Learning from experience – anxiety, defence and leadership in group supervision: the implications for supervision and reflective practice

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Despite the apparent centrality of supervision to the effectiveness of social work practice, this topic remains largely under researched (Wilkins 2017). The majority of studies to date have relied on self-reporting mechanisms to understand ‘what happens’ in supervision, with few accessing supervision directly, and none, to the writer’s knowledge, attempting to analyse the impact of unconscious processes in social work supervision. This paper aims to contribute to this gap in the knowledge base by analysing the conscious and unconscious processes at play in two cohorts of systemic group supervision held in UK children’s services, and how such processes, alongside the leadership styles of supervisors, impact on the nature of supervision practice. A psychoanalytically informed research methodology drawn from the work of Skogstad and Hinshelwood (2000) is employed to study the group supervision sessions, and the subsequent data analysed through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This paper employs Bion’s (1962) model of thought outlined in his seminal work Learning from Experience to explore the different forms of ‘thinking’ occurring in the supervision sessions, and how each group has developed its own unique ability to think in light of its capacity to contain the anxieties and frustrations implicit in children and families social work. Implications for the nature of reflective practice in the supervision, and social work practice more broadly, are then discussed.

Social Work Supervision

Social work supervision is consistently described by numerous professional bodies and throughout the cannon of academic literature, as a key determinant in the quality of social work practice (BASW 2011, Carpenter et al 2013, Hawkins and Shohet 2012, Manthorpe et al 2005, Morrison 1999, Munro, 2011, O’Donoghue and Tsui 2015). Moreover, government sponsored reviews of English and Welsh children and family social work have gone as far as to postulate that poor supervision practice has led to children being inadequately safeguarded (Lamming 2009, Munro 2011). Indeed, such concerns have culminated in the DfE’s Practice Supervisors Development Programme, a national training programme for social work supervisors and their managers (Research in Practice 2021).
Despite this apparent academic and governmental consensus, there appears an incongruence between models of supervision espoused in the literature and the reality of practice (Harlow 2015, Turner-Daly and Jack 2017, Wilkins et al 2017). Such an incongruence has been attributed to pervasive technical-rational approaches to social work practice, synonymous with neoliberal ideas of New Public Management, which when exacerbated by societal patterns of risk aversion following high profile child deaths of children such as Peter Connolly, have led to a surveillance culture of audit and inspection (Bartoli and Kennedy 2015, Cooper and Lees 2014, Jones 2014, Ruch 2007, Shoesmith 2016). Such a culture has permeated supervision, leading to the rejection of uncertainty and complexity, and resulting in the stifling of the creativity, innovation and reflection espoused in the literature (Beddoe 2010, Harlow 2015, Morrison 1999, Peach and Horner 2007).

**Group Supervision**

Children and family social work supervision normally occurs either in a dyadic form between a social worker and their manager, or in a group format often involving a number of social workers or other professionals, in lieu of, or supplementary to, dyadic supervision (Sewell 2018). Group supervision exists in social work in a broad nomenclature including terms such as Balint Groups (Balint 1964), Reflective Practice Groups (Lees and Cooper 2019) and Work Discussion Groups (Rustin and Bradley 2008), each model posing distinct and differing implications for supervision practice. Moreover, group supervision is also undertaken in a wide number of disciplines beyond social work as diverse as: mental health (Adlam 2019, Bartle and Trevis 2015), education (Hulusi and Maggs 2015, Kuh 2016), early years (Elfer and Wilson 2021), general practice (Diaz et al 2015), healthcare settings (Carter 2013, Kurtz 2019, Platzer et al 2008), and even the Church of England (Gubi 2016). Currently there is an increasing popularity of group supervision models in children and families social work, with group supervision models employed in systemic, signs of safety and family safeguarding practice models, as well as informally in a number of child welfare settings (Forrester et al 2017, Goodman and Trowler 2012, Sheehan et al 2019).
Systemic Group Supervision

Todd and Storm (2014) note that systemic supervision differs from supervision in broader therapeutic contexts in that it invites and privileges multiple perspectives, contextualises supervision in the complex web of influencing relationships within which it is embedded, and acknowledges and tolerates complexity and uncertainty. The supervision studied in this paper followed the systemic Unit Meeting model employed in the *Reclaim Social Work* model originally piloted in Hackney children’s services (Goodman and Trowler 2012). Here social workers are in teams, or ‘Units’ of four-five social workers supervised by a Consultant Social Worker, who has case responsibility. The Unit Meeting Model is characterised by a focus on generating systemic ideas to explore with families, a group supervisor who has management responsibility, the application of the systemic technique of hypothesising and the occasional presence of a systemic clinician (Bostock et al 2017, Bostock et al 2019).

