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Knowledge Briefing

PSDP - Resources and Tools:

Using a systemic lens in supervision

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Introduction

Recent developments in children's social work in England have tended towards a move away from approaches which have been perceived as bureaucratic and process-driven (Munro, 2011), to more relationship-based and practice-led ways of working with families. This has led to an increased interest in the application of ideas from systemic theory to social care contexts.

Using systemic approaches can help to ensure that the voices, views and experiences of children and families are placed up front in supervision conversations. For example, the evaluation of the **Children's Social Care Innovation programme** found that the application of systemic ideas to practice contributed to better outcomes for children and families (Sebba et al, 2017). Systemic ideas also have much to offer in a practice supervision context (Bingle and Middleton, 2019; Dugmore et al, 2018).

The systemic approach has its roots in the therapeutic field of family therapy, rather than in social work. The systemic literature can seem complex, and the level of focus upon systemic ideas in social work qualification courses varies in practice. Most practice supervisors will be working in organisations whose practice frameworks are not wholly based upon systemic ideas. For example, many practice frameworks are influenced by restorative principles, strengths-based principles, or based upon a model such as **Signs of Safety**.

The position of this knowledge briefing is that no single approach has a monopoly upon usefulness, and that it is perfectly possible to apply systemic ideas in supervision within a practice context that draws upon an eclectic range of ideas, approaches, models and theories. The purpose of this knowledge briefing is to support practice supervisors to enhance their understanding of systemic ideas, and to explore how systemic ideas can be useful in a children's social care context.

The key principles of systemic practice

The systemic approach, at its heart, pays attention to relationships and interactions between people who are connected in a system. Each individual is considered in relation to other individuals, with a focus upon the ways in which they affect and are affected by each other. Systemic thinking emphasises that individuals are connected in patterns of interaction, which may be sustained by the way communication flows between them. Following from this, the relational problems which families might face are thought of as being located, primarily, in the patterns of interaction between people, rather than within people themselves. In child and family social work, systemic ideas can also be useful in drawing attention to the impact of wider social themes, such as poverty, inequality and oppression, upon families' experiences.

Case study

Maria and her 13 year-old daughter, Celia, used to enjoy a close relationship but, since Celia's thirteenth birthday, it has become more strained and they are finding it difficult to communicate.

Celia wants more freedom to go out with her friends, but Maria is worried that she might get into trouble. Celia starts telling her mother that she is going to a homework club in the school library at the end of the school day, but really she is going into the local town with her friends. Maria finds out and punishes her daughter, who refuses to answer her mother's questions about her activities.

When Maria was 13, she was raped by a stranger in a park near her house after school one day. She became pregnant and had a termination. This episode was only known to her mother and father, and they do not speak of it. Celia has a vague idea that something frightening happened to her mother once, but does not know the details.

Celia's description of the 'problem' might be that Maria is too controlling and doesn't listen to her, so she has to lie to her in order to fit in with her friends. She thinks if her mum relaxed and trusted her more then she wouldn't have to lie.

Maria's description of the 'problem' might be that Celia is lying to her and being disobedient, so she has to be strict and punish her. Her perception that the world is dangerous, and that Celia must be protected, is informed by her traumatic experience of rape and pregnancy at 13.

The diagrams on the following page illustrate a more circular explanation of one small aspect of a pattern of communication between Maria and Celia, which maintains and reinforces the suspicion and anger between them. If they continue to blame each other, then change might remain difficult. However, describing the problem in a relational way offers more possibilities about how they could find another way of negotiating this tension through trying to communicate differently. This illustration refers to just one small aspect of the relationship between mother and daughter. However, systemic theory suggests that helping to change one small aspect of a pattern can pave the way for wider change and be a 'difference that makes the difference' (Bateson, 1973).

