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**Recruitment and Retention of Children and
Family Social Workers: a Case Study**

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Abstract

It is well established that the social work profession endures problems in recruiting and retaining social workers, especially within children and family teams, but reasons for these problems are not fully understood. The inner-workings of social work are little known outside the profession itself, contributing to a climate of public misunderstanding and vilification. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to open a small window on the world of social work practice, and give fresh insight into why recruitment and retention problems exist, and how they might be resolved.

Using a case study of a Children's Services Directorate this study seeks to explore factors contributing to recruitment and retention problems by examining the experiences of employees in four area offices. Documentary analysis of local data, an ethnographic study of the daily lives of social workers, semi-structured in-depth interviews with eighteen social workers, and a nominal group technique group interview with twenty eight senior managers combine to illuminate the issues at the heart of recruitment and retention of social workers.

Although capture of the ecology of social work practice in a universal sense is beyond the aims of this study, a realistic 'snapshot' of social work within North City is achieved. Local North City vacancy and turnover rates that exceed national levels helped identify a need for a new 'real time' vacancy rate that more closely reflects front line experiences, when compared to the rate calculated using a traditional formula. The data reveals challenges and rewards in being a social worker, high levels of resilience, the emotive nature of practice, and wide-ranging complexities associated with recruitment and retention. Disparity in the senior management and social worker relationship contributes to front line workers feeling of undervalued, despite sharing the ultimate aim of protecting and improving the welfare of children. The study indicates the need for careful consideration of how poor communication between senior managers and social workers, and lack of acknowledgement of the emotive nature of practice, feed negative perceptions of experience.

The findings suggest that improvements in the relationship between senior managers and front line workers will help create an environment where problems associated with recruitment and retention can be addressed more constructively. Finally, this study identifies areas for further research and development around the recruitment and retention of social workers.

A deep, deep breath; in, and then, slowly, out. Leaving the all too familiar shoreline, looking ahead at the distant rising sun and feeling the cool breeze on my face, I set sail on my voyage, full of a delicious mix of hope and trepidation, not knowing quite what lay ahead. Life and death and everything in-between touched me throughout, often ensuring I set anchor in times of sometimes desperate need, whether mine or other's. A friendly port made leaving again difficult but, of course, it was the only way to go. I knew from the outset I would complete what I set out to achieve, however, I knew not how difficult this would be. It was satisfying in equal measure but any sense of pleasure took time to filter through the fog.

Now, having achieved my goal, I reflect on what this could all possibly mean. I have completed something many would never believe possible. The many sacrifices made pale into insignificance now I contextualise the last few years of my life and the support I have received from family and friends. Will they ever understand the gratitude I feel? Probably not - I will never forget the acts of kindness and grace in moments of chaos and catastrophe, the belief and humility in times of doubt and need. I blink into the sunlight of the new dawn, already way above the horizon, and realise this so called end is folly and nothing but another temporary pause. Breathe in…breathe out. You see, I've always been sailing these shores and beyond, exploring, needing to know more. I only hope that in producing this thesis I have done justice to all those who have been involved in any way possible. So, whilst this certainly represents an ending, it is also a new beginning. Eyes open wide. Here goes…

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

"One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time" (Andre Gide)

1.1   Thesis Overview

The social work profession, and good quality social work practice, are fundamental to the wellbeing of society. Social workers build positive relationships with people who are often marginalised, vulnerable, or at risk and help them sustain positive change (DSCF 2009). The profession in England, however, is restricted by inadequacies in basic conditions that include: recruitment and retention, frontline resources, training, leadership, and public understanding (DSCF 2009). It has frequently been referred to as, in crisis, over the last 15 years, especially within children and family service provision (Douglas 2002; Lymbery 2004; Asquith et al. 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006; Skills for Care and Development 2009).

Recruitment and retention in international social work is also widely recognised to be problematic (Loughran 2000; McGrath 2001; Wagner, van Reyk and Spence 2001; Burns and Murray 2003; Lonne 2003; United States General Accounting Office 2003; Tham 2006; 2009; Burns 2009). Research suggests these problems are complex, and that wide-ranging reasons exist for the reported crisis. High turnover and vacancy rates are cited as indicators for these contributory factors (Eborral and Garmeson 2001; Audit Commission 2002; CWDC 2008; DSCF 2009).

Although little research-based information is available to underpin anecdotal reports of social workers leaving the profession (Moriarty and Murray 2005), some research has been conducted by the United Kingdom (UK) government aimed at addressing workforce related issues, which may indicate action that informs the current political agenda (2010); namely, the creation of the Social Work Task Force, plans for the Social Work College, and the commissioned review of Children's services by Eileen Munro to be published in 2011.

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In recognition of the complexities in issues relating to recruitment and retention where greater understanding overrides a need for precise and definitive answers, this study aims to illuminate the problems within one employer, and indicate how they might be resolved.

1.1.1 Setting the scene

This study is bounded by two significant social work related publications: The Victoria Climbié Inquiry - Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming (Department of Health 2003a) and Building a safe, confident future - The final report of the Social Work Task Force (DCSF 2009). Both publications have implied the need for major changes within the profession, which appear to stem from government inability to deal effectively with problems associated with recruitment and retention of social workers. Change is a golden thread running through the study relating to policy, legislation, local 'case' particulars, and my personal journey.

The issues in section 1.1 underpin my claim for the relevance of this study, and currency of the findings, in light of much of the fieldwork being conducted throughout 2006. The death of Peter Connelly (Baby P) in 2008 highlighted familiar significant failings, some of which are associated with not having enough social workers to do the job (Laming 2009; LGA 2009b). Whilst change in social work is endemic, Laming's subsequent report following Peter's death signified that still not enough of the necessary kind of changes were being made to address the issues (Laming 2009).

