



## Supervision in child protection: a space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance?

Liz Beddoe, Harry Ferguson, Lisa Warwick, Tom Disney, Jadwiga Leigh & Tarsem Singh Cooner

To cite this article: Liz Beddoe, Harry Ferguson, Lisa Warwick, Tom Disney, Jadwiga Leigh & Tarsem Singh Cooner (2021): Supervision in child protection: a space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance?, *European Journal of Social Work*, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 26 Aug 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1204



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Supervision in child protection: a space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance?

### Ko te aratakinga i roto i te whakamaru tamariki: He mokowā me te wāhi mō te whakaaroaro, he rite rānei ki te oma taumano tārūrū nui mō te tautukunga?

Liz Beddoe<sup>a</sup>, Harry Ferguson<sup>b</sup>, Lisa Warwick<sup>c</sup>, Tom Disney<sup>d</sup>, Jadwiga Leigh<sup>e</sup> and Tarsem Singh Cooner<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work, Te Kura Tauwhiro Tangata, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; <sup>c</sup>Centre for Social Work, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK; <sup>d</sup>Department of Social Work, Education & Community Wellbeing, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; <sup>e</sup>Sociology Department, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

#### ABSTRACT

Supervision is promoted as an essential element of effective professional practice in social work. Its benefits include promoting reflective social work and assisting with the management of the emotions generated in challenging practice. This article reports on the observations of supervision in a 15-month ethnographic study of social work teams on two very different sites in England, one using hot-desking the other a small team design. Our findings show how supervision is constituted by temporal, spatial and relational elements and that some current organisational designs do not create the ideal environment for reflective supervision to flourish. Far from providing an opportunity for containment of challenging emotions, supervision was sometimes a source of stress. It was experienced as reflective and containing where managers were accessible and space was made for thinking in a context of openness that encouraged regular deep conversations about current work. By experiencing the atmospheres of supervisory encounters and organisational cultures, this study has enabled us to produce new insights into the embodied nature of supervision as it is lived.

#### WHAKARĀPOPOTOTANGA

Whakatairangatia ai te aratakinga hei huānga waiwai o te haratau ngaio o te tauwhiro tangata. Ko ētahi o ōna hua ko te whakatairanga i te tauwhiro tangata whakaaroaro me te tautāwhi i te whakahaerenga o ngā kare ā-roto ka toko ake i te haērautau mātātaki. Ko tā tēnei tuhinga he pūrongorongo i ngā kitenga e pā ana ki te aratakinga i tētahi whakamātau mātai whanonga tangata i ētahi uepū tauwhiro tangata i runga i ngā wāhi mahi e rua e tino rerekē ana i Ingarangi, ko tētahi e whakamahi ana i te tēpu mahi wera, ko

#### KEYWORDS

Supervision; child protection; social work; ethnography

#### KUPUMATUA

Aratakinga; whakamaru tamariki; tauwhiro tangata; mātai momo tangata

**CONTACT** Liz Beddoe  e.beddoe@auckland.ac.nz  School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work, Te Kura Tauwhiro Tangata, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, 74 Epsom Ave, Epsom, Private Bag 92-019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

tētahi e whakamahi ana i te hoahoa uepū iti. Kei te whakaatu ā mātou kitenga e hangaia ana te aratakinga i ngā huānga ā-wā, ā-mokowā, ā-hononga hoki, ka mutu, tērā ētahi hoahoa ā-whakahaere kāhore i te whakarite i te taiao paruhi e pāhautea ai te aratakinga whakaaroaro. Arā, i ētahi wā, ko te aratakinga te pūtake o te ahotea, ehara kau i te tāwharau e kaupēhia ai ngā kare ā-roto mātātaki. Ka wheakotia te aratakinga hei mea whakaaroaro, kaupēhi hoki, i ngā wā e wātea ana ngā kaiwhakahaere, i ngā wā hoki ka whakawāteatia he wā mō te whakaaro i te horopaki tuwhera e whakatenatenatia ai he matapaki hōhonu, auau hoki, mō ngā mahi o te wā. Nā te wheako i ngā wairua o ngā tūtakinga ā-whakahaere me ngā ahurea ā-pūtahi kua puta mai i tēnei whakamātau ētahi hinātore hou e pā ana ki te āhua whakatinana o te aratakinga me tōna wheako ā-oranga.

## Introduction

It is a long-held assumption that supervision produces better outcomes for service users when it encompasses reflective, supportive, educational and case management functions (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Significant reviews of child welfare practice have acknowledged supervision as an important aspect of practice (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011) and accordingly there have been calls for improvements to supervision for child protection social workers in England, with greater emphasis on reflective practice (Bartoli & Kennedy, 2015; Turner-Daly & Jack, 2014). Manthorpe et al. (2013, p. 54) note the presence of a kind of ‘dialectical approach’ in the discussions of supervision in social work, with supervision seen ‘as largely introspective (a therapeutic model) or its antithesis, depicting it as instrumental – a tool for surveillance and the soft exercise of power and authority’ (p. 54). Echoing this perception Harvey and Henderson (2014) comment on the dangers of a ‘dichotomous view of supervision where it is regarded as either nurturing or controlling; all about feelings or all about procedure’.

