before mapping out the next stage of the journey. This chapter reviews the discoveries that have been made en route and their contribution to current thinking and practice in contemporary child care social work and considers where next. Whilst the findings and ideas that have emerged from this research can inform child care social work practice they are not claimed as definitive explanations of the current state of play. They are illustrative of current issues, offer possible responses and provide the signposts for future research journeys.

1. Reflective Practice and Reflective Spaces - The Contemporary Context of Child Care Social Work, How it is and How it could be

1.1 Contemporary Pressures

In Chapter One I outlined some of the pressures on practitioners in child care social work, derived from the prevailing outcome-orientated and performance-driven socio-political climate, which make it difficult for practitioners firstly, to feel able to establish relationships with clients beyond a purely bureaucratic one and secondly, to feel it is permissible to stop and think about their practice. The tragic death of Victoria Climbié and the findings of the Laming Inquiry (DH, 2003) appear to have exacerbated the existing pressures on practitioners and generated more organisational turmoil. Whilst supervision is acknowledged in the introduction to the report to be the ‘cornerstone’ of good practice (DH, 2003:17) and one of the seminar groups, convened to consider the implications of the Inquiry for practice, referred to the importance of high quality supervision for realising professional as opposed to procedurally-driven
practice, most of the recommendations address wider organisational and structural issues, particularly in relation to inter-agency working and do not refer to specific support structures for practitioners. At no point in the recommendations is the challenging and distressing nature of the work or the need for support to undertake this type of work explicitly acknowledged. The nearest the report recommendations come to addressing the support needs of practitioners are in its recommendations for on-going professional and inter-agency training. This is disappointing given that in the summary of one of the five seminar groups there was recognition that:

*practice should be governed by professional judgement not by rules and procedures. While regulation has its place, it could not substitute for reflection and judgement.* (DH, 2003:357)

In a socio-political climate which produces institutions which ‘*begrudge the space to think and attack the capacity to care*’ (Froggett and Briggs, 2003:5), which valorise ‘doing’ over thinking and feeling and evidence and outcomes over experiences and processes the findings from this research are pertinent but challenging. These findings demonstrate that the promotion of reflective practice is contingent on diverse opportunities for practitioners to think and talk about their practice being identified and nurtured. These findings stand in stark contrast to the Climbie Inquiry recommendations which emphasise procedures and action. The findings of this research focus on the underprivileged aspects of contemporary social work practice - how practitioners think, feel and talk about their practice as opposed to what they do. This is not to suggest that the ‘doing’ dimension of social work practice is not important. Rather it underlines that effective ‘doing’ in social work needs to be underpinned by thinking and talking. Criticisms that have been levelled in the past at reflective and relationship-based approaches to practice - that they are disempowering and ineffective approaches to practice, with negligible benefits for the client (Brewer and Lait, 1980; Coulshed and Orme, 1998; Fischer, 1976; Howe, 1998b; Munro, 1996) have been challenged by this research. These findings suggest that practice which is more relational and responsive to the specific needs of individual families and children is derived from settings where practitioners feel contained and have adequate opportunity for thinking and talking about the complex and unpredictable situations they encounter. According to this research and in contrast to existing criticisms,
holistic reflective practice is conducive to relationship-based practice and both practitioners and clients appear to benefit from relationship-based and reflective approaches.

1.2. Reflective Spaces

According to this research for reflective practice to be realised reflective spaces are essential. Such spaces promote and are promoted by the multi-faceted containment of practitioners through a range of forums which meet the procedural, epistemological and emotional needs of practitioners. Preston-Shoot’s (2003) recent paper on the current state of social work education and practice endorses this view and asserts that defensive and de-personalised practice and professional insecurity arises from dysfunctional or uncontained work settings. The dysfunctional features of the social work departments implicated in the Climbie Inquiry (DH, 2003) provide graphic evidence of this assertion.

The Climbie Inquiry in its acknowledgement that procedures, whilst an essential component of effective practice, are insufficient in isolation, indirectly endorses two other findings of this research - the importance of multi-faceted forums for reflecting - thinking, feeling and talking - about practice, and the need for multi-faceted containment beyond simply procedural containment. Despite this realisation the Climbie Inquiry appears to have ignored its own advice and sought a solution to the ‘buck passing’ it identified as happening in terms of organisational changes aimed at creating more efficient and effective structural arrangements. Unlike this research it failed to identify the multi-faceted needs of practitioners engaged in emotionally charged and demanding work and the contribution of relational and epistemological containment, alongside procedural containment, to meeting these needs. Without the diverse needs of professional practitioners being met, I would argue, the scope for improvements in effective practice is seriously reduced.