In 2003, the time of the initial Laming report, social workers were generally vilified and misunderstood, representing a profession that was 'damned if it did and damned if it did not'. Whilst this study indicates those concerns remain, the creation of the Social Work Task Force in 2009 appears to signify a new era of hope for positive change, perhaps to be underpinned by Eileen Munro's review, albeit framed by the ubiquitous 'change' at a time of new government and uncertain futures.

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Having left my social worker post in a children and families team in Birmingham to conduct the research, it quickly became important for me to take ownership of the study and make choices about its future direction, in order to meet, not only the study objectives, but the criteria for my PhD studentship (SHU 2010).

The potential for situational irony relating to me leaving my full-time permanent social worker post to study recruitment and retention in social work was not lost on me. I justified my decision in a two ways. Firstly, I believed (and still maintain) that my leaving to further develop my path in social work academia would have some positive impact on the profession through education. Secondly, I worked as an agency social worker for the first two thirds of the study until I gained full time employment as a lecturer at SHU. I should add that I am proud to maintain my social work registration and I have not ruled out a future return in some capacity to social work practice. I will at least return to voluntary work. This would, in part, retain my knowledge and practice based skills that underpin my teaching of social work students.

My decision to 'go' rather than 'stay' was more motivated by my desire to take an unexpected opportunity to develop my career, and potentially have more impact on the profession. It was not related to any unbearably poor practice experiences, or need to escape. That said, I could immediately engage with the subject matter, having personally witnessed the results of recruitment and retention problems on the front line. In the main I thoroughly enjoyed my various social worker jobs, especially the interaction with my service users and team colleagues, and have vivid memories of the many laughs and tears shared. I also particularly enjoyed working with, and learning from, other professions, as well as the pressure of court work and the need to perform to the best of my ability. Perhaps because of my current post, I frequently reflect on service users who touched me, and the lives of those who I touched, and hope that I did somehow 'make a positive difference'. I value the support provided by each of my team managers and appreciate their pivotal role in my social work practice. These feelings, emotions and experiences

will unquestionably pepper the study with bias, so it is aimed that my explicit explanation of my position within the study will inform the reader in this respect.

1.2   The research problem

Moriarty and Murray (2005: 15) highlighted the lack of exit data relating to why people leave social work and stressed the importance of future research considering the wider social work workforce in determining issues around people entering the social work profession. Identified common themes and statistics from the literature indicate that the problems associated with recruitment and retention have been most significant in the last fifteen years, and generally do not appear to be improving.

North City is a pseudonym for a Local Authority Children's Services Department (CSD) identified as the 'case' in this study. It was identified as a typical local authority in that it shared the aforementioned problems. Senior managers and front line workers endured historical and wide-ranging challenges in dealing with recruitment and retention problems, especially within child and family teams. An informed response to local recruitment and retention problems was therefore sought. The aim of the research is to conduct a case study of recruitment and retention in child and family social work in North City, where North City children's services is identified as the 'case' (Merriam 1988; Stake 1995 and 2003; Yin 1994 and 2008).

1.3   The research settings

A local research consortium and Sheffield Hallam University jointly funded this study. Having identified recruitment and retention as problematic within North City CSD, the study aims and objectives were informed by an initial literature review, my personal social worker experience, formal and informal consultations with peers within the child protection work environment, and with North City social workers.

My preparatory work identified four organisational settings within three citywide locations, providing services to children and families, as being those most affected

by the identified problems. Consultations conducted shaped the research question and informed the case study research approach. The empirical research using a range of methods (see section 1.5) was conducted within the most appropriate North City setting for each method. Social workers were, in the main, observed and interviewed within their office base, although two home visits and one court case were attended. A senior management away day in a local venue was also used to conduct a large group interview approach called nominal group technique (NGT).

This study should be considered within a range of contexts as described across the chapters that follow. The previously mentioned concept of change is important here too because five significant organisational changes occurred during the fieldwork:

- Major refurbishment of one large worksite
- Introduction of a tier system to prioritise work
- Change from social services departments to CSDs
- Geographical relocation of teams
- Joint Area Review conducted in 2006

The next section introduces the research question and study objectives that centre on gaining insight into the recruitment and retention of North City social workers.

1.4   The research question

This study explores recruitment and retention problems through the analysis of data generated by the case study. The research question is considered in two parts:

i)   *How can problems of recruiting and retaining children and families' social workers in North City children's services be explained?*

and

ii)   *What evidence is there for resolution of the problems?*

The study objectives are to:

- Critically examine and describe the problem of recruitment and retention in child and family social work in North City.

- Identify key patterns, features, and influences on the problem.

- Document and evaluate the efforts made by North City social services to recruit and retain children and families social workers.

- Analyse and theorise findings within the context of the North City case study, making national and international comparisons.

- Make specific recommendations for good practice in employing agencies and in academic providers of social work education.

1.5   Methodology

The research question is explored using the case study approach that is located within my ontological paradigm of constructivism, and my interpretivist epistemological philosophical framework. These underpinning principles imply the most appropriate research strategy to be qualitative where the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of social workers are explored in relation to issues of recruitment and retention in a children and family department. Social workers retained within the organisational setting are well placed to provide insight into recruitment and retention issues and thereby provide valuable evidence for explanation of, and possible resolutions for, problems.