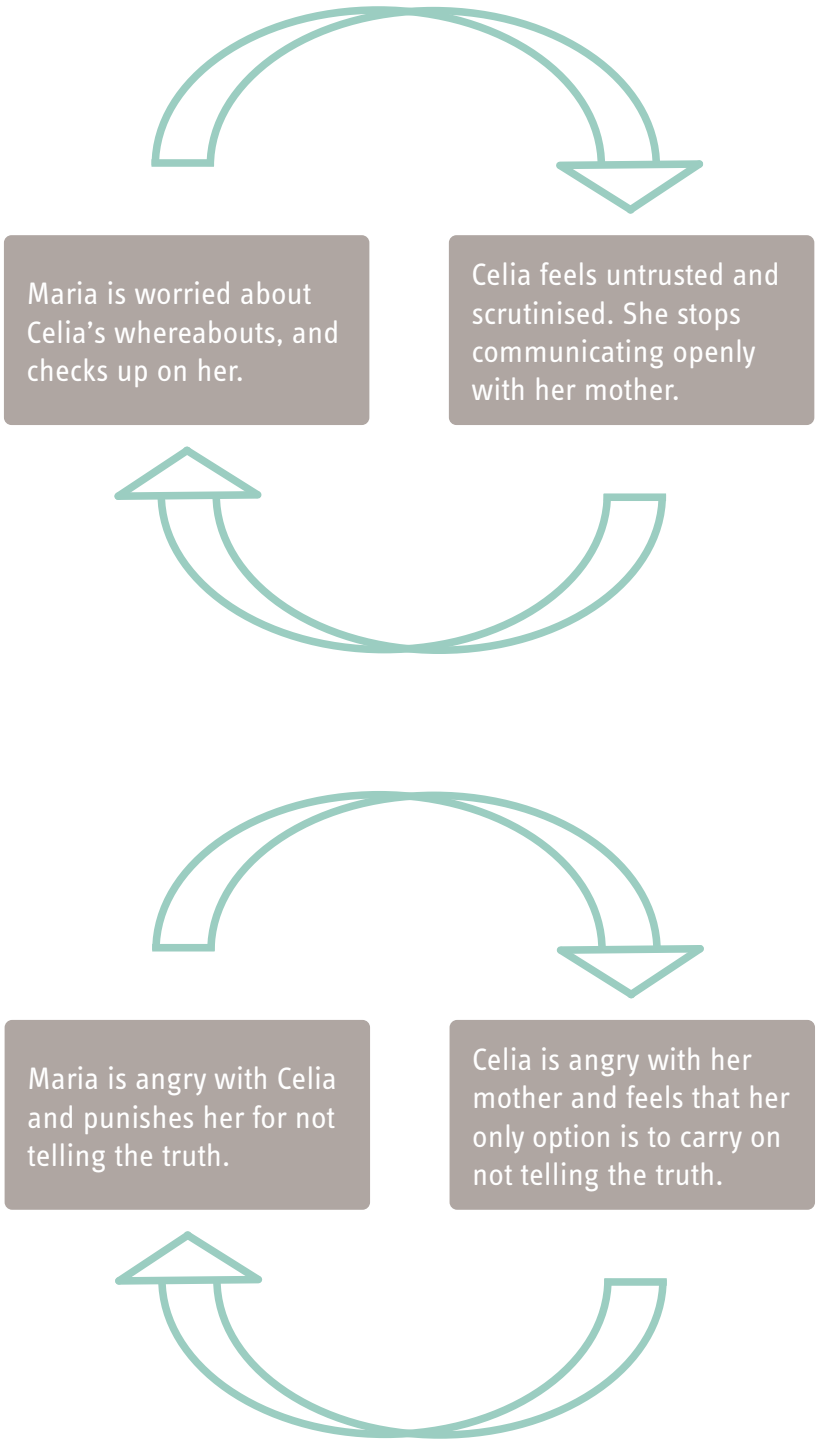

Figure 1: an example of circular patterns in relationships

Implications for practice:

- In supervision, pay attention to the language that you and the supervisee use to describe families. How often do you locate problems within people, as opposed to within interactional patterns (e.g. she is aggressive, he won't co-operate etc.)?
- In supervision, consider questions which probe this pattern of circularity. For example, when Maria checks up on Celia and doubts her honesty, what does Celia do? When Celia lies to her mother, what does Maria do?
- Also consider examples of times when the pattern is disrupted. Do Maria and Celia ever communicate in a positive way? Have there been times when, for example, Maria has been able to trust Celia? Perhaps they agreed a plan and Celia stuck to it?