Despite the growing literature, very little is known about what actually happens in supervision sessions, as it is rarely observed in any depth. To address this gap, we included observations of supervision and staff support during our 15-month ethnographic study of child protection work in two social work offices in England (Ferguson et al., 2019). This article presents the findings from our observations of supervision as it was practised. We found supervision, as provided by managers, was often focused on case management processes, such as targets and timescales, at the expense of critical reflection and emotional support. Our article has two main aims: first, to report how organisational design impacted how supervision was practiced at the two sites; and second, to contribute to an understanding of supervision based on the concepts of space, place, relationship and emotional containment.

## Contemporary supervision research

Despite a renewed focus on supervision there have been consistent reports from many contexts that supervision serves largely as a mechanism for managerial oversight and surveillance (Beddoe, 2010, 2011; Dill & Bogo, 2009; Strand & Badger, 2005; Wilkins et al., 2017). Research reported over the same period notes that effective supervision is associated with job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and retention, helps reduce staff turnover, and is significantly linked to employees’ perceptions of organisational support (Carpenter et al., 2013). Mor Barak et al. (2009) noted that supervision is most effective when providing task assistance, social and emotional support, and the positive presence of a valued supervisory relationship. The emotionally charged nature of child protection work places demands on social workers, requiring opportunities for reflection and support and Carpenter et al. (2013, p. 1852) noted the importance of

attending to supervision process and recommended incorporating qualitative methods including 'observation and conversation'.

In the last decade a flurry of research on supervision has been reported (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Turner-Daly & Jack, 2014; Wilkins, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2017), including studies of recorded supervision sessions. Wilkins et al. (2017), for instance, provide a snapshot highlighting the discrepancy between what the supervisors expect to do in supervision sessions and what audio-recordings show actually occurs. This study consisted of two phases: analysing 34 audio-recordings of supervision sessions provided by first line managers and conducting group interviews with managers concerning their perceptions of good supervision (Wilkins et al., 2017). Despite managers' perceptions that essential components of quality supervision were child-focused, reflective, supportive, and analytical, analysis showed that sessions did not proceed as planned and became primarily managerial oversight. While managers checked in with supervisees about their general well-being, once the session focused on casework with particular families there were few references to emotion and while the social workers' feelings were sometimes sought, 'there was only limited consideration of why the social worker felt a particular way or how their feelings might be impacting on their behaviour and decision-making' (Wilkins et al., 2017, p. 946).

Space and place are increasingly used as metaphorical devices in social work literature (Bryant & Williams, 2020) and can also be found in participant accounts of 'good' supervision. Beddoe (2011) identified numerous references to these terms in the earlier literature, where space and place were used to explain a state of *being between* – between professional self and personal self, between the 'office' and home or other places. These create categories of spatial and temporal elements in supervision sessions as communicative events. The use of 'space' to stand for protected time (temporal) and 'place' to stand for the room that provides the context (locational) are often bracketed with ideas about safety (Beddoe, 2011).

In the literature there is an idealised type of supervision where the process is highly focused on the individual's professional and personal development needs. This is often referred to as professional or reflective supervision, to distinguish it from the managerial supervision (for example, Turner-Daly & Jack, 2014). In this article we use the following definition for the term professional supervision:

Supervision ... is a forum for reflection and learning. It is, we believe, an interactive dialogue between at least two people, one of whom is a supervisor. This dialogue shapes a process of review, reflection, critique and replenishment for professional practitioners. (Davys & Beddoe, 2010, p. 21)

This ideal of highly reflective supervision was described as 'sacred time' by a participant in Benton et al.'s (2017) study when exploring how supervision creates the space for reflection, bringing the supervisee into a rewarding focus on professional ideas and skills. A significant benefit of such personally focused supervision is that it can hold the casework that is in focus for discussion, while making room for the wider concerns – the supervisees' development, the self and the emotional content, social work theory and skills, relevant social policy and the macro-context.

There are spatial and temporal considerations in this making of space for reflection on practice. Reflecting the demands of micro-managed social work, with timescales and other audits' shaping practice, employers want social workers who can 'think on their feet' with the capacity for both rapid decision-making and critical reflection while *in situ* in practice. There is now some critique of this expectation. Ferguson (2018), for example, explored the inherent challenges of reflection 'in action', arguing that 'research shows that there are times and situations in which practitioners find that it is better *not* to reflect in the manner advocated in the literature' (p. 417). In his observations of practice, Ferguson discerned that 'the demands of face-to-face work were so great at times that workers could not think about or feel that complexity while they were in it, if they were to be able to focus on service users' needs' (Ferguson, 2018). Ferguson argues that inherent in this expectation is a 'failure to recognise the limits to reflection' because the self has been

'conceptualised as a coherent unproblematic entity, as something distinct and unified that the worker accesses and goes into in order to connect to themselves and their service users' (p. 417). Being *on tap*, of every social worker's 'self' ready to 'think well' and make good decisions in the moment suggests a somewhat perverse and contradictory approach to a more traditional notion of reflection as contemplation. Thus, if reflection is to avoid harm, taking into account Yip's cautions (2006), then the conditions for supervision need to be excellent. We will argue, based on our findings that such conditions include the spatial: quiet, calm and apart from the hubbub of busy shared spaces; the temporal: protected time for reflective discussion, and a third element, the relational, where there is trust, respect and a sense of safety.