The majority of academic research in social work is focussed on social work practice and its relation to service users. Further research is needed to explore the connection between social worker experience, subsequent career choice, and front-line practice. This study is therefore focussed on front line practice,

relationships, and what influences 'stay or go' decisions. It follows that retained social workers are best placed to explain their experiences, and indicate what improvements are necessary, and how these can be achieved. A dearth in senior manager perspectives on recruitment and retention issues is also apparent. It is intended the NGT method will address this to some extent by providing a consensus of how problems can be tackled from their collective perspective.

Whilst a number of key social work recruitment and retention studies have been conducted using interview methods (including Balloch 1997; Eborall and Garmeson 2001; Burns 2009) and survey methods (for example Audit Commission 2002; Eborall 2005; Smith 2005; CWDC 2008) this academic study appears to be one of a very few case studies of children service departments using observational methods (Parslow and Stephenson 1978; Dingwall et al 1983; White 1997). It provides an opportunity to hear the voices of front line children and family social workers, and their managers, and analyse aspects of team life; a rarely opened window into the world of children's social work in England.

Case study analysis provides the key analytical tool employed within the research. This involves iterative analysis adapted to the individual technique employed, including interviews, observations, NGT, and desktop research of documentary sources.

1.6   Scope of the research

'By informing policy and practice research can improve the quality of life of clients through the cost effective delivery of the services they receive' *(SSRG 2004).*

This thesis centres on empirical data gained from a single case study of a local children's services department identified as having problems with recruitment and retention. The research will, therefore, be of most relevance to employees related to 'the case'.

Whilst statistical generalisability is not an aim, I do foresee the findings being of relevance to social workers, their employers and policy makers, in a heuristic sense where resonance and logic are found. There may also be some transferability across professions, into other arenas such as, teaching, nursing, occupational therapy, and the police services, where recruitment and retention have been/are relevant. Issues around generalisability are presented in further depth in Chapter 4. It is hoped that children and family service users may benefit, albeit indirectly, from this study.

1.7   Structure of the thesis

The literature review is contained within two chapters. In the first, Chapter 2 the literature is presented in six related aspects. First, a historical context is provided, indicating where the problems are rooted. Second, I present the international context that demonstrates the global scale of the problem, as well as a dearth of literature outside of the UK, Ireland, United States of America (USA), Australia, and Sweden. Third, I focus on the English context where government statistics are examined to demonstrate national trends in vacancy and turnover rates. Voluntary and independent social work settings are also considered. Fourth, I explore social work within the English public services sector, including: teachers, police, nurses, midwives, and occupational therapists. Fifth, social work training is examined within an educational context, in light of the creation (and subsequent abolishment) of the regulatory body for social work, the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the protection of title with social work registration and governance, the Social Work Task Force report Building a Safe, Confident Future, and Eileen Munro's review into Children and Family social work services due in 2011. Sixth, I turn my attention to the relevance of political interest in social work; especially in child protection, leading to a surge in policy aimed at tackling recruitment and retention problems. This section links to an updating thesis postscript reflecting the 2009 election of a coalition government. I conclude with consideration of the impact the problems have on service users. This provides an underlying assumption of this study that improvements made in recruitment and retention of children's social workers will improve the wellbeing and safeguarding of children.

The second literature chapter (Chapter 3) considers retention issues within the ecological context of children's social care work and the fundamental requirement to navigate human relationships. A Decision Making Ecology model (Baumann et al.1997) is used to help present the relevant literature. Although Baumann et al. (1997) designed this model to explain decision making, I found it offered a useful framework with which to consider the working world of social work.

Literature relating to the working world of social work is presented with the above-mentioned levels presented as four influential factors. Firstly, the conceptual model for the ecology of children's social care on which these factors are based is introduced. Secondly, the model is used to examine literature relating to 'case' factors involving service users, 'worker' factors followed by 'organisation' factors, and 'external' factors. The chapter highlights the complex and challenging nature of social work and considers the relationship between and within the associated factors. Gaps in the literature are identified, and the implications for this study are discussed in the construction of the methodological approach and subsequent data analysis.

Chapter 4 focuses on the methodology and natural history of the study. As explained above, the case study research design is presented within social constructivist ontology, and an interpretivist philosophical framework. The centrality of ethics, and axiology (the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics and religion) as well as quality issues, is also discussed.

The chapter offers a critique of the strategic approach, supported through reflexivity and reflection, and justification of the specifics of research design. Also discussed is the application of a mixed methods approach to data collection using: interviews, observation, nominal group technique (NGT), and documentary analysis (desktop review). This enabled a contextualisation and confirmation of the local problem, and more effective analysis through triangulation and principles of grounded theory. Analysis of qualitative data was conducted using Braun and

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Clarke's (2006) six-stage model where coding was conducted to help establish emerging themes.

This is followed by the practical implications of the strategic approach, including, access to data sources, sampling, rapport, timing, ethical issues, and 'false leads' (Alasuutari 1995). Here, I present an insight into the natural history of the empirical research 'journey', reflecting the methodological challenges faced, and the exciting and engaging experiences within. Whilst carefully planned approaches are presented, examples of chance opportunities, and unplanned 'happenings', that combine to enhance my understanding of research, are also noted. The chapter closes with an illustrative timeframe providing clarity of the research process, reflecting the natural history, and personal context of the study (Silverman 2010).

The fieldwork chapter (Chapter 5) describes the practical detail of the design and its subsequent use in the fieldwork, including access to the 'case', sampling, detail of how the four methods of data collection were used, and how data was analysed.