The findings of this research suggest that if the social work profession is to avoid repetition of the Climbí tragedy and to develop more effective practice attention needs to be broadened to include focussing not only on how services are delivered and what practitioners ‘do’ but on how practitioners think, feel and talk about what they
do and the necessary conditions to facilitate these processes. Despite the prevailing culture of mistrust which pervades our society in general (O’Neill, 2000) and child care social work in particular (Cooper et al, 2003), all of the practitioners who participated in this research were committed to helping improve the circumstances of disadvantaged families and children. There was no evidence to suggest, as criticisms of relationship-based and reflective practice would have us believe, that if given the opportunity to think and talk about their practice practitioners would avoid ‘doing’ social work. This research indicated that practitioners could be trusted to ‘do’ the work but did not always feel sufficiently supported in that task. What the practitioners identified as being most valuable for their practice were the opportunities they had to practice communicatively and collaboratively. Those practitioners who embraced communicative and collaborative working practices avoided colluding with the myth of an absolute and omnipotent solution to risk and uncertainty (Cooper, 2002) and consequently avoided falling into the trap of feeling powerless to effect any change.

According to this research the existence of reflective spaces and communicative and collaborative practices hinged on two key factors: firstly, the inter-dependence of the different contexts of practice and secondly, and connected to the first factor, the crucial role played by teams and particularly team managers in facilitating this contextual inter-dependence as well as the reflective and containing spaces referred to above. The research findings clearly demonstrated that how practitioners understood and operationalised their understandings of practice was influenced not only by personal qualities but by their experiences of their team and organisational contexts. Conversely, how the team and organisational contexts were understood and responded to by individual practitioners was influenced by their personal and professional stances.

Pivotal in all the contextual inter-connections was the team manager. The role of the team managers was recognised to have the potential for containing organisational and procedural uncertainties and anxieties, for promoting collaborative and communicative team practices and for responding to the professional needs of individual practitioners. Furthermore, the importance attributed by this research to the position of the team manager has been heightened by the Climbie Inquiry Report which,
compared with previous Inquiry reports, has placed greater responsibility for shortcomings in practice on the shoulders of managers. These research and Inquiry findings, however, have arisen in the context of limited attention having been paid to the needs of team managers in social care contexts. It is to this and other areas for future research that I now turn.

2. Future Directions for Social Work Practice and Research

2.1. The Role of The Team and the Team Manager in Promoting Reflective Practice

The findings of this research have highlighted how supportive organisational and team contexts enhance the opportunities for practitioners to develop their reflective skills and in so doing enhance their professional competence, confidence and satisfaction and consequently their resilience and longevity in practice. Given the current crisis in retention and recruitment of social work practitioners these findings make an important contribution to the current debate about staff turnover and morale. Most practitioners whilst welcoming financial incentives to be retained in practice, place greater importance on professional incentives which enable them to perform (professionally) at a level that is professionally effective and fulfilling. The combination of these research findings which suggest that the team and the team manager play pivotal roles in the development and promotion of reflective practice and the current crisis in levels of staffing in social work make it imperative that further research is undertaken to enhance understanding of the characteristics of effective and reflective team settings. The paucity of research into teams and team managers in social work settings means there is considerable scope for future research in this area. The location of this research in family support teams was an informed choice because of the likelihood of child protection and assessment teams having less opportunity for reflective practice. The research findings relating to the centrality of team practices for the promotion of reflective practice, however, is pertinent to all child care social work team settings. It is vital, therefore, that further research is undertaken into team practices in mainstream statutory child care teams. This research needs to consider how applicable the findings of this research, particularly in relation to issues of containment, collaboration and communication in team settings, are to other child care
contexts. Such research could involve an action research approach which starts from the perspective of practitioners and introduces and evaluates the implications for reflective practice of team practices that the practitioners identify as desirable. Further research into team practices could also contribute to the growing interest in ‘learning organisations’, a concept originating in the worlds of business and industry but increasingly considered applicable to social care settings (Gould, 2000). Gould’s research into how social work settings can become learning organisations identified the team as of considerable significance for learning and his emphasis on the importance of informal and formal structures to facilitate learning concurred with the findings of this research. These overlapping findings suggest scope exists to explore the untapped potential of teams further.

With regard to team managers the research undertaken by NISW (Kearney, 1999; Rosen, 2000) reached similar conclusions to this research with regard to the lack of attention paid to the complexities of the front-line managers role. Further research could usefully explore the experiences of team managers across a range of child care settings and could focus more specifically on two aspects of the job: firstly, on the multi-faceted nature of the team manager’s role and how this is most effectively tackled - by separating it out using consultancy arrangements; by equipping managers to develop more integrated, reflective approaches to the management role; and secondly, on the support needs of managers and the challenges of bridging the practice-management gap. Little research appears to have been done addressing the transferability of practice skills and knowledge to managerial roles. The complexities of the team manager role and discrepancies between management expectations of and demands on the team manager and practitioner expectations and demands, underline the importance of gaining a fuller understanding of this aspect of contemporary social work. This recommendation for future research is reinforced by the Climbie Inquiry’s emphasis on the roles of managers and its recognition that good administrative procedures cannot be a substitute for ‘efficient management’ (DH, 2003:5). The Inquiry Report, however, does not define what constitutes ‘efficient management’ and from whose perspective. These questions require further attention.