Each Unit Meeting studied in this paper started with a ‘check in’ where attendees were encouraged to discuss their wellbeing. Following this the families the unit were working with were discussed in family supervision discussions. The structure of the family supervision discussions observed was broadly as follows:

- **Dilemma**: a supervisee raised an issue they or a family are facing
- **Clarifying questions**: fellow attendees asked the supervisee questions related to the dilemma
- **Hypothesising**: the Unit generated a number of systemic hypotheses to explain the dilemma, describing how contextual problems and patterns in family member’s beliefs, actions and relationships often maintained difficulties (Selvini et al 1980).
- **Actions**: one or two hypotheses were chosen to be explored in further detail, and a number of systemic actions were generated by the unit for the supervisee to consider.

Much of the systemic theory that underpins the Unit Meeting model stems from the work of the Milan Team, who employed the pioneering systemic theory of Gregory Bateson (1972) to work therapeutically with families (Boscolo et al 1987). Research has indicated that the Unit Meeting model of group supervision; is a positive forum for embedding reflective

**What is Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice is universally presented in the supervision literature as key to the effectiveness of social work supervision, and it therefore seems pertinent to briefly define this concept. While such an endeavour is no doubt way beyond the scope of this paper, forming some loose categories of the various different definitions of reflective practice does aid with the analysis of the supervision practice studied. This does however prove problematic with several authors noting the contested nature of reflective practice, positing it as ill-defined, and incorporating a variety of terms drawn from various different disciplines such as reflection, critical reflection, self-reflection, critical self-reflection and reflexivity (D’Cruz et al 2007, Iker 1999, Wilkins 2017, Wilson 2013). Indeed, Iker (1999) and Wilkins (2017) both argue the concept is so ill-defined as to become unusable.

Ruch (2000), drawing on the work of Van Manen (1977) and Habermas (1973), outlines four models of reflective practice: **Technical, Practical, Critical, and Process.** What follows is a brief attempt to explore Ruch’s (2000) four categories and the demarcations between them. A five category **Reflexive Practice** is then added to cover gap identified in Ruch’s model. Here Ruch’s categories are conceived more as elements of reflective practice, in order to acknowledge that one element of reflective practice might be present in a number of other forms of reflective practice.

- **Technical Reflective Practice** refers to instrumental reflection as a mode of problem solving, and is consistent with the seminal work of Schon’s (1983), who postulated how practitioners need to be able to reflect on action and reflect in action. As Ruch (2000) explains, ‘technical reflection is deemed to be the lowest level of reflection and uses “external/technical” sources of knowledge derived from formal theory and research... to resolve an identified problem’ (p.101).
• *Practical Reflective Practice* acknowledges the relativist nature of knowledge and the socially constructed nature of meanings attributed to experience (Ruch 2000). Such a model of reflection is consistent with the work of Eraut (1994) who asserted that practice cannot be separated from one’s own subjective experience, therefore requiring the practitioner to explore personal assumptions and their impact on practice.

• Although the ‘critical’ in *Critical Reflective Practice* is occasionally used in an analytical sense, it is more often employed to refer to critical social theory, which employs the ideas of theorists such as Foucault (1972) and The Frankfurt School (Fook 2002, Fook and Gardner 2007, White et al 2006). As Theobald et al (2017) explain, ‘critical’ in this model involves the ‘analysis of existing social structures and power relationships and how these are internalized by individuals and communities. The aim is to increase understanding of these to enable change individually and create a more equitable and just society’ (p.301).

• Ruch (2000) describes the fourth category of *Process Reflection* which draws on psychoanalytic theory to explore the unconscious aspects of practice; the idea that individuals make unconscious attempts to manage anxiety through defence mechanisms such as splitting and projection is central to much of the psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1926, Klein 1946). These ideas were expanded upon by Bion (1961) who noted that without containment such anxiety can disrupt thought processes. Process reflection acknowledges such intrapsychic processes and therefore aims to provides containment for practitioners’ anxieties.

• The category of practice reflection, in my opinion, fails to satisfactorily encompass the systemic notion of *Reflexivity*, therefore requiring the creation of a fifth category of *Reflexive Practice*. Like practical reflection, the concept of reflexivity is bound by the social constructionist ontological position of the relativist nature of knowledge and multiple truths (Burr 2015). Therefore knowledge ‘emergence is distinct to the individual... and thus fits with his or her individual discourse, background (and) context’ (Jude, 2018, p.47). However, unlike practical reflection there is an increased emphasis on the emotionality of experience, with a focus upon emotional experience and emotional communication with others (Hedges 2010).
Learning from Experience (Bion 1962)