The first of three findings chapters (Chapter 6) presents the findings from data obtained through the desktop review. These are generally presented chronologically, but also where there is a logical progression of information. This was always dependent on the availability of information provided by the local authority. It provides indicative recruitment and retention statistics and a local contextual basis for the following two chapters.

The second findings chapter (Chapter 7) presents combined findings from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 18 front-line children's workers across grades, ranging from trainee social worker up to team manager, resulting from iterative, thematic analysis. This includes one interview with an ex-children's social worker who left child protection work to work with young people within the same authority. Emerging topics and themes are presented in order of resonance to the participants, and underpinned with examples of observational field notes and verbatim interview quotations.

The final findings chapter (Chapter 8) presents primary data attained through the nominal group technique (NGT) resulting in a list of prioritised themes of facilitators to the recruitment and retention problem. NGT participants represented all managerial grades from team manager through to senior management, including the head of service within the North City CSD, providing a total sample headcount of 28. The method achieved the aim of arriving at a group consensus of the top ten facilitators to recruitment and retention problems for North City.

Chapter 9 presents discussion based on the findings in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 and the connectedness of the findings with what is already known within current literature (in Chapters 2 and 3). Here the centrality of my interpretation of Baumann et al.'s (1997) 'ecology of practice', the context, and relevance of factors in influencing employee decisions about their recruitment and retention are considered. Discussion is also provided on the working of the data analysis and what was done to arrive at the findings. Further insight is provided into the weighting of interview and observational data, presented in Chapter 7, with its relationship to each of the key dimensions of case, worker, organisation, and external factors. Influential mechanisms, processes, patterns, and trends within each dimension are also discussed.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 10) presents implications of the findings for social work policy and practice. It reflects on the research process and journey experienced throughout the course of the case study and implications for theory and the research community. The limitations of this study are considered and areas for further research are presented. The final section identifies key recommendations for North City CSD. Reference is made throughout this chapter to the various audiences for whom this study is written. These fall within disciplinary, methodological, and public categories.

Chapter 2 - Context of Recruitment and Retention

"I do not believe it is possible to do effective child protection social work, or
to supervise and manage it, unless there is a capacity to experience and
engage with intense emotional pain, anger, disbelief, the desire to punish
and retaliate, and the balancing impulse for compassion",
(Cooper 2005: 5).

2.1   Introduction

Chapter 1 contended that recruitment and retention in the social work profession
are unquestionably problematic and whilst widespread challenges exist, they are
most significant within children's social care, especially within children and family
fieldwork where front-line child protection is conducted. As described in section
1.7, this chapter provides definitions of terminology involved and then considers
the complex contextual relationship of recruitment and retention issues, in order to
enhance wider understanding.

2.2   Defining the terms

Language in social work is reportedly confusing and lacks clarity, which contributes
to confusion and misunderstanding of what social workers do (Asquith et al. 2005).
This appears particularly true of the way 'social work', 'social care', 'social
services', and 'social work activity' are used within the literature (Asquith et al.
2005: 41). Whilst image and identity remain challenges for the profession and
social work staff (see 3.5.1) a shift in terminology is noted. This section reflects the
latest language used in social work research by social commentators and within
government policy.

'Children's social care' is the official term used to describe 'those services and
responsibilities previously carried out by local authority social service departments
and which have been taken over by the newly created departments of children's
services [in England]' (Frost and Parton 2009: 1). This reflects major changes

associated with the Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme (DfES 2004b). Social workers in this study are defined by their protected status of the professional governing body, GSCC and by their Standard Occupational Classification, "social workers and social work managers" (SOC 2000). These include team managers but not those in senior operational positions. They will also hold either a certificate of qualification in social work (CQSW), diploma (DipSW) or a degree in social work (BaSW and MSW). Children Service Departments (CSDs) is the term currently (2010) applied to State social work organisations for children and families (DCSF 2010) and is therefore used throughout the thesis.

A wide range of definitions of social work exists, arguably reflecting the complex and diverse nature of the profession. These include 'social work is what social workers do' (Thompson 2000: 13) and 'social work has to be seen as a collection of competing and contradictory discourses that come together at a particular moment in time to frame the task of social work' (Cree 2003: 4). The following international definition is used within English government publications (GSCC 2008),

> "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (IFSW 2005).

Children's social workers in the USA and Australia are most often referred to as child welfare workers (Lonne 2003; Mor Barak et al. 2005), occasionally child protection service (CPS) workers (Alliance, APHSA and CWLA 2001), and as social workers in Sweden (Tham 2006). These are used accordingly within this study, depending on which nationality and which study is being referred to.

Central to this study are the concepts of recruitment and retention. Recruitment refers to the act of attracting and selecting people capable of required

organisational performance in order to satisfy organisational objectives (Rudman 1999). Retention refers to employees remaining within an organisation and the ability of the employer to provide the working experience to facilitate this (Mullins 1996). Whilst this study adheres to Mullins' (1996) definition, the concept is not necessarily straightforward.

A systematic review of American qualitative research (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008: 6) identified recruitment defined variously as intention to remain employed in child welfare (Ellet 2000; Dickinson and Perry 2002; Ellet et al. 2003), or remaining employed in child welfare over time (Rosenthal et al. 1998; Cahalane and Sites 2004). It is clear, however that concepts of recruitment and retention are inextricably linked to vacancy and turnover for measuring vacant posts and staff who leave.

Children's social care workforce statistics are gathered annually on the Department of Health staffing return SSDS001 (Information Centre 2008; LGA 2009), which include national vacancy and turnover rates. National data is also collected to establish reported levels of difficulty employers have with recruiting and retaining children's social workers (LAWIG 2007). 'The state of children's social care workforce' (CWDC 2008) also provided a comprehensive statistical overview of the workforce within the public services for children. Private and voluntary organisations were also included. The combination of vacancy and turnover rates, and rates of perceived difficulties gives an indication of the severity of local and national picture (see section 2.3.3).