Thinking systemically about families involves considering their behavioural patterns within the context of their belief system. A family's belief system represents the way in which they make meaning of the world – the lens through which they see things. The family's belief system influences their behaviour and is, in turn, influenced by it.

For example, if a family system supports the belief that men should not be involved in caring for children, then it is likely that the activities of childcare will fall to the women in the family. This pattern is likely to be self-perpetuating over time, as women become more competent and men become less competent, in a complementary pattern. After a while, individuals in the family may stop noticing that this behaviour is based on a belief and might start to perceive it as a fixed truth about gender roles. Helping a family to identify their beliefs or scripts can be a useful step towards opening up the possibility of change.

Many organisations use genograms, or family trees, as a way of helping people to identify the messages they learned from growing up in their families. Constructing the genogram together with family members can be a way of increasing rapport, and finding out more about how each individual makes sense of their family. Using genograms as part of assessment practice and supervision can help to move beyond the linear idea that there is a problem in this family that needs to be solved.

Genograms can also be helpful in thinking about the family life cycle – the patterns and stages of family life which are influenced both by interactions within the family, and interactions between the family and the wider social and cultural system. They can also promote discussion about how family systems cope with planned and unplanned transitions (e.g. births, deaths, marriages, migration journeys, divorces, etc.). Transitions can be difficult to negotiate for all families, especially if they are unexpected, but they can also offer the opportunity to experiment with new patterns of interaction.

Guidance about how to use genograms in supervision can be found in the learning tools that link with this section of the open access website.

Implications for practice:

- How often do you have supervision conversations about a family's belief system and the way in which it affects, and is affected by, their behaviour? Is the same belief system shared by all family members, or are there differences, for example, across the generations?
- Can you extend your use of genograms in supervision to include reflecting upon how a family's belief systems have or haven't been useful to them?