Before outlining the methodology and findings of this study, this paper will first describe the work of Wilfred Bion which is central to the analysis of the supervision practice studied. In his theory of Learning from Experience Bion (1962) builds on Freud’s (1911) concepts of the Pleasure and Reality Principles and the work of Klein (1946) to posit a theory of mental development. Klein’s (1946) theory of the Paranoid-Schizoid Position theorises a stage of early infant development mobilised when the self is under threat, and where splitting of both self and object into good and bad occurs. Here the infant employs projective identification as a mechanism for unburdening the psyche of unpleasant stimuli, whereby anxiety-arousing perceptions, sensations and feelings are projected out by the infant and identified in the ‘bad breast’ (or carer), which is then experienced as persecutory (Klein 1946, O’Shaughnessy 1981). Bion (1967) argued that such a process of projective identification represents the most primitive form of thinking, whereby ‘thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts’ (p.111). Therefore, ‘thinking’ is developed as an apparatus for managing unpleasant ‘thoughts’, and ‘thoughts’ must therefore be regarded as epistemologically prior to ‘thinking’ (Bion 1962).

Bion (1962) theorised these unmetabolised intolerable thoughts as Beta Elements which, under optimum conditions, when projected into the carer are subsequently contained through the carers’ Alpha Function and returned to the infant as tolerable Alpha Elements. Through this process the carer contains and modifies the infant’s projections, before returning them in a tolerable form where they can be introjected through a process of what Bion (1962) described as K Activity. Subsequently the introjected alpha elements can be symbolised by the infant, and are available for dream thought and unconscious waking thought. However, if the carer is unable to tolerate the infant’s projections, a failure of containment occurs and the infant continues to employ projective identification with increasing force and frequency. This ongoing process of projective-interjective K activity between infant and carer is then gradually introjected by the infant, leading to the capacity to process beta elements internally, and the development of an ego with the capacity to tolerate the frustration associated with the reality principle (O’Shaughnessy 1981).

Drawing on the dichotomy between Freud’s (1911) pleasure principle and reality principle, Bion (1962) postulates a dichotomy between the emotional experience of Love/Hate and
the emotional experience of K. Here powerful intrusions of Love/Hate obstruct the urge to know, resulting in what Bion termed -K (Fisher 2006). Fisher (2006) argues that such tension is central to human development:

the developmental dynamic lies in the tension between the... conflict between these impulses. That is, at every stage it lies in the dynamic of the tension between the ‘K-impulse’, which seeks to know, and the L/H impulse, which is to feel good or avoid feeling bad. In other words, it is the ongoing tension between the pleasure principle and the reality principle (p.1225)

Bion (1962) theorised -K activity occurs when an emotional experience is found by an individual to be too painful, and here they may ‘... attempt either to evade or to modify the pain according to the capacity of the personality to tolerate frustration’ (Bion, 1962, p.48). Here, drawing on Freud’s concept of the ego functioning under the pleasure principle, reality is denied, and learning from experience is jettisoned.
Methodology

Much of the existing research into supervision relies on self-reporting mechanisms, via interviews and questionnaires (Beddoe et al 2016, Wilkins et al 2017). While such approaches have advantages in terms of practicalities, they raise issues regarding the reliability of data, and are clearly limited when attempting to access unconscious contributions to supervision practice. In order to address these issues this study employed Hinshelwood and Skogstad’s (2000) psychoanalytically informed observation methodology. This involved the non-participant observation of group supervision sessions, an approach influenced by psychoanalytical infant observation model of Bick (1964) and Miller et al (1989). The methodology posits three elements of experience to be observed:

- objective events happening
- emotional atmosphere
- researcher’s inner experiences

For the purpose of this paper, the data presented and analysed will focus primarily on the objective events observed in the Unit Meetings and the emotional atmosphere present.

Sampling and Recruitment

Six group supervision sessions were studied in total, with a mean length of three hours. Each session contained between five and seven supervision attendees who all gave consent to take part in this study. The supervision sessions were situated in two different Local Authorities (henceforth LA1 and LA2) both rated as ‘good’ by Ofsted, over a three-month period. Ethical approval was gained from both LAs and the Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee prior to commencing the research. As a result of the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, three of the group supervision sessions took place in person, and three virtually. Clearly there are limitations to the wider applicability of this study in light of such a restricted sample. However, given that the researcher came close to six rich and unique data sets, there was value for the illumination of similar research areas (Cooper 2009).
Data Collection and Analysis