The vacancy rate is defined as 'the number of vacant posts at 30th September each year which authorities are seeking to fill or will seek to fill, as a percentage of the establishment (all posts)' (LAWSG 2005: 21), or

Number of vacancies

――――――――― x 100

Number of posts

The turnover rate is defined as 'the number of leavers from the social services department in the 12 months to 30th September [of the year in question] as a percentage of employment' (LAWSG 2005: 21), or

Number of leavers

_____   x 100

Number of staff in post

DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008: 6) again demonstrated various interpretations of turnover rates. Turnover is defined as, actual job exit (Drake and Yadama 1996), leaving child welfare (Rosenthal and Waters 2004), intent to leave (Nissly et al. 2005), and intent to turnover (Jayaratne and Chess 1984).

Job dissatisfaction and subsequent intention to leave are considered pre-cursors to actual turnover (Mobley et al. 1978; Bannister and Griffith 1986). Tham (2006: 4) noted that timescales vary and employees can move around between job dissatisfaction and intention to leave, remaining within this 'borderland' without necessarily leaving for long periods.

Intention to leave is said to be the most consistent single predictor of actual turnover (George and Jones 1996; Mor Barak et al. 2001; 2005). Intention to leave has a negative impact on service quality because those workers are less likely to invest the required energy (Balfour and Neff 1993), and by the time intention to leave is reached it may be too late for managers to intervene (Graen and Ginsburgh 1977; Porter, Crompton and Smith 1976).

2.3 Contextualising the issues

Contextualising recruitment and retention issues demonstrate the complexities involved in children's social care work. The historical context, for example, highlights the challenges involved are not new and have been present in children and family teams for many years. High turnover and high vacancy rates in employing organisations are costly in different ways. Turnover of unskilled manual workers, and managers and professionals, is estimated to cost £1,302 and over £5,000 respectively (CIPD 2003). Estimates to recruit a public sector worker are around £3,500 and workers may only reach 60 per cent of their full work capacity within the first year (Audit Commission 2002: 3; Huxley et al. 2005: 147).

Staffing costs for local authority councils is £55 billion, accounting for half of all service spending (Audit Commission 2008). The Audit Commission noted that local councils need to improve their 'recruitment, development and retention' strategies, calling for: workforce issues to be considered within strategic objectives, and chief executives and heads of service to engage with workforce issues, to ensure adequate and effective workforce strategies and systems are in place (Audit Commission 2008: 2). It ultimately argued for a systematic approach to recruitment and retention. Such a planned and systematic approach (see Figure 2.1) was perceived by Mullins (1996) as the most productive way to select the best available staff and retain them for a 'reasonable' length of time (Mullins 1996: 674).

Figure 2.1 A systematic approach to recruitment and selection

Diagram removed for copyright reasons

(Mullins 1996: 675)

Whilst Mullins (1996) did not define what a 'reasonable' retention timeframe was, it is argued this will vary dramatically from job to job. For example, within the health

and social care public services, methodology was developed to measure the expected working life of health care professionals (Netten and Knight 1999; Curtis and Netten 2005, 2007; Curtis et al. 2009b), and social workers and social care workers (Curtis et al. 2009a). Estimates for the working life of each profession are as follows:

- pharmacists – 28 years (Curtis and Netten 2005)
- general practitioner - 25 years (Netten and Knight 1999)
- nurses – 15 years (Curtis et al. accepted for publication 2009b cited in Curtis et al. 2009a)
- social care workers – 13 years (Curtis et al. 2009a)
- social workers – 8 years (Curtis et al. 2009a).

Curry (1996) and Curry et al. (2005) highlighted that no agreed timeframe is associated with acceptable staff retention in child and family work. Curry et al. (2005) settled on 7 years for the purpose of their study because it represented a period when around half of the workforce had either remained in, or left their employer. Though these estimates are of indicative and contextual interest in issues of turnover, the concept of what is 'reasonable' remains purely subjective. Consequences of high turnover to employing businesses and organisations can be costly, not only in financial terms. Intangible costs include: morale, motivation, job satisfaction, organisational performance, and customer satisfaction (Mullins 1996). An examination of the literature is conducted next to contextualise the human and financial costs involved, beginning with consideration of where recruitment and retention issues are rooted.

2.3.1 Historical context

Although social work has a long history, it only became a formal arm of state welfare after the Second World War, when together with health, education, housing, and social security it stood against the 'five giants of welfare' (Townsend 1970). It consisted of separate services for children, hospitals, psychiatric illness, and those generally in need (including 'elderly'). In 1951 Dame Eileen

Younghusband's report found staff to be untrained and with poor prospects (Younghusband 1951) and subsequently advised for an expansion of university courses and a grounding in applied social sciences for social workers (Sheldon and Macdonald 2009).

In 1968, Lord Seebohm's Commission recommended the unification of occupational groups within social work into social services departments (Seebohm 1968), which was achieved in 1971 by the Local Authority Social Services Act of 1970 (Cooper 1983). Almost at the same time, the Redcliffe Maud Commission was considering the re-organisation of local government and some of its proposals were incorporated into the Local Government Act of 1972. This meant that by 1972, not only were social services in the process of amalgamating, but their operational boundaries were changing too. Services grew fast in the new social services departments and training of social workers developed to keep pace with the numbers of staff who were recruited to meet all the needs identified through this expansion and coordination of activity. The growth in social services personnel at this time was halted by the world economic crisis that followed the Middle East conflict (Parton 1999), but meanwhile a series of enquiries into child deaths, together with the 'discovery' of child abuse (Kempe et al. 1962) led to societal demands of an increase in social work (Parton 1985; Holman 1995; Parker 1995).