A third and no less important focus for future research highlighted by this research, is the implication of relationship-based and reflective practice for service users. Whilst
the findings of this research provide an indication of the potential benefits for service
users of practitioners who are located in containing, communicative and collaborative
contexts which promote reflective practice, the decision not to focus the research on
practitioners working directly with service users has limited the findings in relation to
this aspect of practice. The limited evidence arising from this research, however,
suggests that it would be worth serious attention being given to developing
practitioners as researchers (see section 2.2. below) who, in the course of their
practice, could undertake research into the implications of reflective practice for
service users.

2.2. Social Work Practice, Social Work Research and Reflective Practice

An interesting and surprising discovery that arose from my research experiences has
been the parallel between my experience of undertaking research from a reflective
perspective and the experiences of practitioners engaged in reflective practice. My
research experiences, particularly in the early stages with the Sandworth Team,
underlined the importance for me of reflective spaces and relationships which enabled
me to articulate and externalise the thoughts and feelings generated by the research and
where possible to feed my reflexive understandings back into the research process.
The increasingly collaborative and dialogical research relationships that I developed
were largely attributable to the support and understanding I gained from supervision
and consultation sessions and from the debriefing relationship I established. This
realisation underlined for me the significance in inter-subjective research, which evokes
conscious and unconscious emotional responses in researchers and research
participants, of reflective forums which enable the researcher to explore their
responses and reactions (Johnson and Scott, 1997).

As the research process progressed the parallels between the benefits I gained as a
reflective researcher from my reflective research forums and the benefits practitioners
acknowledged arose for them from collaborative and communicative relationships,
practices and forums became increasingly apparent. The relevance of containment for
reflective practice identified in this research was equally applicable to my research
experiences. The different forums I related to - academic supervision, research
consultation, debriefing relationships and other informal support networks - provided,
to varying and overlapping degrees, holistic containment through academic guidance (procedural containment), emotional insight and support (emotional containment) and intellectual challenge and understanding (epistemological containment). My research experiences and findings have highlighted that containment, communication and collaboration are crucial features of reflective approaches to social work practice and social work research. The overlaps between my experiences as a researcher and those of the practitioners contribute to bridging the gap between social work practice and research and the growing interest in the compatibility of social work practice and qualitative approaches to research (Butler, 2002, 2003). It also supports the argument for greater emphasis being placed on action-orientated, collaborative approaches to research and on practitioner-researchers who can research their own practice.

**Conclusion**

Unless practitioners are enabled to develop their skills as reflective practitioners the scope for relationship-based social work practice will be impaired and the risk of child care social work being eroded to a minimalist model, which avoids uncertainties and reduces understandings of service users and practitioners to technical-rational beings devoid of practical-moral behaviours, will increase. This research has demonstrated that reflective practice is not a self indulgent, introspective approach to practice. Rather it is a vibrant and dynamic approach which ensures that practitioners not only understand and develop their own personal and professional responses to complex and challenging practice but also reflect constructively on organisational and institutional responses and appropriately challenge them in the interests of service users.

My research was intended to be inclusive and participatory but as I acknowledged in Chapter Three I have become increasingly aware of the constraints on fully participatory research given my research design and the dominance of my voice in the research process. However, without the participation of the practitioners this research would not exist so it feels appropriate to close this chapter and thesis with their voices. These interview extracts contain the views of two practitioners, one from each setting, and encapsulate much that I have endeavoured to summarise in this concluding chapter:
Lisa (ST): So... I think with social work you need to make sure that your needs are fulfilled, because it’s about your energy, about using yourself, how are you going to be effective if you are unhappy how are you going to be effective. Some of us can be. I try not to allow my experience of the team interfere with my work ....I am positive about my work I do make a lot of contribution, I do work in a positive way I hope with the children because I always get their views at the end of each session and I have an evaluation as well but in terms of communicating with other people, you know, professionals within the team I think the learning you could progress there. You need to feel confident with your team for them to appreciate what you are doing as well. (Interview)

Maria (HC): I think it’s very different when I work on my own because there is no dialogue with anybody where I can check things except in supervision and that sometimes is not that.... So, usually what happens there is more about conversations we have in team, not so much the one that we co-work, but the one that we work on our own and we check that with someone and everybody gives ideas and then the team has that broad dialogue. That’s the difference between individual work and co-working...... It depends on the piece of work, on the level of reflection I go through. With the family work it needs more conversation because there are so many different perspectives to take on board, the child’s perspective, the parent’s view and if more than one parent they might have different views and your own. It takes longer but the process is similar in the way you have to process what they say, you have to process what you think about it and why you thought about it and once you have that clear ‘Is it me?’ how is that conversation and then go again ... I am always aware I have to see how it touched me, why it touched me that way, it’s my own experience. Once I am clear about that then it can follow. (Interview)
Appendices