Following Hinshelwood and Skogstad’s (2000) model, observation of the three non-virtual meetings involved the researcher sitting in the Unit Meetings as a non-participant observer while attendees undertook supervision. In order to avoid pre-interpretation and missing valuable data, field notes were completed after each observation and written in a manner that avoided premature theoretical interpretation (Skogstad 2008). The Unit Meetings were also audio recorded and transcribed so as to triangulate the psychoanalytic observation data with the group supervision dialogue. To aid analysis and to provide critical attention to subjective processes, the fieldnotes, as well as sections of transcriptions, were further analysed in bi-monthly Work Discussion Groups with fellow doctoral students. Finally, the data was analysed through a thematic analysis informed by Cooper’s (2014) meaningful interpretative approach. In order to establish the modes of thought evident in the two cohorts of group supervision, a certain amount of comparison in the data analysis became important in the process of hermeneutics. This was achieved by a process of ‘counting’ using NVIVO software. Here specific occurrences of codes were tallied and compared across Unit Meetings, producing numerical data.
Findings and Discussion

Anxiety and Defence in the Unit Meetings

In all six sessions anxiety was evident to lesser or greater extents. Data was coded as attendees’ ‘Displays and Responses to Anxiety’, to indicate an expression of or response to anxiety, for example a voice quivering or an apparent risk being avoided. Data was also coded as ‘Apparent Causes of Anxiety’ which represented where that anxiety was perceived to have stemmed from. This meant that the same section of transcript would usually be dual coded, and ‘Apparent Causes of Anxiety’ was never coded in the absence of ‘Displays or Responses to Anxiety’. Unsurprisingly the data coded as ‘Apparent Causes of Anxiety’ indicated that some of the more emotionally challenging elements of the social work task, such as having difficult conversations with service users or considering accommodating children, appeared to lead to ‘Displays or Responses to Anxiety’ from attendees.

The data indicated that 75% of the data coded as ‘Displays and Responses to Anxiety’ was in LA1, compared to 25% in LA2, clearly indicating that LA1 was a more anxiety rich environment. The data also indicated that attendees employed a number of collective social defences against anxiety, as theorised by Menzies (1959) in her classic organisational observation of a hospital ward, to defend themselves against such anxiety.

Hyperactivity as a Defence

S1 – right, ready, steady go. This is the K family

The quote above is taken from the beginning of a supervision discussion in LA1, and highlights a striking difference between the two Local Authorities in respect of the pace of the Unit Meetings, which I would theorise represented a social defence against this anxiety. The Unit Meetings in LA1 appeared to run at a much faster pace with little to no periods of silence, and an imperative that they ran to time. Moreover, LA1’s sessions were also characterised by a somewhat manic propensity to record most, if not all the information discussed, and as such the sound of typing could be heard throughout the sessions. Hoggett
(2010) postulates the defensive qualities of such hyperactivity in front-line welfare teams, noting they ‘often (have) a manic edge of busyness... but it is precisely this busyness which also protects workers from thinking about what they are doing’ (p.203). The pace of LA1’s Unit Meetings, with little silences and fast dialogue, appeared to prevent the emotional engagement with the material discussed. Moreover Ruch (2007), notes how this urge to record information in supervision represents a similar defensive tendency to ‘do’ at the expense of the ability to ‘be’ emotionally engaged with emotive child protection work, a point vividly illustrated by a supervisee in LA1 when minuting one of the sessions:

S3 - I’m struggling to think at the minute because if I start thinking I’ll stop minuting

**Denial and Disavowal**

The defence of denial, first highlighted by Freud (1927) and later further developed by his daughter Anna Freud (1936), is a defence mechanism, operating under the pleasure principle where the ego ‘refuses to become aware of some disagreeable reality... and substitutes for the unbearable reality some agreeable delusion’ (Freud, 1936, pp.79-80). Such a defence was observable in LA1 where attendees were far more likely to display avoidant behaviours characterised by attendees brushing over apparent risks in order to focus on strengths, or ignoring apparent risks altogether.

A particularly illustrative example of this denial was observable in the third Unit Meeting in LA1, which took place shortly after the announcement of the UK Government Covid 19 (CV19) lockdown. At one point the supervisor details how they are finding ways not to think about the virus, in a manner which appears consistent with the denial of reality:

**LA1 Supervisor -** what I’m finding is a lot of the conversations I’m having are about the virus, and whilst we do need to have those conversations I’ve also been doing stuff (inaudible)... we’re doing like random facts, so learning a fact about an animal, so I can then talk about that... so I was wondering whether we could... take turns to do joke of the day or random fact of the day just so we’re also letting our brains do something else (LA1, UM3)
Freud’s (1927) writings referred to the German word ‘disavowal’, which when translated into English as ‘denial’ perhaps loses some of its more nuanced disassociative qualities. Examples of this disassociative disavowal were also evident in attendees’ behaviour in LA1, and here attendees employed collective forms of disavowal by not situating themselves in their work or discussing its impact upon them, as demanded by practical reflection and reflexivity. Rather than situate themselves in their work, attendees instead analysed the impact wider Children’s Services had upon family systems, a strategy that served to deny attendees’ involvement in their emotionally challenging work as demonstrated in this hypothesis in LA1:

S4 - social work involvement has acted as a reminder of emotions of loss and grief, both in regard to S passing, but also in relation to B as a child... (LA1, UM2)

Moreover, attendees in LA1 employed an anonymised method of hypothesising, whereby rather than share their hypotheses with the group, they were emailed to the supervisor who read them out anonymously. Again, this represented a further example of disavowal as this served to deny attendees need to own an opinion on the challenging issues faced by families, rather removing themselves from such anxiety provoking thoughts by presenting their ideas as the responsibility of the group as a whole. In contrast, attendees in LA2 regularly situated themselves in their work and explored how they influenced the family systems they worked with:

S1 - cos she might tell you that she finds it ok and that might help you to feel better about it
S2 - that’s true
S1 - cos some of these anxieties might be your anxieties (inaudible)
S2 - erm yeah that’s true (LA2, UM2)

Again, in contrast to LA1, there were also frequent examples of attendees placing themselves, or indeed other attendees, in their hypotheses:

S5 – maybe there’s something in S6 from her own experience from her own mother... if when she was a child things were dealt with by brushing them off so she
doesn’t quite know (with) her new position as a social worker what boundaries she has

**Supervision Confluence and Actions**

In LA1 there was at times a lack of confluence in the supervision discussions. This was often manifest in a pattern of the Unit Meeting actions being drawn directly from the description of the problem (the dilemma) and appearing to ignore the hypothesising in between, or actions being discussed that related to Children’s Services wider Child in Need or Child Protection plans, rather than the supervisee’s dilemma. In LA1 there also appeared a pattern of actions, particularly systemic actions, appearing somewhat vague. For example, there are several references to ‘ongoing genogram work’, or ‘explore family history’, without any clarity about the exact nature of this work or what it aimed to achieve, and in fact all the data coded ‘vague intervention’ was in LA1. These patterns were not observable in LA2, and here the Unit Meetings appeared confluent, with dilemmas flowing into hypotheses and then into clear and discernible actions.

The data also indicated that there was significantly more practice coded as ‘systemic incongruent’ in LA1 \( (n = 35) \), whereas such practice was unusual in LA2 \( (n = 7) \). Such ‘systemic incongruent practice’ was often characterised by the presence of linear thinking, where explanations for families’ behaviours were presented in a reductionist cause-and-effect manner which failed to account for circularity, wider family history and contextual factors, and were therefore incongruent with systemic practice.

**Two Contrasting Leadership Styles - Negative Capability and Containment**

The supervisors in each Local Authority demonstrated contrasting approaches to supervision leadership, and it is interesting to reflect upon the impact these two contrasting styles had upon the material discussed in the Unit Meetings, and the anxiety and defences outlined above. For example, LA1 supervisor took a more directive leadership role in the sessions, characterised by being more inclined to lead the Unit Meetings and provide answers to supervisees’ quandaries. The sessions in LA1 were further characterised by a lack
of challenge of the supervisor and indeed fellow supervisees. As such the discourse was
dyadic supervisor-supervisee-supervisor, and as a result the supervision appeared more
indicative of dyadic supervision in a group format, rather than group supervision.

By contrast the supervisor in LA2 displayed a more non-directive style of leadership, and as
such their role was more akin to a facilitator, rather than expert. As a result the sessions
were characterised by the cocreation of ideas by the unit as a whole, and a willingness for
supervisees to challenge the supervisor and one another. An excellent example of this non-
directive leadership style, and its impact on supervisees’ ability to challenge other
attendees, occurred in LA2 Unit Meeting 2. Here the supervisees suggest applying a model
where they change the family’s GRACES (aspects of a family’s identity – see Burnham 2012)
to consider the impact of dominant and subjugated discourses on their work with the
family. The supervisor allows them to lead this, and the discussion informs their work:

S4 – erm it says to identify the social graces, so the first one was about erm so C, so if
C was a single mother discussing around that

LA2 Supervisor - so for example we might say erm if A was a male victim

S5 – yeah

LA2 Supervisor – how might this be different...