Humanist geographer Tuan (1977) captures this sense of safety in space and place well for our purposes: 'Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other' (1977, p. 3). Ideally, supervision should hold this tension, providing both sanctuary from the seemingly ceaseless demands of busy practice environments and the freedom to hold 'not-knowing', uncertainty, creativity and a safe space where one can be one's authentic self and imagine better practice. This protected time is not fixed in a particular location. We observed reflective supervisory discussions about casework which took place 'on the move' within the ceaseless activity of the practice environment. Harvey and Henderson note that reflective supervision offers this space by providing *containment*, 'promoted by a consistent setting and familiar person who has an available mind which is open to the emotional experiences of the practitioner' (2014, p. 344). Containment is neatly described by Bond and Holland (2010, p. 150) as 'gently "holding" that part of you which is feeling emotional and postponing expressing the feelings until a more appropriate time'. Previous studies have asserted that child protection supervision rarely addresses these emotional effects of the work, being mostly about formal case direction, management while participants struggled to make time for reflection, thus reflecting managerial culture (Benton et al., 2017; Wilkins et al., 2017; Wilkins & Jones, 2017).

### **The contribution of this article**

A significant gap in the research is that supervision of casework is rarely observed in any depth or over a significant period. To address this gap, we included observations of supervision in our long-term ethnographic study of child protection work in two teams in England. Our longer-term data collection allowed researchers to see, hear and feel what supervision *is*, when and where that emotional, reflective dimension happens, and to explore the participants' reflections on their supervision over time. Shadowing social work teams over 15 months enabled us to explore the way organisational arrangements impacted the supervision of practice with families. Our findings suggest that organisational culture computer-based case management systems and office design had a bearing on how supervision was experienced and perceived and note that such arrangements may act to stifle reflection and creativity in social work practice. We describe the aspects of space, place and time in the organisational arrangements for professional supervision, as we observed and heard about them. What we found suggests that, in reality, these formal sessions may not create the safe place for containing reflective conversations unless there is a significant commitment to making 'space' for them.

### **Methods**

This article draws on data from a large ethnographic study of child protection practice (Ferguson et al., 2019) conducted 2016–2018, where we explored how social workers develop and sustain relationships with children and families over the longer-term and the influence of organisational cultures, office designs, staff support and supervision on social work practice. It was approved by the ethics committees of the participating universities and the social work services of two local authorities in England.

The sites were chosen to provide diversity in terms of office and system designs. At one site, (HDO) hot-desking was used in a large open-plan office which accommodated 60 social workers.

The team managers were seated in separate offices and supervision was largely conducted in small internal interview rooms. The organisational design of the second site (small team office STO), located practitioners in small team rooms, most of which housed about five staff, made up of the co-location of two to three social workers, a social work team manager, a family support worker and an administrative worker. The research design thus enabled observation of two very different physical sites and organisational designs and the effects of these work spaces on practice and supervision.

Fifteen months of fieldwork were undertaken on each site. During the 402 days spent in the field team members observed 271 practice encounters between social care staff and service users in a variety of settings, including home visits and in addition 54 formal staff supervisions were observed. Interviews and observations were audio-recorded and transcribed and field notes made of less formal discussions between social workers and their managers.

Data were inputted into QSR NVivo 11 software, coded, and thematic analysis and standard techniques of constant comparison were used (Bryman, 2012). Data specifically related to supervision were broadly categorised as formal supervision, live supervision ('on the move') and peer support. In reporting the findings, details have been changed and pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of families, professionals and sites.

## Findings

In any workplace relationship there are organisational, environmental, social and emotional aspects that impact communication styles and behaviour. We observed temporal, spatial and relational elements impacting the supervision which we also explored within interviews. There was a striking paradox that supervision in the open plan HDO office design was conducted in constricting spaces that were anything but open, while the STO design had an openness about it that encouraged regular reflective conversations about current work, much of which occurred outside of formal supervision sessions, which then provided space for personal reflection. A surprising element was the time spent on supervision, especially in the HDO site where formal supervision sessions were often very long and focused on the computer screen. Computer systems in social work have attracted criticism as being 'IT' led rather than social work led (Hill & Shaw, 2011; White et al., 2008) and in many sessions we observed on this site, the structure of the supervision seemed dominated by the computerised recording system and its timescales, hence it was managerial rather than reflective. From our conversations with managers, it was apparent that engagement with each case largely meant them giving case directions and recording. Sessions were thus managerially driven by a common understanding of good practice and the demands of the audit/inspection culture. It had been explained to us that a prior audit had identified gaps in the regularity of supervision and there was thus a greater emphasis on compliance.