Appendix One - The Compatibility of Reflective Practice and Qualitative Research

Appendix Two - Introduction to the Research

Appendix Three - Consent Forms

Appendix Four - Outline of Research Participants

Appendix Five - Brief Introduction to the Research Interview

Appendix Six - Interview Frontsheet

Appendix Seven - Interview Schedule

Appendix Eight - Inventory of Data

Appendix Nine - Research Summary

Appendix Ten - Research Summary

Appendix Eleven - Research Summary

Appendix Twelve - Bower's Model of Internal Professional Structures
**Appendix One**

The Compatibility of Reflective Practice and Qualitative Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective Practice</th>
<th>Social Constructivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focusses on individual - starts where client is</td>
<td>Idiographic - acknowledges uniqueness of individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary medium is talk</td>
<td>Primary data is talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of context- practice often occurs in natural</td>
<td>Seeks 'emic'/insider perspective and acknowledges the situated and contextual nature of knowledge; naturalistic settings for enquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>settings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic understanding of individual</td>
<td>Holistic understanding of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of the interactive, relational nature of</td>
<td>Emphasises the inter-subjective and relational nature of knowledge generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses therapeutic interview to elicit information and,</td>
<td>Uses in-depth or semi-structured interviews as well as observations to collect data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less commonly but increasingly, observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledges diversity of sources of knowledge and</td>
<td>Acknowledges diverse sources of knowledge, inductive knowledge generation and role of reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inductive creative, artistic approaches to knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice is dynamic and evolving</td>
<td>Dynamic, process-based nature of knowledge - iterative process of data collection and analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses case notes, process recordings, reflective diaries</td>
<td>Uses fieldnotes, transcripts and reflective journals to record and analyse data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc. to record and understand data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledges diversity of view points - multiple</td>
<td>Recognises partial and multiple realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Two

Introduction to the Research

Reflective Practice in Contemporary Child Care Social Work

Introduction - Who am I?

I am a social work practitioner who has had experience in statutory child care settings, but not in family centres. Currently, I do not work for social services but am employed by Southampton University as a tutor on the MSc Social Work Studies Course. My research is being undertaken with ESRC funding and it is hoped will lead to the award of an MPhil or PhD.

My interest in the area of reflective practice arose from my experiences as a child care practitioner. Whilst undertaking direct work with children I discovered the gaps between how the theories and the literature write about direct work and the actual realities of it! Rarely did sessions go to plan!! As a consequence of these experiences I became interested in how practitioners think about working in ways which acknowledge the practitioner-client relationship as central and crucial to practice and in particular in the systems/support structures which facilitate such work.

What is the context of my research?

Recent research has highlighted trends within child care social work which have resulted in procedurally-regulated and managerially-dominated practice, focusing on risk assessment and child protection investigations at the expense of preventative work and family support. The response to these findings has been a call to 'refocus' child care services towards family support services and practice which is relationship-based. The implication of this shift in focus has been recognition of the need for practitioners to reevaluate their styles of practice. Relationship-based and reflective practice appear to be the new approaches which are developing in response to current needs.

So what am I interested in? - Research Objectives

- To explore how practitioners experience, perceive and understand relationship-based practice
- To explore how practitioners experience, perceive and understand reflective
practice and how it contributes to relationship-based practice

- To consider the organisational contexts, conditions and systems that facilitate or inhibit reflective practice.
- To explore the significance of reflective practice for individual practitioners, service users and service provider agencies.

Research Settings

The research will use as its sample base three Family Support teams based in three Social Services Family Centres, each located in a different Local Authority. Family Centres constitute the settings in which the majority of statutory Family Support social work is currently undertaken and where work of a broadly defined 'therapeutic' nature takes place. Each of the sample Centres have developed different systems through which reflective practice may be promoted. This small but diverse sample will afford scope for in-depth examination of each centre and for comparison of their different organisational arrangements and the implications for practice. In addition, the different Local Authority contexts of each of the Centres will provide the opportunity to examine the implications of different Local Authority policies and procedures for reflective practice.

How will I do it? - The Research Methodology

It is envisaged that the research sample will include all members of the Family Support teams from each of the Family Centres (approx. 24 in total, 8 from each centre). The nature of my research means it involves spending several months in each setting. However, I do not anticipate being in the team on a full-time basis and would want to negotiate with you the most suitable and effective way of me organising my time with you all.

The research design will use the following methods, with differing degrees of intensity, to gain an understanding of reflective practice:

- Observation - I will be observing practitioners in a range of settings, varying from the more informal daily environment of team practice, to more formal supervision sessions, consultation sessions, team meetings and team training sessions. These observations are in no way 'judgemental' and I will seek to be as unintrusive as
possible.

- **Semi-structured interviews** - The data gathered from observations will inform semi-structured interviews with practitioners and managers. These will seek to draw out individuals' views on reflective practice and to check out information from the observations.