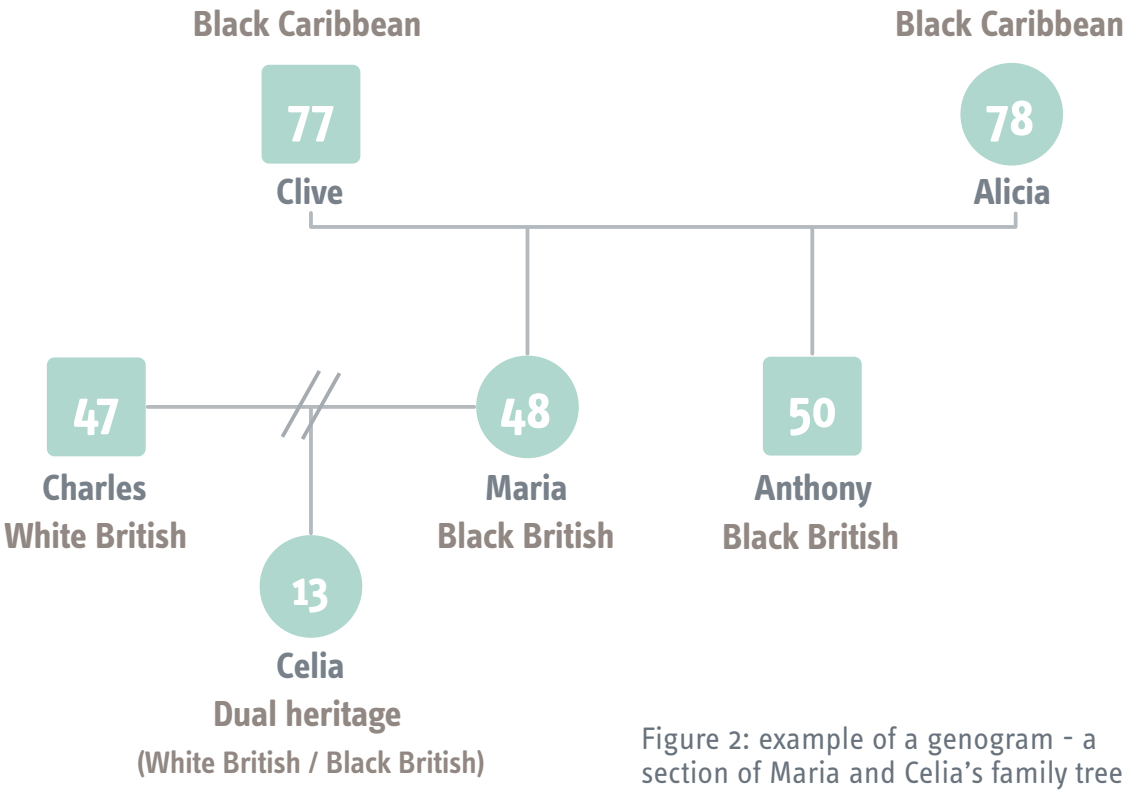

Figure 2: example of a genogram - a section of Maria and Celia's family tree

Questions to explore Maria and Celia's genogram in supervision:

- Who would Maria consider supports her the most in raising Celia? Who would she consider supports her the least?
- How are Maria and Celia negotiating Celia's transition into adolescence and eventual independence?
- What beliefs did Maria learn from her parents about how parent / daughter relationships work? How are these beliefs helpful / unhelpful in her relationship with Celia?
- What are Celia's beliefs about how parent / daughter relationships work?
- How are race and culture lived and experienced within this family?
- Has structural racism influenced this family?
- How do Maria's beliefs about family life help / not help her to cope with being a single parent?

Glossary: some key terms in systemic theory

These short explanations of common terms used in systemic theory are offered in order to give you ideas of possible questions to ask in supervision when you are thinking about a family through a systemic lens.

Circular causality: each person influences, and is influenced by, other people in the system. It is less important to understand 'where the pattern began' than to understand how it operates, and then to promote change by introducing difference.

Context: the setting in which interactional patterns take place. Understanding more about the family's context can provide more information about the meaning of their actions and interactions.

Curiosity: a position of openness to each person's point of view, and to multiple ideas about the family's situation.

Family life cycle: all families experience predictable stresses (birth, a young adult leaving home, illnesses or older age) and unpredictable stresses (loss of job, sudden illness, bereavement). Difficulties can emerge at times of transition if the family is not able to adapt.

Family scripts: these are patterns of behaviour which are handed down through generations, through repeated sequences of interactions between family members, often based upon belief systems. They can influence individual's expectations about who they should be and how they should live based on their experiences of family life. Individuals can accept them, or rebel against them. And the scripts can change over time under the influence of an individual's behaviour, and the changing social context.

Feedback: information about the system which produces change. Positive feedback leads to change, and negative feedback leads to stability.

Homeostasis: the tendency of a family system to strive to maintain equilibrium. They develop interactional patterns which maintain stability.

Hypothesising: generating an idea about relational patterns which connect family members. The idea is held lightly, and used as a guide for further questions or suggestions.

Linear causality: communication occurs through a step-by-step sequence, which operates in one direction only (A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D).

Recursive patterns: all family members are connected to each other, and a change in one person's behaviour will lead to a change in them all. Bateson (1973), an early systemic thinker, referred to this as 'the pattern that connects.'

Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS: (Burnham 1993; Roper-Hall 1998) a model which describes aspects of personal and social identity, including gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality. These aspects of self can be voiced or unvoiced, and visible or invisible. There is a learning tool about social GGRRAAACCEEESSS in the tools that link with the open access website.

Triangulation: the process by which a child is drawn into a conflict between adults. The child may be invited to 'take sides' in the conflict, or to adopt an adult role.

How systemic approaches can be applied in practice with families

Social work activity takes place within a legislative framework, the focus of which is to protect children from significant harm. Within this framework, the exercise of professional judgement involves balancing the need to intervene with the need to build collaborative relationships with families, often within set timescales (Bingle and Middleton, 2019 and Parton, 2014).

Social work activity is also situated within a wider social culture, which is influenced by media reporting of inquiries into the maltreatment and abuse of children. Social work decision-making will also be influenced by the ways in which local authorities respond to the pressures to 'get things right' for children and families (Higgins, 2017).