This model challenges a supervisee’s thinking:

S1 – yeah, I think I probably am conscious of what she has told me and what the
children have said about their father… I’m advocating for the children to stay with
her and to try and keep them safe as a unit

S5 – is that because she’s female

S1 – yeah probably, also if it was a father and his two children in an abusive
relationship would I (pause) be more understanding of the need for contact with
both parties

The supervisor in LA2 was also more likely to demonstrate behaviours that would be
indicative of containment, behaviours typified by the naming and exploration of emotions
or speaking in a calm tone. This containing behaviour is typified when a supervisee appears
exhausted and unsure what to do next. Here LA2 supervisor responds in a calm manner, typical of their practice:

S1 - something happens it could be anything she seems to have managed to find something every single day that drives her into a completely inconsolable state... it’s just a really dire situation really

LA2 supervisor – (calm tone) what came to mind when you are talking is these... kind of feedback loops these cycles of things happening... and maybe it would be helpful to look at what

S1 – how could we break them

LA2 supervisor – well and what could be changed or done differently

By the end of this case discussion the supervisee appears far more positive about their work:

S1 – yes, erm I feel like this is kind of may have been a little bit of a light bulb moment

LA2 supervisor would also make use of silence to allow participants to make sense of the discussions in the Unit Meetings. An excellent example of this occurs in LA2 UM3 when a supervisee is considering their recommendations for a report. Here LA2 supervisor leaves pauses between 20 – 30 seconds long, before offering an opportunity to discuss emotions:

S5 – I don’t know how to word that a bit better but (long pause) so it’s just like managing their expectations while also staying erm (pause) (resigned tone in voice) I can’t think of the words

(long pause)

LA2 Supervisor – when you get these calls from erm a family member what kind of feelings is it bringing up, if you feel able to talk about that now or maybe you want to talk about that separately

S5 – erm more recently I’m just losing my patience with it a little bit and I know that sounds really bad (pause) ... so when they first send the email I messaged to say I’ll
call you tomorrow to discuss this. Then I had like three other texts saying have you had a chance to respond to this email yet...

LA2 Supervisor – and why do you think that is

S5 – I don’t know

(long pause)

LA2 Supervisor – ok, shall we maybe have a think about that then and you could listen to some ideas about why the family might be behaving or functioning in this way (LA2, UM3)

Bion (1970) employed Keats’s (2002) notion of Negative Capability as a stance in his analytic work, which refers to the capacity of the analyst to tolerate the frustration and pain associated with ‘... uncertainties, mysteries (and) doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats, 2002, p. 41). Such a stance towards therapeutic work therefore requires the tolerance of ambiguity and doubts implicit in Learning from Experience, and here one must not prematurely reach for a truth, if one wishes to find one (Adlam 2014, Eisold 2000). It would appear from the data that LA2 supervisor was far more adept at applying the stance of negative capability than LA1 supervisor, something evidenced by LA2 supervisor’s frequent use of long periods of silence when supervisees were considering challenging supervision material, and their willingness to both allow participants to lead the Unit Meeting and surrender the expert position.

Simpson et al (2002) employ Needleman’s (1993) concept of Dispersal to describe the breakdown of the receptive state required for negative capability. Here, when anxiety provoking situations are encountered, individuals tend to disperse into explanations, emotional reactions or physical action, the very antithesis of negative capability. Such a process of dispersal can be manifest in the form of Heuristics, that is, ‘intuitive forms of knowledge or rules, drawn from people’s past experiences... helping them to think about ambiguous and confusing situations in the present’ (Yerushalmi, 2019, p.294). In contrast to the supervisor in LA2, it appeared that LA1 supervisor was more likely to employ dispersive heuristics, evidenced in the propensity for them to lead the Unit Meeting discussions by
being positioned as an expert providing an answer, the dyadic supervisor-supervisee-supervisee nature of the discourse in LA1, and the lack of challenge evident in these Unit Meetings.

Thinking in the Unit Meetings – K and -K Supervision

The findings of this study therefore indicate that, despite the two group supervision cohorts apparently following the same Unit Meeting model, two very different forms of supervision practice were evident in each Local Authority. In LA1 supervision practice was characterised by high levels of anxiety, the operation of collective defences against this, a directive supervisor leadership style, and occasional inconfluent case discussions that led to the creation of vague actions. By contrast, supervision in LA2 was characterised by the cocreation of ideas, nondirective leadership, confluent case discussions, reflexivity and purposeful systemic actions. In light of this, and following the theory of thinking outlined by Bion above, it becomes possible to theorise two modes of collective thought evident in the Unit Meetings that account for these contrasting styles of supervision practice. One functioning under Bion’s theory of K and operating in Freud’s (1911) reality principle, and the other operating in -K under the influence of the pleasure principle.