Supervision sessions were often very long, held in confined and stuffy spaces, with a narrow and enervating focus on case management. The HDO data reveal a narrative of supervision as a necessary but a painful process to be endured. Rather than containment of challenging emotions (Harvey & Henderson, 2014), the highly managerial HDO supervision often added to stress and anxiety. Our observations have enabled us to produce new insights into the embodied nature of supervision as it is lived, by experiencing the atmospheres of supervisory encounters and organisational cultures. Beginning with the HDO site we found supervision was experienced by some workers as physically and emotionally debilitating and far from being emotionally supportive, was a source of dread. The researchers' notes often echoed these emotions.

### *Supervision: a gruelling marathon*

As noted above HDO supervision sessions were very long, and subject to critical comments by many social workers and some managers.

[The duration of supervision] varies completely depending on the manager, I have had supervision with some managers when it has taken easily eight or nine hours a month, probably even more, ... [this] was frustrating and not helpful. But then I think with [my current] manager my last supervision was two hours but we only got through I think about half of my case load so I think ... I think three hours is average I would say. (Annie HDO)

When asked about how focus could be maintained over such a long time, there was a sense of resigned endurance. In the second half of a long session, a social worker took her boots off and curled up on a chair, with the effect was that she appeared smaller, hunched and tired. For some what was sacrificed was the time for more personal engagement about the impact of the work, or reflections on process. Annie commented that colleagues have reported a manager saying 'oh we are going to skip the bit where we talk about you because we have got too many cases to go through'.

So, there was often no exploration about social workers' well-being, which Annie felt was an important part of supervision.

... Some managers didn't ever do that, ask about me, I think I have had ... I think out of those six managers, two or three, I don't think one ever asked me in supervision asked me about like, how I am, or that kind of thing. (Delia HDO)

Harriet felt it could be better organised: 'you should have a supervision over two days, half your caseload on one day, half your caseload on another'. The pattern of doing all cases in one prolonged session was frustrating:

all 28 cases, 40 minutes per case sometimes, 30 minutes per case where you're just sat there regurgitating everything you already know and waiting for the manager to type it up and then finding out you haven't done something you should have done. (Harriet HDO)

HDO Supervision sessions were conducted in a small interview room, an interior office with no windows, brightly lit and with little scope for the participants to spread out notes or resources. Interviews confirmed what we observed and felt that supervision was a burden, to be endured and which cut across practitioners' time to do their work. Harriet approached supervision with dread:

[the room is] just tiny and you know, in your head you're just constantly thinking oh my God I've got that to do [so much], I've got four hours and after supervision I'm going to have an hour left of the day and then I'm going to be [working] into my time that I don't get paid for. (Harriet HDO)

Some social workers were observed strategically managing the use of supervision time. When Sally asks Jenny if there is anyone she wants to start with, Jenny asks to start with a specific family because she is 'worried that [parent] is going to have me for breakfast'. The researcher's observation notes record that 'this strikes me as a good tactic for these long supervisions, allocating time at the beginning when everything is fresh to deal with families the social workers are worried about'.

Supervision was a marathon: the researcher notes, 'I am dying observing this. I check the clock; we've still got 1 hour and 45 minutes left!! I notice small beads of sweat on Sally's head, these supervisions are so excruciating!' The physical impact is unpleasant, it's hot, cramped and they feel unproductive, but the work must be done:

The social worker and her manager realise that they have still got loads of cases to go, Sally gets her diary out to book a new date to catch up on the rest of the cases. Jenny says next time we need to book in a whole day, Sally replies 'it's too much isn't it? You can't sit here all day but you've got to get them done'. (Field note)

A field note on another day reports a supervision session taking almost three hours in this unpleasant room:

10:00 Sally is at the computer going through cases and making notes. The social worker, Andy, is at the side of the desk behind the door ... looking at his tablet. It's really bright in the room from the light and it's hurting my eyes. And worse thing is that we still have 10 cases to go through. Andy has 26 children in 17 cases.

12:40 Supervision comes to an end. 2 hours 40 minutes.



### ***Locked into procedure, policies, and guidance: managerial supervision***

The computer-facing management style of supervision in this HDO setting seemed to constrain the free flow of exploration, instead taking a form determined by the order of cases in the system. Supervision conducted in the small, barren interview room was emotionally stifling, creating both physical and relational barriers to the expression of feelings, and the deeper reflection that requires a different environment. This confinement produced prolonged, tedious sessions that social workers felt were audit exercises to be endured.

It is important to note that we found that managers were also critical of these organisational arrangements that made supervision so problematic. In the following section we explore one manager's perspective on the HDO supervision model. Angela, an experienced manager, found supervision sessions often to be boring, not because of the social workers but because of the tight system that imposed a process:

Boring! ((laughs)) Well they are, because, I don't know, they're just repetitive, if you know what I mean? And some of them, some of it, it feels sometimes that you've got to write things for the sake of writing things, because nothing's changed, and you're trying to think back.