To some extent the problems of poor recruitment are shared across the public sector (see section 2.3.4). As this literature review will show, however, the image of other public sector workers has been strengthened, and there has been a more concerted attempt by government to engage in targeted workforce planning. Additional challenges result with the level of competition for employment being particularly high in the current (2010) UK labour market. The Audit Commission (2002: 2) also warned of a "demographic time bomb with over 27 per cent of the public sector workforce…aged 50 or over". Problems in recruiting and retaining social workers are far from unique to the UK, as demonstrated in the next section. Like the UK, it is within service provision to children where challenges are most profound.

2.3.2 International context

Staff shortages within the international children and family workforce over the last fifteen years have been widely reported as a major cause for concern (Tham 2006). However, social commentary and research appears limited to few countries; the USA, where the situation is frequently described as being in crisis (Alliance for Children and Families, American Public Human Services Association, Child Welfare League of America (Alliance, APHSA and CWLA) 2001; Alwon and Reitz 2001; Graef and Hill 2000; United States General Accounting Office 2003), Australia (Wagner, van Reyk and Spence 2001; Lonne 2003), Sweden (Tham 2006; 2009) and Republic of Ireland (Loughran 2000; McGrath 2001; Burns and Murray 2003; Burns 2009).

Problems with recruitment and retention negatively affect children and their families (also see Chapter 3). The American Child and Family Services Review (GAO 2003, cited in DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008) suggested, "staff turnover and high caseloads [resulting] in insufficient relationships between workers and families, a limited focus on child safety, and [they] affect the timeliness of decisions about safe and stable placements" (GAO 2003 in DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008: 1-2). In the USA, Light (2003) highlighted similar workforce concerns to Eborall and Garmeson (2001), and the Audit Commission report (2002) (see section 2.3.3). Using data collected from 1,213 national random-sample surveys of human service workers, including child welfare social workers, he found high workload, high turnover, and a generally frustrated and unappreciated body of staff. Despite this, high levels of commitment to service users were reported and 40 per cent reported liking their job. The combination of commitment and frustration was seen to explain the contradiction that almost half of respondents said they felt valued in their work, yet described their work as unappreciated (Light 2003: 5).

A survey of public and private agencies employing child welfare workers, across 43 American states in Autumn 2001, found vacancy rates for 'state' child protective service (CPS) workers was 10.9 per cent and 9.3 per cent for 'private' CPS workers. The average annual turnover rate from 1st July 1999 to 30th June 2000

was 19.9 per cent for CPS workers and 40.0 per cent for 'private' workers. Average tenure for CPS workers across 12 state agencies was 7 years and for 'private' workers only 3 years (Alliance, APHSA and CWLA 2001: 9-11).

When considering notable recruitment problems, 'state' agency managers and supervisors perceived the following as 'highly problematic':

Table 2.1 Notable recruitment problems

Problem	%	Number (n=) of responses
Perceived imbalance of job demands and compensation	68	41
Non-competitive starting salaries	54	39
Other labour market alternatives	49	41
Lack of qualified candidates	47	43
Problematic recruitment procedures	28	40

(Alliance, APHSA and CWLA 2001: 16).

Table 2.2 Notable retention problems

Problem	%	Number (n=) of responses
Workload too high and/or demanding	82	39
Caseloads too high	62	39
Low salaries	46	39
Too much time on travel, paperwork, etc.	44	39
Supervision problems (amount or quality)	36	39
Workers do no feel valued	34	38

(Alliance, APHSA and CWLA 2001: 17).

Further research of child welfare agencies around a similar time in the USA highlighted more significant turnover rates that commonly exceeded 30 per cent,

sometimes reaching 85 per cent (Thoma 1998; Ellet and Millar 2001). Insight supporting concerns is also gained from an extensive systematic literature review of 154 documents from the USA dating from 1974 to 2004, conducted by DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008). An Australian study of rural child welfare workers also established an average retention span of 16.1 months with 34 per cent leaving within 12 months of joining (Lonne 2003). Such challenges were reflected in Tham's (2006) study in Sweden that found 54 per cent of the 309 children's social workers in Stockholm responding to surveys had been in their workplace for two years or less, and 48 per cent intended to leave. Organisational culture was considered key to retention, with greatest significance given to the extent workers were rewarded, and where management took interest in wellbeing (Tham 2006: 1).

In the Republic of Ireland, Burns (2009: 33) identified an 11.9 per cent turnover rate of child protection and welfare social workers in unpublished data but considered this to be an underestimation skewed by a 'recruitment embargo'. The lack of research relating to other countries is, in part, because the social work profession is still in its infancy in many of the new European Union member states, particularly in Eastern Europe (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 5).

Whilst inconsistent definitions and rates exist as well as a dearth of literature outside the countries noted above, available research and commentary indicate recruitment and retention issues are problematic and wide-ranging. The international context is comparable to that of the UK and especially England, which is of particular focus in the next section.

2.3.3 National context

In the UK social workers must be registered with the appropriate regulatory authority in order for them to practice. These are: the Care Council for Wales; the Scottish Social Services Council; the Northern Ireland Social Care Council; and the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in England. Since April 2005 'social worker' is a protected title that can only be used by a person registered with one of these four bodies; depending in which country they work. The rise in demand for social workers includes: recognised need for early assessments and intervention for

children; acknowledgement that realistic workloads and effective supervision are necessary for effective safeguarding of children; and an ageing population (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 3).