The tensions caused by these wider social and organisational forces can have an impact upon supervision conversations, as Davys and Beddoe write, positive and negative aspects of an organisation make their way into supervision contexts (2010).

Applying systemic ideas in supervision conversations, and in work with families, can help to balance the tensions between intervening to prevent harm, and building collaborative relationships, and can help us to consider what other factors might be influencing our responses to risk.

First order and second order positions

Systemic theory draws a distinction between first order and second order perspectives, which, although sounding a little odd on first hearing, can be useful for both supervisors and social workers to make sense of their work in practice.

From a first order perspective, the worker is viewed as separate from the family, and as observing the family system without influencing it. The role of the worker is to make an assessment in order to decide what and how the family needs to change, and then to intervene in a way which promotes change, from the position of an expert. The assumption is that the way in which the family operates is something that can be understood by someone standing outside the family system, and that once the correct understanding has been reached, the correct way of intervening will become clear.

First order assumptions can have a role to play in helping us to structure our thinking about a family, and offering a starting place, but it is rarely possible in social work to identify an obviously right decision.

First order positions tend to be less useful in promoting change as they tend to reinforce assumptions about the family already present within the worker, team, wider organisation, and society. They also place the family in a passive position and can reinforce a sense that they are powerless and being 'done to'. This position can be associated with linear bureaucratic processes, which promote simple interventions as opposed to developing a deeper understanding of a family, particularly a child's lived experience of it (Higgins, 2017).

Second order positions recognise that, simply by observing the family, the worker joins the system, albeit in a distinct role, and has, therefore, an impact upon the way the family system functions. Second order positions are more associated with relationship-based approaches, and promote a collaborative and mutual stance.

They open up possibilities for curiosity, but also require the worker to be open to thinking about the influence they are having upon the operation of the family, and upon the way they are perceiving the family, as a person and as a professional. This position invites the worker to be reflective about the ways in which they and the family are affected by (and are affecting) each other, in a circular pattern.

Through encouraging a second order position, practice supervisors can help workers to reflect upon the ways in which the power dynamic between them and the families they work with may be affecting the relationship. Once the social worker is able to articulate this, they may be more able to reflect upon ways of communicating which help the family to feel safer, and which promote collaborative ways of working.

Questions to encourage a second order position within supervision:

- How do you think this family perceives you? Is that the same for every family member, or are there differences?
- Who do you feel closest to / furthest away from in the family? Has this changed over time, or has it been constant?
- What kinds of conversations feel possible or impossible with this family?
- What emotions do you have when you think about this family? What emotions have you experienced during your conversations? How might these emotions be helpful / unhelpful?
- How are the interactions between you and the family affected by the power difference between you due to your roles? How can you use your power ethically with this family?
- What language do you use to describe family members? What might happen if you changed that language? For example, what might the impact be of moving from the position that 'this father is hard to engage' to 'our attempts to form a working relationship with this father haven't yet been successful'?
- How do you experience our supervision relationship / our conversations about this family? What has been helpful / unhelpful? Has it been the same / different from what you were expecting?

Domains of Action

The concept of Domains of Action (Lang et al, 1990) can be very helpful in navigating the tension between working collaboratively with a family, managing risk within a safeguarding context, and has a lot to offer supervision conversations.

Working within the 'domain of production' involves using professional knowledge to decide how to act, based upon consensually agreed ideas about what is safe / unsafe, legal / illegal, right / wrong. In the domain of production, there is a truth which can be discovered.

For example, supervision conversations might include questions such as, 'Do we need a strategy meeting?', 'What's the legal position?', 'Has the threshold been met?' There are times when these questions are useful, but the wider social care system can influence us to take a position where these are the only types of useful questions.

In the 'domain of explanation', there are at least as many possible 'truths' as there are people involved in the interaction, and therefore there is no single truth which can be discovered. Within this domain, the professional uses curiosity to explore a range of possible ideas and perspectives.

When speaking from the domain of explanation, questions might include, 'What is this family's set of beliefs about receiving help from social workers?', 'What are the differences between what the mother believes is best for her daughter, and what the professional team believe is best for her daughter?' 'How do these differences affect the way we communicate?'