Angela noted that it served different purposes for some workers

because obviously they need challenging. But, like, with Helen, she knows what she's doing, and, just that odd bit where you think, well, have you thought about [for example] that mum's been raped, so how much has that impacted on her neglecting her kids?

When asked if she had always found supervision sessions to be boring and if not, what had changed, Angela felt that the process had become much more prescriptive, and it was 'locked into procedure, policies, and guidance, and all the rest of it':

There's a more prescribed format for it. I'm not saying we don't cover anything different probably to what we used to cover, but sometimes you could say 'nothing's changed on this case', and so you wouldn't discuss it. And certainly, for instance, like [case names] we have just been talking about that, actually, because we've been talking about it last week, I guess I could've written that up without the social worker being present ... But it's got to be done.

### ***The challenges of making space for safe reflection in an audit culture***

Our observations revealed that making space for a more reflective supervision was very difficult in the HDO. Harvey and Henderson (2014) suggest that problems with making space for reflective supervision may reflect 'the tensions inherent in the profession between developing expertise and managing performance, which may replicate care and control splits in child protection work with families' (p. 343). In the impetus to contain anxiety, reflection is a luxury that managers may not feel they can afford.

Since [a prior critical audit] they're trying to produce reflective discussion, and I think the reality is, you can't do reflective discussion ... there isn't enough time. If you did proper reflective discussion on every case, [doing an analysis] to try and capture what you're talking about, then I'd need at least two, three days per social worker. They haven't got the time, and I haven't got the time to do that. (Angela)

Two social workers were interviewed together to explore their experience of supervision and reported a lack of opportunities to build a supervision relationship. Annie (HDO) has had six managers in two years. Delia asks Annie 'have you ever had reflective supervision?' Annie says 'no never. I don't know if I would recognise it'. Delia replies 'I had it once!' In another interview Harriet expressed disappointment with the supervision she was receiving: 'I was taught in uni what supervision is and it's not that'. Harriet found supervision didn't offer what she expected, rather, paradoxically, the containment aspect of supervision seemed more directed at the manager's needs:



I feel like it should be about reflecting on how you're feeling, how your values are impacting on your job and I just find it's just about managers being reassured that things are being done. So it's like really it's just about managers knowing that you're doing your job properly so that they can look like they've done their job properly, I don't feel like it's ... actually for my benefit.

As a consequence, supervision was a source of additional stress, rather than offering a process that was helpful to her:

I come out of that supervision with 50 [things] to do as well as just getting over the fact that we've just had five hours of supervision. (Harriet, HDO)

Supervision was not only a gruelling endurance exercise, it was, for Harriet, a source of stress, and represents the opposite of containment, with anxiety experienced before and during sessions:

I come out more traumatised after supervision than before going in and I get anxious before my supervision because I'm like 'shit have I done everything, are my visits up to date, is everything done, is there anything that she's going to go oh well you, why haven't you done that you know what I mean?' It, it's just anxiety and I don't think supervision should be like that at all, it doesn't feel like it. (Harriet, HDO)

Robert spoke regretfully about an ideal of supervision relationship that he doesn't find consistently available. For him the missing element is the relational:

my current manager is not a very, she's not a people person I'd say, so she's very, is very work centred, very direct and no beating around the bush. (Robert HDO)

The warmth of a supervision relationship is important to Robert, as it provides an emotional climate necessary for the disclosure of difficulties:

I think you'd, if you warmed to someone and have that, you know, obviously there's a difference between managers and workers and you, you need to keep that sort of balance in check. But if you had a bit of a personal relationship with them then you could be more inclined to go and talk to them about difficulties.

And ... you need to be able to do that because you know, touch wood, so far, I haven't anything that's caused me any issues that would impact on my work but if you can't raise issues like that to your manager then you know, that could be potentially dangerous.

Ferguson (2018) notes that in a previous research study there were observed instances of 'suspended self-preservation' (p. 420) where practitioners were suspending feelings – 'consciously turning reflection on and off to meet the demands of the situation' (p. 421). Robert's comments above suggest that this suspension of feelings might also happen in supervision if the manager's style was not encouraging of the expression of emotion, and where time and space were not made available:

You have that space and that time to be able to, to air things like that but also it makes you feel valued ... [so that] you're not going in there and just saying, right what's, what's the latest, what's going on, what's happening, right well you need to do this, this and this. (Robert HDO)

In many situations observed in the course of our fieldwork on both sites we noted that social workers suspended expression of their difficult, conflicted thoughts and feelings while in situ and immediately after. There seemed to be a marked preference for the emotional aspects of the work to be 'parked' for later conversations. In this process it was important for workers to have the ability to self-regulate in the moment, with a view to future expression of what might be difficult to address in situ. This kind of containment is better experienced as a 'postponement, not suppression, of expressing and exploring feelings' (Davys & Beddoe, 2010, p. 166). If opportunities to address these 'postponed' feelings are not provided this suppression may be harmful.