The recruitment and retention crisis was expressed within the Shortage Report on Social Workers for the Migration Advisory Committee co-ordinated by Skills for Care and Development (Skills for Care and Development 2009) 'which is the sector skills council (SSC) for the social care, children, early years and young people's workforce in the UK' (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 7). An evidence-based argument for children's social workers to remain on the shortage occupation list for skilled workers coming to the UK from outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) was presented as meeting the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) criteria of 'skilled; shortage; and sensible' (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 7). Recognising the significant problems, the MAC published its first review of the shortage occupation list on 29th April and announced that whilst all other social workers should be removed, social workers for children and families will remain on the list (UKBA 2009).

International interest to join the social care register in England is increasing with a steady trend noted from those outside the EEA as demonstrated in Table 2.3. Only two of these countries are within the EEA, further justifying the inclusion of those outside the EEA on the shortage list.

Table 2.3 Top ten countries of received applications to the social care register for England from April 2004 to February 2009

Country	Number of applications
Australia	1316
South Africa	1147
United States	1107
India	934
Canada	474
Germany	449

New Zealand	336
Zimbabwe	301
Romania	292
Philippines	186

Twenty eight per cent of local authorities recruited children's social workers from other countries in 2005, a reduction from 31 per cent in 2003 (LAWSG 2004: 35). These were mainly from Canada (6 local authorities), USA (5), Germany (4), and elsewhere in Europe (8). The UK has also seen an increase of social workers born overseas, from 10 per cent in 2004 to 15 per cent in 2007, reflecting the need to employ from abroad to fill gaps as well as the need for a diverse workforce (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 39).

The number of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) workers employed in Social Services departments in England at 30th September 2008 was 202,200. This included 45,300 social workers, representing a rise of over 91 per cent since 1989 when 23,700 were employed (LAWIG 2006); although this has slowed with a less than 1 per cent increase on 2007 to 45,200. Coincidently, 23,700 social workers (52 per cent) worked with children in 2008 (IC 2009), an increase of almost 37 per cent since 1999. In 2008, 80 per cent of children's social workers were women, representing no change over the last decade. Ethnicity of children's social workers includes a 75 per cent White, 12 per cent Black and 4 per cent Asian split (IC 2009).

In January 2009 there were 80,108 registered social workers (and an additional 15,530 registered qualifying social work students) in England (Skills for Care and Development 2009) and approximately 8.5per cent of social workers gained their qualification from outside the UK (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 9). The total number of social workers registered with the GSCC at July 2010 was 84,417, with social work students at 16,093 (GSCC 2010b: 66). This is up 5,385 representing a 7 per cent increase on July 2009 at 79,032 (GSCC 2010a: 66).

Inconsistencies exist in the numbers of social workers practising across all services in England with estimates ranging from around 45,000 according to the GSCC (in Skills for Care and Development 2009: 18) (just over half the number registered with the GSCC), 50,300 in 2007 according to the NHS information centre (IC 2008), 68,000 estimated by Moriarty et al. (2008) (in Hussain and Cornes 2008) and 92,000 reported by the MAC, although this is reportedly based on flawed data (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 19).

A central starting point in the literature is the Department of Health UK meta-review, combined with in-depth interviews by Eborall and Garmeson in 2001. This followed much historical anecdotal information and a Local Government Association (LGA) survey in 2000, suggesting a public services problem affecting qualified and unqualified staff. An additional preceding review of recruitment and retention in the mental health workforce referred to the considerable amount of evidence from organisations of all types highlighting the significance of human factors. It suggested that job satisfaction and commitment to an organisation led to improvements in organisation performance (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2000).

> "These human factors include the extent to which employees feel valued, trusted and supported; are enabled to exercise a high degree of autonomy in undertaking their work roles, and are well supervised and trained," (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2000:152).

According to Eborall and Garmeson (2001) factors that encourage retention were:

- high level of commitment to work
- service user contact
- making a difference to lives
- working in skilled team
- learning from others

Factors that discourage retention were:

- staff shortages

- excessive workloads

- reliance on temp/inexperienced staff

- bureaucracy

- poor management

- vicious cycle of staff frustration and increasing pressure

- stress and burnout leading to fear of practitioner error (also see Knud and Walker 2002; Newell 2003; Evans et al. 2004; Huxley et al. 2005)

- violence and abuse from service users (also see Littlechild 2005)

- blamed for failures in multi-agency working

- inadequate resources

- poor pay

- inadequate training

- competition from other agencies

- 'glass ceiling' effect (also see Harlow 2004)

(Eborall and Garmeson 2001).

Costs and benefits associated with high and low turnover were also provided. It is therefore noted that some degree of turnover is perceived positively.

Table 2.4 Costs and benefits of high and low staff turnover

	High Staff Turnover	**Low Staff Turnover**
Benefits	Permits rapid restructuring Enables quick wage bill reductions Brings in new blood Provides opportunities for internal promotion	Stable workforce Better continuity of care Low cost of recruitment, induction and temporary cover Retention expertise
Costs	Loss of skills and local knowledge Less continuity of care High cost of recruitment, induction and temporary cover Undermines morale Difficult to establish culture Can lead to service reductions and closures Cannot choose who leaves: good staff often leave first	High wage bill Career blockages Stagnation Difficult to implement change Lack of fresh ideas Danger of out-dated approaches

Eborall and Garmeson (2001: 17).