Working collaboratively with families in the domain of explanation helps workers feel supported enough to be curious, and to accept that their perceptions of a family's situation are just that - their perceptions that don't necessarily represent 'the truth'.

The 'domain of aesthetics' is concerned with the ethical aspects of the work, including the influence of the agency, and social and political ideas. Decisions about which domain should be occupied at any time is taken within the domain of aesthetics, with the aim of the transitions being smooth.

In their study of the impact of introducing systemic ideas into supervision, Dugmore and colleagues (2018) found that social workers recognised that, following the exercise of curiosity in the domain of explanation, it is important that there is a pull towards the domain of production, where discussions about risk take place. It was seen as important that supervision conversations were able to move between these two domains. Introducing this model improved the asking of questions, the amount of time spent considering other possibilities in the domain of explanation, and ethical aspects in the domain of aesthetics.

The Domains of Action

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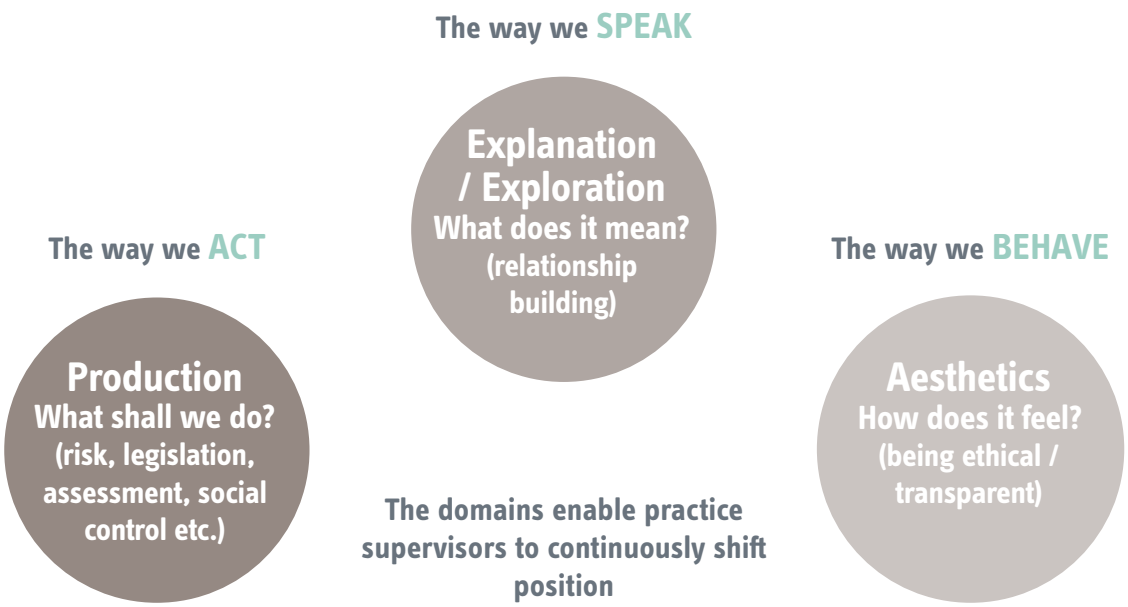

Figure 3: The Domains of Action (Lang et al, 1990)

Implications for practice:

- In order to encourage understanding, talk through the above diagram of the three domains during a supervision conversation.
- From time to time, pause and reflect together upon which domain your conversation is currently situated in. You can then be curious about how the conversation might change if you moved your conversation to another domain.
- Notice which domain(s) you feel most drawn towards, and which domain(s) feel more difficult to occupy.

Hypothesising and curiosity

Within positive supervision relationships, supervisors can use the technique of hypothesising in order to support professional curiosity and to encourage conversations to remain in the domain of explanation. Hypotheses are ideas about how family members are influencing and being influenced by each other in interactional patterns (Cecchin, 1987).

To be most useful, they involve all elements of the family system, and take account of their wider social network and identity. It is not important whether they are right or wrong, their function is to challenge fixed ideas about individuals and families, and to promote consideration of alternative possibilities.