- **Focus Group** - It is anticipated that a focus group will be convened towards the end of the field work and will comprise, with their agreement, 2/3 members from each Centre. This will provide a forum for practitioners to articulate with each other their perspectives on reflective practice, and for shared and conflicting views to be explored. In addition it will afford the opportunity for themes which have emerged from the observations and interviews to be examined further.

- **Documentation** - Examination of policy and procedure documents will contribute to an understanding of the political and organisational contexts in which reflective practice is located.

**Ethical Considerations**

I fully recognise that in allowing me to undertake research within your team I am relying on your ‘goodwill’, generosity and interest (hopefully!) in the research topic. To this end I will endeavour not to intrude on or disrupt your work commitments unnecessarily. If at any time my presence or the requirements of the research become difficult for you please let either your manager or me know. The agreement for the team to be involved in the research is a voluntary one and you are free to cease being part of the project at any time.

**Professional integrity** - I will endeavour to conduct the research in an honest, non-judgemental and professional manner throughout. I do not consider myself to be an ‘expert’ in this field and would hope that the research can be more of a partnership than a distanced researcher-researched relationship.

**Informed Consent** - Your consent will be sought in relation to participation in the interviews and for extracts from informal or formal conversations to be used in my
written reports/publications. Further meetings during the course of the field work will be convened to discuss its progress and to exchange views and ideas in relation to the research process.

Confidentiality and Anonymity - What is said will remain confidential. The names of the research participants and settings will be anonymised as far as possible. It will be important, however, to recognise and acknowledge openly that the small sample size and relative geographical proximity of settings may make it difficult to guarantee total anonymity. All data will be recorded (on computer, tape and paper) without names, and stored and protected securely.

Research Outcomes
Whilst the research will be written up as a thesis for the degree of MPhil/PhD it is hoped that the research will be beneficial not only to the immediate participants and their agencies, but to a range of users. For social work practitioners, managers and policy makers it aims to enhance understanding of the nature of reflective practice and how different conditions may hinder or promote these processes. In turn this understanding will inform the development of relationship-based practice to the benefit of service users. In endeavouring to research in a collaborative, empowering and emancipatory way it is hoped the experience of being involved in the research process will contribute to the enhancement of individuals' practice.

And finally....
From the outset it is my hope that involvement in this research will be a source of interest and stimulation to you in your practice. I very much hope it can be a shared experience from which we all can benefit. I am happy to discuss thoughts, concerns, questions you might have at any time during the project and can be contacted in the following ways:

Gillian Ruch
Post-Graduate Research Student
University Tel No: 02380 592575
e-mail: g.m.ruch@soton.ac.uk
Appendix Three

Consent to Participate in Research

I consent to participating in the research being conducted by Gillian Ruch which will involve being interviewed, tape recorded and observed. I understand the purpose of the research and that:

- all information will be anonymised
- the tapes and transcripts may be shared with Gillian’s supervisors, but no one else
- anonymised extracts from interviews or observations may be used in Gillian’s thesis or in written/oral presentations derived from the research

I understand that my involvement in the research is on a voluntary basis and that I can withdraw at any time.

Signed:

Date:
Appendix Four
Research Participant Profiles

The Sandworth Team (in alphabetical order)

Jeff
- early 50s, white man; Resource Centre manager; had worked in the Authority for many years

Joan
- mid 40s, white European woman; an unqualified social worker but had a teaching qualification and was paid at qualified social work rates. She had worked in the county for twenty six years - six of these in the Resource Centre and the remaining twenty years in residential children’s homes. Following a period of ill health Joan was redeployed to the over-11s team from the local residential children’s home before being transferred to the Family Support Team during the re-organisation.

Lisa
- late 30s, black woman; newest member of the team having joined it on a part-time basis in June 1999 when she completed her social work training. In June 2000 she became a full time member of the team.

Lorraine
- early 30s, white European woman; unqualified and had come into social work from a job in banking. Prior to being redeployed to the Family Support Team she had worked in the Sixteen Plus Team based in the Resource Centre.

Mike
- early 40s, white European man; a qualified teacher who had spent fifteen years working in a residential therapeutic community before taking a break and becoming a taxi driver for two years. On returning to residential child care in two of the county’s children’s homes he suffered ill health and was off work for six months before being redeployed to the Resource Centre. Despite his teaching...
qualification Paul was paid at unqualified rates.

Paul

- mid 40s, white European man; a qualified social worker who had worked in the county for ten years in field and residential settings and had been redeployed to the team manager post following the last re-organisation. Prior to moving to this post he had been acting-up as a Resource Centre manager on the other side of the county. At the outset of my involvement Mike informed me of personal difficulties which had impacted on his work. Throughout my time with the team Mike was not in good physical health and at the end of January 2001 he was admitted to hospital for a double hernia operation and was off sick for the last few weeks of my time in the team.