### ***Making space – the physical environment makes a difference***

The physical environment of the STO site markedly provided for smaller more intimate work spaces with the social workers working in smaller groups. Field observation notes suggested room to explore, a greater sense of cohesion and longer duration relationships. Mickey reflected the impact of the office design:

maybe it's the way we're seated as well, the four of us [together] we can very easily pick up on signs of stress and immediately draw it out of them you know, try to see what the problem is and intervene ... yeah just that, that good ethos, it's where there's a kind of healthy, yeah, a bit like a family ... where you feel you know there's a genuine caring, sharing ethos.

Mickey explained the value of 'proper' professional supervision for him:

I'm really for the idea of proper reflective supervision and really kind of stepping back and, well if you have the luxury of, of the time ... just being able to feel safe with your supervisor, to feel safe to throw things around and without, without the fear of looking unprofessional, or looking [like you] don't know what you're doing you know I suppose.

However, there were some interesting reflections that suggest some similar dynamics across the two sites. While the STO model reflected a more personal style of supervision, rather than long computer-driven sessions there was still the spectre of compliance-driven audit culture. Mickey was interviewed after his supervision with Loreen and commented:

I suppose it's a relief, to get through it. I don't necessarily look forward to it unless there's a vested interest in me offloading I suppose, stuff that's been bothering me, yeah so it is a huge help.

I suppose a lot of the time I'm kind of wary that it's kind of, there's an element of micromanagement involved with it as well because of the way we work at the moment.

Mickey was able to differentiate the pressure for 'micromanagement' from his own manager's personal style:

Loreen is very good in supervision; she's a good listener and goes at the right pace. She allows plenty of opportunity for me to say if I need to think differently about a case or, to do the reflective stuff a bit more. She'll do her utmost to allow that time and split supervision over two sessions, if need be.

Reflective supervision was intensively championed in the STO and it was commonly held that the organisational design of the office contributed greatly to reflective practice. Interviewed about the site's practice, Miranda, the line manager of the team leaders, commented:

when we've been functioning our best, I think it's about embracing the madness of it, the excitement, the interest, the exhilaration, and liking it for all of those positive things. ... You know, and embracing all those things, having in place in quite a natural, easy way, those support mechanisms. So, you've got the manager getting, regular, rounded supervision in all the right qualities that we know about, to the manager giving supervision, the unit atmosphere of support and then the whole office ... there's a little sort of feeling of a social element in the atmosphere in our office meetings

The proximity afforded in the STO model enabled Loreen's team, including two really experienced social workers, to engage frequently:

I do like this way of working, that we're all sat together, I feel we're a really close unit and being able to form those relationships because we're together all the time and yeah, they feel like they're able to approach me whenever.

In this organisational design, supervision was often part of an on-going conversation that began informally in the small team office and flowed into formal supervision meetings.

Loreen noted that in the previous design the managers supervised teams of eight or nine social workers and were separate from the team:

I mean for instance, this room was Gabrielle's room before the change and she'd have the door closed quite a lot and people would feel ... like you had to knock on the door but you'd only knock if it was really important, because you knew that she was busy.

### ***Time-space and pressure***

In the STO there was an appreciation of time as both a limitation and sometimes a source of pressure, but an opportunity for reflection in depth. Loganbill et al. (1982, p. 28) described the 'sense of time as a gift' as a significant supervisory variable. When Andrea, a manager, was asked about her supervision philosophy, she distinguished between her 'guiding principles and the reality'. The principles were grounded in the importance of the work and 'getting that right'. Caseloads are high, the pressure is unrelenting and good supervision provides that gift of time

I believe in supervision [because] you're going to really struggle unless you have supervision. Because you need some time to go away and think about the children, what you're doing, what you want, where you want to go. And so, you need that time to stop and think, otherwise the work that you're doing with the families is potentially just going to be a bit meaningless.

Supervision was also about the provision of time and space to assemble and analyse all the information the social workers have gathered:

So you might write an assessment but sometimes it's good to think about and talk about it. And because I talk and I think, that's a really important thing for me, so I wouldn't survive without supervision and I probably talk way more than I should, but that's how I work things out and to process them as well

The researcher asked Andrea if 'when you're supervising staff do you, do you feel able to give that space, like for people to do that process?'

So, it's really hit or miss which is why I said there are principles and then the reality. So, I know without a doubt when it gets really busy, I get very focused on just trying to sort of pull together the main bits, so I think I get very focused on risk management

While time was a significant feature of many discussions and observations of supervision, Andrea articulated the conundrum of equating time with quality, because of the time allowed and also recognising that time is a precious resource:

I would love to do supervision better, I mean, if that makes any sense. I do still try and have quite long supervisions which is, it's one of the things that ... we, we did look at actually because it took quite a lot of time out and there was a bit about, I wonder if that should be slightly less.