Hypothesising about families can act as a balance to the pressure within social care settings to seek positions of safe certainty and to remain within the domain of production. It is an essential part of considering what is informing our work with families, and challenging the tendency for 'confirmation bias' (Munro, 2008) by provoking us into shifting position and considering alternative explanations, which is a key part of the supervisor's role.

In an empirical study of group reflective supervision in a children's services setting, Bingle and Middleton (2019) found that social workers were able to generate multiple ideas about families using the technique of hypothesising, but that there was a tendency for them to be drawn towards finding the 'right' answer. As a result, hypotheses tended to reflect a first order position, and to draw upon dominant social stories and assumptions.

For example, in a group supervision session, the authors observed social workers and supervisors quickly adopt the idea that a mother had 'turned a blind eye' to harm suffered by her daughter, a position that reflects the dominant social story that blames mothers and female carers for harms suffered by their children, and absolves fathers and male carers from responsibility. This highlights the risk that hypothesising can reinforce dominant social stories if it is engaged in without sufficient awareness of power and difference.

For hypothesising to be most useful within supervision, and to promote better outcomes for children and families, workers need to be encouraged to be self-reflexive (Burnham, 2005). This involves considering how their social position and professional role might be influencing the way they construct their ideas about the interactional patterns within families (Bingle and Middleton, 2019).

A second order position would also encompass the consideration of the impact of their presence on the functioning of the family system. Self-reflexivity also usefully includes consideration about how aspects of their social identity as a person may influence how they interpret interactional patterns within families, and consideration of their emotional responses to families.

Using systemic approaches to explore perceptions of risk and responses to risk

Many organisations have started to use Mason's framework of safety and certainty as a prompt for supervision conversations, as it offers a useful lens for considering ways of balancing the need to attend to risk, as well as the need to maintain collaborative relationships in a context of uncertainty (Mason 1993, 2019).