Sue

- late 30s, white European woman; unqualified but had nursery nurse qualifications. She had worked for three years as a Family Placement Support officer in the Resource Centre’s Family Placement Team before being redeployed to the Family Support Team. She had been offered a secondment to undertake professional social work training and commenced this in January 2000 whilst my research was happening.

Two team members were not included in the research due to the limited amount of time they overlapped with my research

Alan

- 50, white man; a qualified teacher but an unqualified social worker, paid at qualified social worker rates. He had worked for over 20 years in the county in a variety of residential settings, including the Resource Centre when it was an observation and Assessment Centre. Alan had applied for the team manager post but had not been shortlisted as he was not a qualified social worker. He left the team shortly after I commenced my research on grounds of ill health.

Mary

- mid 50s, white woman; part-time sessional worker on permanent contract; off
sick with back injury for almost all of my time with the team

The Hurst Centre Team

Anna

• early 40s, white European woman; part time team member - three days per week in team and one day on family therapy training; had been in the team for twelve years. During that time she had completed her social work training and was in the third year of a four year MSc in Family Therapy.

Carol

• early 40s, white European woman; part-time team member - four days per week; had trained as a nursery nurse and began working in this capacity in one of the other family centres in the city before transferring to the team as a family centre worker when the teams were reorganised. Carol was in the second year of the family therapy training but had been seconded to a DipSw course from October 2001 and was interrupting her current training to do this.

Jane

• mid 50s, white European woman; full-time team member; joined the team in September 2000 as a family centre worker, having worked in a variety of health and education settings. Jane was keen to undertake whatever training was available in order to develop her knowledge and skills.

Jenny

• late 20s, white European woman; part-time team member - three days per week; had previously worked on community projects before commencing art therapy training and working part time as a family centre worker. Jenny was committed to psychodynamic theoretical approaches.

Julie

• mid 30s, white European woman; part-time - four days per week; joined the team as a qualified social worker whilst I was researching with them. Julie came from a different local authority where she had worked in an adolescent crisis
team and had experience of residential child care and of brief solution based therapy approaches to practice.

Kate

• 50s, white European woman; part-time team member - three days per week; was a qualified social worker who had worked in another family centre before joining this team when it was created. Kate had recently been off work long term with cancer and was affected by health issues during the course of the research. Although interested in family work Kate was not engaged in any further training and did not demonstrate any clear theoretical allegiances, her main practice interest being in groupwork with women.

Linda

• early 50s, white European woman; qualified social worker; had worked in Hurst Centre as practitioner and manager before current position as Family Centres manager

Maria

• late 30s, Chilean woman; full-time team member; had been in the team for three years. Maria qualified as a social worker in Chile and worked in the Area Assessment Team before moving to the family centre as a family centre worker before progressing to a social work post. Maria was in the second year of family therapy training but had decided to take a break from it at the conclusion of the academic year in order to concentrate on her PQ training.

Sarah

• mid 30s, white European woman; full-time team member; had a degree in social policy and counselling training. Sarah joined the team three years previously and was in the second year of the pre-clinical component of child psychotherapy training but was intending to put this on hold whilst she took maternity leave.

Sheila

• late 40s, white European woman; part-time team member - four days per
week; had worked as a family centre worker in the team since its inception, having previously worked in pre-school education and residential child care settings. Sheila was not engaged in any training and during the course of my research with the team announced her intention to look for a new job, possibly out of the social care field.

Steve
- early 40s, white European man; full time acting team manager was a qualified social worker who had been in the centre approximately three years and was currently acting up as its manager. Steve had previously worked in the Area Child Protection Team and had a background in family work but no formal training.
Appendix Five

Brief Introduction to the Research Interview

In the course of this interview I hope to create an opportunity to discuss with you your understanding of reflective practice in your work setting. You may recall from the outline I distributed when I first came to the team that I am interested in exploring with practitioners how you experience the work you do, how you think about it, what informs what you do and the strategies, systems and structures that may (or may not) exist to support and encourage you in your practice. In order to make you aware of the broad areas which I would find it helpful to discuss with you I have divided my areas of interest into 3 sections:

- **The Nature of the Work you do and How you think about it**
  It would be interesting to discuss with you how you would describe the work you do; its main characteristics; the aspects of it you find most rewarding or challenging; what it is that informs what you do. To do this it would be helpful if you could think of a piece of work, maybe just one session with someone or a whole piece of work (whatever interests you), which we could talk about when we meet.

- **Strategies, Systems and Structures which Support and Promote Reflective Practice**
  I am interested in what it is that helps practitioners to be reflective and the obstacles that make it more difficult. So I would like to talk about your experiences of supervision, team meetings and any other forums which help support and develop your practice.

- **Reflective practice**
  I am interested in exploring your understanding of reflective practice and its relevance and usefulness for you.

I look forward to meeting with you and am very grateful for your time and thoughts!