Further examination of her supervisions though revealed that she was exploring the work with some families in depth and being more focused:

as long as we did it in a, in a clear way, so we could say, actually that family did need a bit more time to talk about. Then so it wasn't a waste of, not that it will ever be a waste of time.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Dilemmas, contradictions and uncertainty are pervasive features of social work practice, and perhaps never more omnipresent than in child protection. 'Good' supervision involves listening, observing and processing emotion and being able to critically question practice while retaining trust (Egan et al., 2017). Our aims in this article were, first, to report on the impact organisational design and second, to contribute to an understanding of supervision in space, place and time. We argue here that supervision experience can be seen as a complex interplay between its temporal, spatial and relational elements. These elements are not all distinct and discrete, rather they blend into one another. Space, place and time are features of the organisational design. The 'space' for 'good' supervision is created by 'making time' and a comfortable place in which to develop the relationship, and

to do the important work of emotional containment (Harvey & Henderson, 2014). Time is inversely linked to a sense of satisfaction with the degree of control. Too much time spent in prolonged sessions of case management is experienced as oppressive and constricting: 'wasted time'. Time is positively linked by social workers and managers to satisfaction when it is seen as invested in *quality*: 'thinking time'.

In the organisational design and compliance-driven culture of the HDO we found that much of the observed discussion of supervision focused on the prolonged computer-facing sessions, in uncomfortable spaces, dreaded equally by social workers and their managers. Similar findings were noted by Benton et al. (2017, p. 300) who reported that the organisation they studied had shifted from the 'culture of a learning organization but, due in part at least to external economic shifts, has moved to a culture focused on compliance'. Furthermore, Benton et al. observed a 'paradoxical finding' in their data that 'the organization's culture shift toward more accountability might actually be impairing staff's ability to provide competent, quality services; and thus, potentially leading toward outcries of client harm or neglect' (Benton et al., 2017, p. 300). We wonder if the nature of the direction of process, led by the prompts on the computer screen were less focused on performance management, recording and more on reflection could supervision be experienced differently. Could more social work input be fed into the design of the IT system to enable a better supervision experience? While our study was undertaken in England, the literature we have drawn on suggests that the concerns about compliance-driven supervision seem to resonate in many different countries.

The physical and spatial aspects of supervision in the HDO were critical as they provided neither comfort nor containment. Managers were housed apart from their teams in shared offices, so supervision took place in small, Spartan and impersonal internal meeting rooms. For the researchers, the observations of supervision seemed interminable. We experienced what the participants did – hot, stuffy, uncomfortable sessions that dragged on and often seemed lacking real purpose beyond compliance.

We concluded that in the HDO this prolonged enervating supervision was counterproductive, leading to exhaustion, boredom, and at times intensifying the postponement of emotional expression, which often became suppression because the opportunity to express emotions, to undertake deeper reflection never came. Supervision perversely came to mirror practice complexity where the demands of compliant recording and meeting timescales were so great at times that it was difficult to focus on workers' own needs and professional development.

While time pressures and work demand also featured in discussion of supervision in the STO, the organisational design of smaller teams seated together at their own desks with their managers, seemed better placed to facilitate relational supervision that allowed for introspection in a more therapeutic space, while not neglecting the oversight that is an important part of the supervisory role in children's services. This office design reduced the dichotomy of compliance-driven versus reflective perceptions of supervision characterised in earlier literature. The small team design facilitated peer support and proximity of supervisors and social workers enabled the building of stronger relationships, and supervision was validated by enabling space for reflection.

The more challenging and unhappier climate in the HDO saw many people leaving or with the intention to leave. Elsewhere we have noted a significant difference in the retention of social workers at the two sites (Ferguson et al., 2020). During the 15-month fieldwork, 42 social workers left the HDO, compared with only five in the STO. Given prior knowledge that supervision assists staff retention we have demonstrated that reflective supervision struggles to thrive in an environment that doesn't support its temporal, spatial and relational elements. The context of practice is ever-changing and since the study period supervisor development has received greater focus and resourcing. While extensive in scope and volume of data, this study represents a snapshot in time of two sites in England and cannot be taken as fixed and unchanging. Further research is needed to assess how training interventions might improve practice.

Our findings, including concerning these bald facts about retention, suggest that computer-facing and compliance-driven supervision is not be meeting the needs of social workers and indeed is diminishing their experience and well-being, leading them to search for better workplaces. The participants in this study, both managers and social workers, recognised the problem, but the pressure of audit and targets made it very challenging to improve supervision. While by no means without flaws, the design of the STO points towards potential improvement.

## Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful to the local authorities, managers, social workers, and administration staff for their generosity in allowing us to observe and interview them over a period of 15 months for this study.

## Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was given by the universities of researchers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/N012453/1].

## Notes on contributors

**Liz Beddoe** is Professor of Social Work in the School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work, University of Auckland, NZ. Her research interests are in critical perspectives on social work education, professional supervision in health and social care, the sociology of professions, the professionalisation project of social work, and media framing of social issues and professions.

**Harry Ferguson** is Professor of Social Work in the Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Birmingham, UK. His research interests include social theory, social work and child protection, domestic abuse, fatherhood, masculinities and using mobile and ethnographic research methods to understand practice and encounters between social workers' service users.

**Lisa Warwick** is Assistant Professor in Social Work at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her research interests are in child and family social work, children in care, children and childhood and the interactions between children, families and professionals.