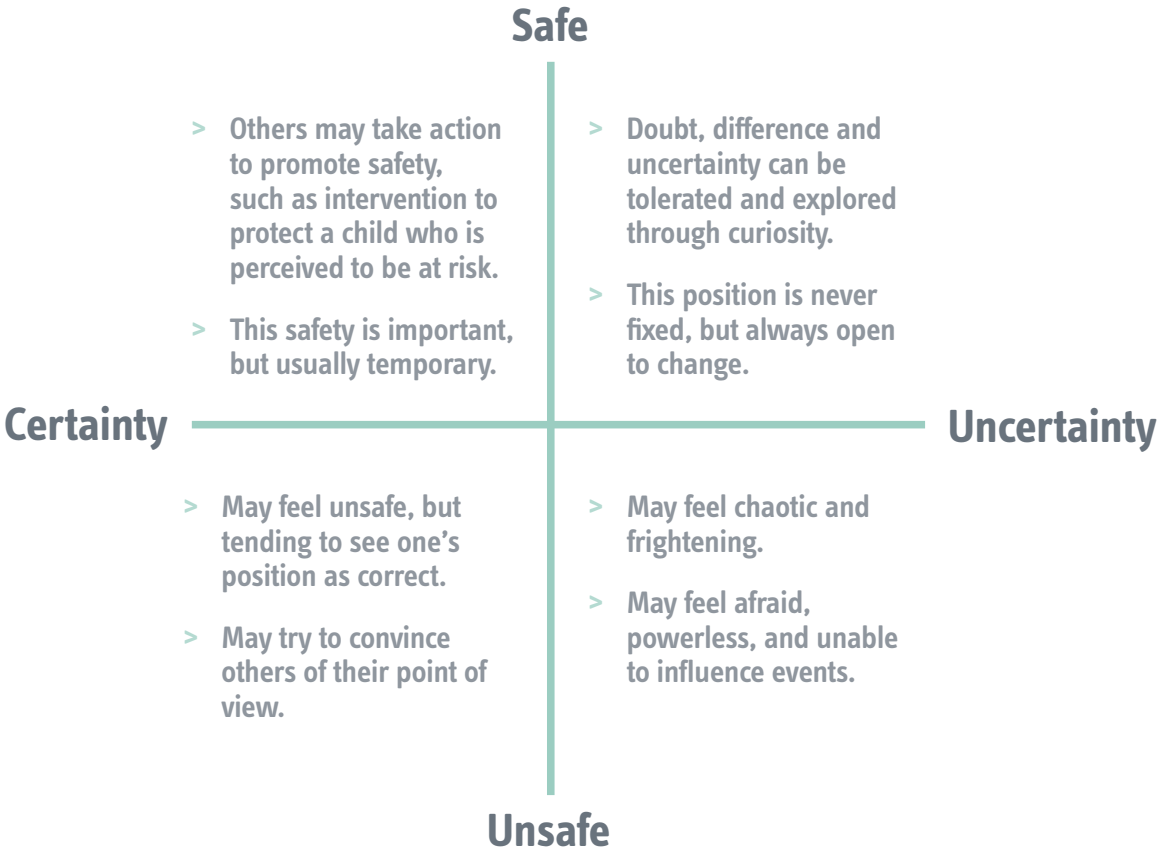

Figure 4: adapted from Mason (1993, 2019)

In this model, safe uncertainty is positioned as the quadrant which encourages the exploration of ideas and opens up possibilities for difference. Linking with the theory of Domains of Action, safe uncertainty is the position which most promotes working in the domain of explanation. The quadrant of safe certainty may also need to be visited at times, but usually only temporarily, when the need to act is paramount, described by Mason as 'first stage protection' (2019).

In a recent paper, Mason elaborates on the shifts he associates with a move towards a position of safe uncertainty (2019). These shifts involve increased willingness to use curiosity to explore alternative ideas, together with a willingness to try different ideas in order to promote change.

Trying out new ways of communicating with families involves an increased willingness to take risks, and an openness to the ideas and contributions of other people. Mason uses the concept of 'authoritative doubt' to describe a position which balances being able to 'own' our professional expertise, whilst also being aware of its limits.

This position can offer an increased sense of emotional containment, based on an acceptance that not everything is knowable and not all harm can be prevented. The model can also be used to explore the emotional dimension of social work activity by inviting curiosity about how it feels to be closer to uncertainty than certainty when managing risk, i.e. how possible does this feel, and what does it evoke in the worker and the supervisor? A learning tool based on the notion of safe uncertainty is available online.

Implications for practice:

- To help you consider where you and the family you work with might be placed, put Mason's framework of safety and certainty (figure 4) between you on a table during supervision.
- Encourage curiosity about which quadrant you are in, consider how long it is appropriate to remain there, and what possibilities may exist if you are able to move and occupy other quadrants.
- If you are occupying the quadrant of safe certainty, how might it be helpful to be able to recognise and name this, and to name your emotional responses to this?

Questions to promote a move towards safe uncertainty:

- What ideas have we not considered? Whose point of view are we paying too much / too little attention to?
- What small changes could you consider making in the way in which you communicate with this family / your colleagues / me as your supervisor? How can you pay attention to the outcomes, and decide whether or not to repeat the experiment?
- How do you think that aspects of your self-identity (social GGRRAAACCEEESSS, life script etc.) may be useful / not useful in collaborating with this family? How are these factors influencing our supervision relationship?
- How can you use your expertise in a way that's helpful to this family? What would be too much? What might be too little?
- Who in this family has access to ideas, qualities or resources that they don't yet have the opportunity to contribute?
- What skills / resources / qualities do you possess that you have not yet had the opportunity to access in your relationship with this family?
- What feelings are evoked by this family? How able do you feel to acknowledge uncertainty while managing risk?

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

Conclusion

Weaving systemic ideas into the activities of supervision can seem daunting at first, especially if your relationship with these ideas is new. Mason offers useful advice to guide us when we are experimenting with difference (2019, p6).

Change = A commitment to experimenting with (small) differences

+

Action

+

Repetition

+

Time

Mason encourages us to start with small changes, and to anticipate that making changes will involve many repetitions of small differences over time. These reflective questions may help to support your steps towards change:

Reflective questions:

- What small change can you make?
- How will you notice and make sense of the impact of the change?
- Who can give you feedback?
- How can you maintain your motivation to experiment with small difference?

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Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
@researchIP #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Lydia Guthrie, Co-Director, Change Point

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