Gillian Ruch
Appendix Six
Interview Front Sheet Pro forma

Date:

Time:

Location:

Name code:

Gender:

Age:

Profession:

Length of time qualified:

Length of time in post:

Comments:
  • Context
  
  • Main themes/issues
  
  • What speculations/hunches/hypotheses did it raise? What was interesting/salient/illuminating?
  
  • Final thoughts- Impact on me and ‘I’s activated; process/feelings of respondent; context issues
Appendix Seven

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This schedule was devised prior to the research and whilst the three main areas of questioning - the nature of practice, the support systems and understandings of reflective practice - formed the framework for the interview within this framework the interviews did not adhere rigidly to the outlined schedule. The schedule acted as a guide and prompted me during the research conversations which arose in the interview setting.

1. The Nature of Your Practice
   - Invite participant to tell me about a recent/current piece of work that interested/challenged/puzzled/affected them
   - what informed/influenced how you thought about this piece of work?
   - what were the most difficult aspects of this piece of work?
   - what makes you feel stuck and how do you deal with that?
   - how do you cope with the emotional content of the sessions?
   - do you ever feel out of your depth in what you are doing?
   - how would you describe the nature of your work to an outsider?
   - what would you say are the main characteristics of the work you do?

2. Support Structures
   - where do you find you think about your work - alone, with colleagues, with supervisor, with others?
   - how would you prioritise these sources of support?
   - Supervision:
     - how would you describe supervision?
     - what do you see as its objectives? Does it achieve them?
     - what do you find useful about supervision?
     - what else would you like from supervision?
   - Consultation:
     - how would you describe consultation arrangements?
what do you see as its objectives? Does it achieve them?
what do you find useful about consultations?
what else would you like from consultation?
who uses consultation? Why? Why not?
how do you distinguish between supervision and consultation?

Team Setting:
what is the purpose of team meeting? Does it achieve it?
in what ways does being in the team help you think about your work?

Co-working:
how do you experience co-working?
does everyone do it equally?
how is it supervised? Is this effective?

Training:
how does training help your practice?

Recording:
do you use recording to help you reflect? If yes how?
do you keep separate records from file?

Organisational Context:
does the organisational ethos encourage/discourage reflective practice?

3. Reflective Practice
what is your definition of reflective practice? How would you describe it?
what do you see as the ingredients of reflective practice (when, where, on what, with what, how)?
do you reflect differently in different places, with different people, at different times?
to what extent would you say what you do is based on/informed by reflective practice?
what do you think it achieves?
- how does it affect you and your practice?
- can you 'over reflect'?
- what does it take to be reflective? Is everyone?
- do you consider yourself to be a reflective practitioner?
- Is there anything else you would like to help develop your reflective practice?

4. Research Process

- what has the research experience been like? Has my presence changed things in any way?
- do you feel I have seen 'everything'?
Appendix Eight
Data Inventory

The Sandworth Team
18 team meeting sessions
14 supervision sessions
5 supervision feedback sessions
6 interviews x2
Informal observations
Documentation
A few additional sessions - consultation; group work meetings; sessional work meetings
Feedback Session

The Hurst Centre Team
13 allocation meetings
9 staff meetings
5 sectional meetings
24 supervision sessions
6 clinical supervision/consultation sessions
3 groupwork supervision sessions
4 family centre training sessions
2 family work training sessions
10 interviews x2
Informal observations
2 feedback sessions
A few additional sessions - co-working meetings; group work meetings;
Documentation
Appendix Nine
Research Summary - The Sandworth Team

Firstly I want to express my gratitude for the open and accommodating way in which you have allowed me to undertake this research with you. Thank you.

It is obviously not possible at this early stage in the research process to reach any final conclusions. However, from my time with you I have begun to develop some ideas about the significance of some aspects of your practice and experiences which I will be taking into the next setting to explore further. I would appreciate any thoughts /comments you have on these tentative observations.

1. Organisational Uncertainty.
Throughout my 6 months in the team I have been aware of the ever-present concerns about the future of the team. This appears to generate uncertainty and anxiety for the team as a whole and for individuals. In environments of anxiety and uncertainty being reflective about practice appears to become more difficult as energy is directed towards team maintenance and professional survival rather than creative and professional development.

2. Team Function
At the initial meeting I attended lack of clarity about the team’s function and purpose was expressed and this theme has persisted throughout my time with the team. Uncertainty about who determines and prioritises the team’s work has been a recurrent theme. This appears to impact on how individuals understand their role and the value they perceive is attributed to their work.

3. Supervision
It has been openly acknowledged that supervision has become more frequent and more focussed as a result of this research process. This appears to have been appreciated by team members and has generated questions about the use of supervision and the content and structure of sessions. It would appear that there is scope for the reflective potential of supervision to be increased.
4. Team Reflective Forums

Most reflective practice in the team appears to happen either individually (and often in the car!) or informally with colleagues and tends to focus on how sessions have been and what could be improved upon. Apart from the team meeting which appears to have a primarily administrative function there is no other forum for the team to meet together to discuss their practice. It would be interesting to explore how creating a formal space for thinking about practice might contribute to developing the reflective practice of individuals through the opportunity to think in detail about cases and in particular about the impact of the work on individuals. A spin-off of such a forum for the team would be the opportunity it provides to consolidate the team’s identity and purpose and to deepen professional relationships within the team.