**Tom Disney** is Senior Lecturer in Childhood Studies in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Well-being, Northumbria University, UK. As a geographer, he is interested in care systems and institutions that intersect with families and childhood.

**Jadwiga Leigh** is Senior Lecturer in Social Work, in the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK. Her research has mainly focused on professional identity and organisational culture in child protection both in the UK and in Belgium using a variety of different methods from ethnography to visual methodology.

**Tarsem Singh Cooner** is Senior Lecturer in Social Work, in the Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Birmingham, UK. His specialism includes combining digital technologies with professional education, learning design and research. He is an Apple-accredited film editor, app developer and a registered social worker.

## References

Bartoli, A., & Kennedy, S. (2015). Tick if applicable: A critique of a national UK social work supervision policy. *Practice*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2015.1048054>

- Beddoe, L. (2010). Surveillance or reflection: Professional supervision in 'the risk society'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1279–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq018>
- Beddoe, L. (2011). External supervision in social work: Power, space, risk, and the search for safety. *Australian Social Work*, 65(2), 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407x.2011.591187>
- Benton, A. D., Dill, K., & Williams, A. E. (2017). Sacred time: Ensuring the provision of excellent supervision. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 32(4), 290–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2017.1408416>
- Bond, M., & Holland, M. (2010). *Skills of clinical supervision for nurses* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Bourn, D. F., & Hafford-Letchfield, P. (2011). The role of social work professional supervision in conditions of uncertainty. *The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, 10(9), 41–56. <http://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9524/CGP/v10i09/50038>
- Bryant, L., & Williams, C. (2020). Place and space in social work. *Qualitative Social Work*, 19(3), 321–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325020918794>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carpenter, J., Webb, C. M., & Bostock, L. (2013). The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: Findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000–2012). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(11), 1843–1853. doi:<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.08.014>
- Davys, A., & Beddoe, L. (2010). *Best practice in professional supervision: A guide for the helping professions*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Dill, K., & Bogo, M. (2009). Moving beyond the administrative: Supervisors' perspectives on clinical supervision in child welfare. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 3(1), 87–105. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15548730802695105>
- Egan, R., Maidment, J., & Connolly, M. (2017). Trust, power and safety in the social work supervisory relationship: Results from Australian research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 31(3), 307–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2016.1261279>
- Ferguson, H. (2018). How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: The possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work. *Social Work Education*, 37(4), 415–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083>
- Ferguson, H., Leigh, J., Cooner, T. S., Beddoe, L., Disney, T., Warwick, L., & Plumridge, G. (2019). From snapshots of practice to a movie: Researching long-term social work and child protection by getting as close as possible to practice and organisational life. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(6), 1706–1723. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz119>
- Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Cooner, T. S., Leigh, J., Beddoe, L., Disney, T., & Plumridge, G. (2020). The nature and culture of social work with children and families in long-term casework: Findings from a qualitative longitudinal study. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(3), 694–703. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12746>
- Harvey, A., & Henderson, F. (2014). Reflective supervision for child protection practice – reaching beneath the surface. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 28(3), 343–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.925862>
- Hill, A., & Shaw, I. (2011). *Social work and ICT*. Sage.
- Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2014). *Supervision in social work* (5th ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Laming, H. (2009). *The protection of children in England. A progress report*. The Stationery Office. [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8646/1/12\\_03\\_09\\_children.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8646/1/12_03_09_children.pdf).
- Loganbill, C., Hardy, E., & Delworth, U. (1982). Supervision: A conceptual model. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 10(1), 3–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000082101002>
- Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J., Hussein, S., Stevens, M., & Sharpe, E. (2013). Content and purpose of supervision in social work practice in England: Views of newly qualified social workers, managers and directors. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(1), 52–68. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct102>
- Mor Barak, M. E., Travis, D. J., Pyun, H., & Xie, B. (2009). The impact of supervision on worker outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Social Service Review*, 83(1), 3–32. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599028>
- Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred system*. The Stationery Office.
- Strand, V. C., & Badger, L. (2005). Professionalizing child welfare: An evaluation of a clinical consultation model for supervisors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(8), 865–880. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.12.001>
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Turner-Daly, B., & Jack, G. (2014). Rhetoric vs. reality in social work supervision: The experiences of a group of child care social workers in England. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(1), 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12191>
- White, S., Hall, C., & Peckover, S. (2008). The descriptive tyranny of the common assessment framework: Technologies of categorization and professional practice in child welfare. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(7), 1197–1217. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn053>
- Wilkins, D. (2017). How is supervision recorded in child and family social work? An analysis of 244 written records of formal supervision. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22(3), 1130–1140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12330>
- Wilkins, D., Forrester, D., & Grant, L. (2017). What happens in child and family social work supervision? *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2), 942–951. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12314>
- Wilkins, D., & Jones, R. (2017). Simulating supervision: How do managers respond to a crisis? *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(3), 454–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1366429>
- Yip, K. S. (2006). Self-reflection in reflective practice: A note of caution. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36(5), 777–788. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch323>