The beginning of each family supervision discussion where supervisees shared an update regarding their work with families contained much of the data coded as ‘Displays of or Responses to Anxiety’, indicating the presence of raw and unprocessed emotional material indicative of beta elements. Here attendees would talk for several minutes without interruption, sharing information about what had happened, rather than why it had happened, in manner consistent with the ‘verbal deluge’ outlined by Wilkins et al (2017) in their study of dyadic supervision. Depending on the mode of group thought operating in the Unit Meeting, these beta elements where either processed by the group and returned to the attendee as alpha elements, in a thinking process analogous to Bion’s (1962) notion of K activity, or the anxiety implicit in this process was too great, and such a process was evaded, analogous with -K.
K Supervision

Figure A outlines *K Supervision* where the group operate under Freud’s reality principle. Here the supervisee in the top left of the picture shares their dilemma and history of work with a family, and beta elements are projected into the supervision system. Here the beta elements are processed by the Unit’s collective alpha function, supported by the factors listed to the left of the supervisor and supervisees. Reflexivity supported supervisees to name and explore the emotions generated as their social work practice intersects with their own lived experiences, processing anxiety that might be generated as a result. The supervisor’s leadership style allows explanations to be cocreated by the unit, allowing supervisees to challenge one another’s thinking and explore their practice from multiple perspectives. The containing style of LA2 supervisor allows the powerful emotions attached to the content of the supervision sessions to be explored, and their stance of negative capability allows anxiety provoking information to be processed in the group without the need for dispersive heuristics. The beta elements are therefore returned to the supervisee as tolerable alpha elements that can be held. Following the *Learning from Experience* present in this process that does not seek to evade the anxiety present in reality, the supervision outputs are characterised by purposeful systemic congruent practice delivered by a contained supervisee. The data indicated that K Supervision was more likely to occur in LA2.
The -K Supervision

Figure B outlines -K Supervision where the group operate under Freud’s pleasure principle, and the anxiety implicit in reality is such that reality is to be evaded. Here the supervisee shares their work with a family, and beta elements are projected into the supervision system. However, the anxiety present in these beta elements is too great for the Unit Meeting to handle, and they are defended against by the various group defences. Here attendees employ strategies of denial and disavowal to remove themselves from the anxiety provoking reality of their practice. The dispersive leadership style of the supervisor, which provides supervisees with prompt answers to their predicaments, prevents the supervisees from experiencing the frustration implicit in Learning from Experience when considering their work. Moreover, the pace of the Unit Meeting and the propensity to record information represents a further dispersive force, as this further defends the supervisees from the anxiety of having to consider the anxiety provoking nature of their work. The beta elements are therefore returned to the supervisee sharing the family presentation, and also remain present and unprocessed in the Unit Meeting. Following the return of the beta
elements, and the lack of Learning from Experience present, the supervision outputs are characterised by vague interventions and systemic incongruent practice.

The data from this study indicates that style of supervision practice was more likely to occur in LA1. Here it appeared that the anxiety associated with the Units primary task of supporting vulnerable children and families was at times too great to be tolerated, and Learning from Experience was jettisoned in favour of a variety of approaches united by an evasion of such anxiety, and subsequent evasion of the reality of the social work task.

Figure B -K Supervision

It is important to note however, that while K- supervision was more likely to occur in LA1, there were times when it was observable in LA2, and indeed times when supervision practice in LA1 was more akin to K supervision, changes that appeared influenced by the makeup of the supervision group and the influence of wider contextual factors. While exploring these factors is beyond the remit of this paper, such data suggests that K and -K supervision practice should not be perceived as static, rather that supervision can move between such states, influenced by internal and external environments, and the behaviour of supervisees and supervisors.
Organisational Containment

While this study was limited in that it did not access empirical data in respect of organisational context, some information can be gleamed from the data that would indicate that LA1, along with representing a more anxiety rich environment, also represented a more performative environment. For example, in LA1 families were chosen for discussion before the UMs, which was perhaps influenced by agency ICS priorities of ensuring that cases were supervised regularly. Such an environment was likely to prove less containing for supervision attendees, and for the supervisor in particular. Indeed, the supervisor in LA1 displayed more ‘Displays or Responses to Anxiety’ \(n = 28\) compared to LA2 supervisor \(n = 2\), indicating they were experiencing a lack of organisational containment.

Toasland (2007) argues that while it is imperative that social workers experience containment from their supervisors, it is also vital that their supervisors themselves experience containment. Without this they may be unable to bear the anxious projections of supervisees and management, and subsequently fail to contain staff they supervise, as appeared evident in LA1 (Toasland 2007). The importance of organisational containment further tallies with Lees and Cooper’s (2019) study in respect of Reflective Practice Groups (RPGs), who noted that the containment of anxiety appeared related to a number of positive outcomes for both social workers and families, but that RPGs needed to take place at all levels of the organisations in order to be effective. It would therefore appear that the managerialist and risk averse approaches to social work practice outlined earlier in this paper, which I have previously theorised are an organisational response to anxiety (Smith 2019), stifle the production of containment in organisations, in turn influencing the creation of K-supervision in LA1.