I am hoping, towards the end of my data collection (early 2002), to convene a focus group comprising practitioners from the research settings (approx three from each) The purpose of this group would be to discuss the preliminary findings from the three settings in order to discover if they are congruent with practitioners’ perceptions and experiences of reflective practice. If anyone wishes to volunteer for this group now I am happy to make a note of their interest. Obviously nearer the time I would then be back in touch to discuss the arrangements.

Once again, thank you for allowing me into your team and for sharing your experiences and insights with me.

Gillian Ruch - March 2001
Firstly I want to express my gratitude for the open and accommodating way in which you have allowed me to undertake this research with you. Thank you.

It is obviously not possible at this early stage in the research process to reach any final conclusions. However, from my time with you I have begun to develop some ideas about the significance of some aspects of your practice and experiences which I will be exploring further as I analyse the information I have gathered. I would appreciate any thoughts/comments you have on these tentative observations.

1. Co-working
When I commenced my research ‘my hunch’ was that supervision would be the primary forum in which practitioners thought about/reflected on their work. From my observations and interviews, however, it would appear that co-working is a highly significant forum in this setting. Co-working appears to encourage both theoretical explorations of practice and a supportive environment in which the more ‘personal/affective/emotional’ aspects of the work can be addressed.

Questions this observation raises for me:
Does this resonate with people’s experiences?
What makes co-working easier for some practitioners than others?
Could co-working be improved in any way?

2. Talking!
It may seem so obvious (!) but from my observations it appears very important in your practice that there are numerous different forums, both formal and informal, where it is possible to talk about your practice. As a consequence there is an atmosphere of openness about practice which seems to encourage individuals to learn from each other and to be open in exchanging ideas and knowledge.
Questions:
What is it that facilitates the talking?
What else does talking achieve?

3. Supervision and Accountability
The diverse forms of supervision I have observed have raised questions about the multiple functions embraced by supervision and how they can best be provided. The potential for complications in lines of accountability appears to be one implication of these multiple supervision forums as is the risk of the functions of supervision becoming dislocated.

Questions:
How do these complexities affect practitioners - positively and negatively?
Are there other implications of multi-layered supervision I have not recognised?

And into the future.....
As I originally outlined when I started my research the intention is that my findings resonate with those people with whom I have undertaken the research. I hope therefore, that once I have spent more time analysing the material have gathered that I can come back and present the findings I have identified and discuss them with you.

Gillian Ruch - September 2001
Original Research Questions:

- To explore the diverse understandings of, and assumptions about, reflective practice in contemporary social work
- To examine the processes whereby practitioners draw upon different sources of knowledge, communicate, exchange and operationalise them in reflective practice.
- To consider the organisational contexts, conditions and systems that facilitate or inhibit reflective practice.
- To explore the significance of reflective practice for individual practitioners, service users and service provider agencies.

Initial findings and key themes:

- co-work
- communication
- supervision and accountability

Main themes emerging from overall research findings:

1. Understandings of Reflective Practice

Two tier model:

- **technical reflection** - includes all practitioners (managers and workers); draws on experiential knowledge primarily - essentially the what and how of the work i.e. what did I do?; what worked and what did not? - how could it be better/different?; necessary but not essential dimension of effective practice

- **theoretical reflection** - most common with practitioners with clearly owned theoretical framework for practice, which incorporates reflective practice as an integral component of that specific theoretical approach i.e. psychodynamic or systemic frameworks; draws on integrated knowledge base which includes and values experiential and theoretical knowledge; asks what, how and WHY?; essential for effective practice.
2. Conditions facilitating Reflective Practice

- **Containment:**
  Importance of containment of anxiety generated by the content and context of practice. Tension between individual and organisational contexts of practice.
  Three significant contexts of containment and their interdependence:
  
  - **Organisational containment** - clarity, confusion and identity; senior management support; departmental relations.
  
  - **Team containment** - manager’s role and attributes; personal and professional boundaries; team diversity and dynamics; collaboration and communication; autonomy and dependency.
  
  - **Practice containment** - holistic and integrated sources of knowledge; acknowledgement of depth and complexity of practice; relationships and techniques; risk-taking, creativity and realities

- **Collaboration**
  Where collaborative approaches to practice were less common opportunities to develop more sophisticated forms of reflective practice appeared to be restricted - enhances self awareness, increases inclusive, empowering and risk-taking practice

- **Communication**
  Communication horizontally and vertically is crucial for organisational, team and practice containment.
Appendix Twelve

Model of an Internal Reflective Space
(adapted from Bower, 2002)
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