Implications for Reflective Practice

The findings of this study indicate that the levels of anxiety present in each cohort of group supervision, and the subsequent strategies involved to either contain or evade this, proved central to the forms of supervision practice evident, the nature of reflective practice and supervision output. At times in LA1 the levels of anxiety could not be processed, and through the -K Supervision model attendees defended themselves against this by denying
their involvement in the social work task, in a process of psychic withdrawal similar to that identified by O’Sullivan (2019) in the Work Discussion Groups she studied in a child welfare setting. In doing so attendees demonstrated a form of reflection that was most consistent with Ruch’s notion of technical reflective practice, which in addition did not at times appear to be related to the reality of supervisees’ practice.

Ferguson (2017) notes ‘child protection professionals experience intense emotions, from their own experience of anxiety, fear, sadness, hope, despair and the feelings of rage, hate, love, gratitude and so on that are projected into them by services users… (and) what is crucial is whether... they are managed in containing ways that promote clear thinking (p.1011). In the same paper Ferguson (2017) describes how when observing an experienced social worker on a home visit, presumably experiencing such emotions and managing them through a -K strategy, the social worker inexplicably neglected to see the two children in the family. An omission even more startling when you consider they were being observed by a leading social work academic. As Ferguson (2017) notes the children became ‘unthought’ and ‘invisible’, a vignette that demonstrates the capacity of the unconscious mind to manipulate reality so as to avoid anxiety when in a -K state, as evident collectively in LA1.

By contrast in LA2, such defence mechanisms of disavowal were less likely to be employed, and attendees frequently situated themselves in their work and appeared attuned to the emotionality of the social work task. As a result, the reflective practice evidenced in LA2 was more indicative of reflexive practice. In light of the data from this study, and the theorisation of K Supervision outlined above, it appears that a supervision leadership style that encourages the discussion of emotions, encourages the cocreation of ideas and employs a stance of negative capability is key in allowing supervisees to tolerate the frustration implicit in Learning from Experience. This in turn is central to the creation of reflexive practice, and supervision practice that is not evasive of the realities of social work practice.

Perhaps the most striking finding from this study is the correlation between the presence of reflexive practice and the levels of anxiety evidenced in the sessions, with the Unit Meetings characterised by high levels of anxiety also displaying a marked absence of reflexive practice, findings that appear to tally with Bingle and Middleton’s (2019) study of a Unit Meeting which concluded that the anxiety rich context of child protection influenced
workers need to find the ‘right answer’ and stifled systemic practice and reflexivity. By contrast the sessions characterised by reflexive practice in LA2, were also characterised by low levels of anxiety. It therefore appears that forms of reflective practice consistent with reflexive practice, where social workers explore the emotionality and personal impact of their work, may have the potential to process anxiety through containment.

**Conclusions**

This study has identified that the anxiety which numerous authors have argued is pervasive in UK Children and Families Social Work also pervades group supervision. Indeed, the difference between the two Unit Meetings is testament to the generative impact of this unprocessed anxiety, as this accounts for why two sets of supervision meetings supposedly following the same format transpired to be so different. For if *Learning from Experience* does not take place and a subsequent failure of containment occurs, unprocessed anxiety stifles supervision and subsequent social work practice, in what I have theorised as -K Supervision. This study demonstrates how in such circumstances supervision attendees collectively operationalise defence systems to protect themselves against anxiety, resulting in the psychic withdrawal from the emotive issues associated with the social work task. The impact of the unprocessed anxiety identified in this study can also account for the schism between the rhetoric and reality of supervision practice highlighted earlier in this paper, where the good intentions of reflexive practice are unconsciously jettisoned in favour of defensive practice that denies the emotionality of the social work task.

The potential risks of such practice, as highlighted in this study and by Ferguson (2017) above, provide a compelling rationale for the prioritisation of reflexive practice, the supervision leadership styles evidenced in the K Supervision State which facilitate this, and organisational containment. It follows that training social work supervisors and practice leaders in the adoption of such practice and the psychosocial theory that underpins it must be an imperative for the profession. While this study is of a small scale, K Supervision does provide an intriguing model that indicates how the much heralded yet ill-defined concept of reflective practice may function, and what leadership styles are required to facilitate it, a formulation that has critical implications for social work practice, service user experience
and the social work profession more broadly. Moreover, the seminal work of Bion that underpins this study demonstrates that it is the nature of thinking in supervision that is the key determinant of supervision practice. Supervision practice must therefore be framed as both and conscious and unconscious process, a theorisation which has clear ramifications for supervision research and broader social work practice.
References