Most public sector employers know little about why their staff leave, with only one in five of ex-public sector workers having received exit interviews, and perhaps despite reasons being 'push', not 'pull' factors (Audit Commission 2002: 4).

The Audit Commission (2002) published a comprehensive national report on recruitment and retention in the public sector that concluded with four critical success factors in recruitment and retention. It suggested that the experience of work must match people's expectations, the working environment should be engaging, enabling and supportive of staff who should feel valued, respected and fairly rewarded and 'the shift from a public sector to a public services workforce must be actively managed to create a synergy, rather than a clash of values' (Audit Commission 2002: 53).

Numerous children's social care workforce development initiatives have been introduced since 2004 (see section 2.3.6) and the latest government workforce survey findings up to 2006 (CWDC 2008; LGA 2009; DCSF 2010) indicate some impact on vacancy and turnover rates has possibly been made. However, despite statistical rate improvements, it remains more difficult to recruit and retain children's social workers than any other occupational group in local government (LGA 2008); a consistent theme since the report of Eborall and Garmeson in 2001.

It is noted within the State of the Children's Social Care Workforce report (CWDC 2008) that effective recruitment and retention are key objectives for employers where measures include the establishment of career pathways, workforce planning, and succession planning (CWDC 2008: 51). Improvements are indicated in the 2006 vacancy rate reflecting an overall reduction of 6.5 per cent since 2000. The Social Work Task Force social workers' survey (DCSF 2010) indicated the statistics from 2006 were the latest available as it cites the Local Government Association report, Respect and Protect (LGA 2009) stating that one in ten social worker posts are vacant at any one time, this being rounded up from 9.5 per cent (see Table 2.5). This LGA report in turn cites the State of Social Care Workforce (CWDC 2008) as its source.

Table 2.5 Vacancy rates of children's 'field' social workers, England

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
16.0%	11.3%	12.6%	11.8%	11.4%	11.8%	9.5%

(LGE 2005; CWDC 2008: 53)

Vacancies were highest in Eastern, West Midlands, London and South East regions. The 2006 turnover rate again reflects a decrease of nearly 5 per cent in six years. Additionally, the retirement rate rose from 0.9 per cent to 1.2 per cent from 2002 to 2006.

Table 2.6 Turnover rates of children's 'field' social workers, England

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
15.3%	13.7%	12.4%	12.0%	10.6%	11.0%	9.6%

(LGE 2005; CWDC 2008)

Turnover was highest in London and the South East (CWDC 2008). The CWDC (2008) report covered all 353 local authorities in England using the SSDS001 annual staffing return carried out by the NHS and Social Care Information Centre (IC 2007). Returns from 600 establishments covering 'children's only services' were used, considerably less than the 12,400 non-children establishments. A 59 per cent return rate was achieved for the Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group (LAWIG) survey issued to local authority children's social care employers in 2006 (LGA 2008) which contributes to the CWDC (2008) report.

Findings indicated that between 2000 and 2007 there was an overall 34 per cent rise in the recruitment of social workers. 78 per cent of employing authorities, however reported difficulties in recruiting children's social workers (68 per cent in 2004 (LAWSG 2005) and 75 per cent in 2003 Eborall 2005)). This arguably reiterates the perceived recruitment 'crisis' in the UK (Douglas 2002; Lymbery 2004; Asquith et al. 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006; Skills for Care and

Development 2009) considered in Chapter 3. Additionally, in 2008 39 per cent of local authorities reported difficulties retaining children's social workers (LGA 2008). This was, however, down from 44 per cent in 2004 (LAWSG 2005), and 54 per cent in 2003 (Eborall 2005). Reported high level of demand was such that during their interviews with 28 key informants, one agency manager referred to professionally qualified social workers as "gold dust" (Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006: 655).

Problems reported in England are shared within the UK, most notably in Wales with local authority vacancy rates for children's social workers at 14.8 per cent and turnover rates at 15 per cent in 2004 (ADSS 2005: 12). Unison established the vacancy rate in Wales in 2008 was 9.6 per cent (in Community Care 2009). In Scotland just over half of qualified social workers (1307.8) worked in children's services in 2007. They have seen a reduction of the vacancy rate from 11.9 per cent in 2003 to 7.7 per cent for children's social workers in 2007 (www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/06/23092957/22).

The figure is at 10 per cent for generic social workers. 84.3 per cent of children's services authorities in Scotland, however, reported recruitment as problematic. The turnover rate for children's social workers was 18.8 per cent in 2007 (ibid). In Northern Ireland 41 per cent of qualified social workers work with children (n=1340.1) with a vacancy rate of 7.7 per cent at March 2008 (DHSSPSNI 2008).

Improvements in recruitment and retention in England could be the result of the implementation of a government measure of performance for authorities reporting key occupational shortages, as recommended by the Local Government Workforce Strategy 2007. The target was that by March 2012 occupational shortages should not be reported by more than half of all local authorities (LGA/IDEA/LGE 2007). Such a measure, in the introduction of the Performance Indicator within practice learning, has positively affected practice learning opportunities (Parker and Whitfield 2006).

Chapter 2 - Context of Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention accounted for half of all public service spending (£55 billion p/a) in 2005-06. A reported average of £900,000 per year is spent at County level on recruitment (Audit Commission 2008: 11) however, only a minority of local authorities are making strategic plans to prepare for a workforce that will meet future challenges (Audit Commission 2008). The Audit Commission's latest report, Tomorrow's People (Audit Commission 2008) highlighted that local authorities generally appear to have not made significant change since the previous Audit Commission report of 2002. Good practice from successful local authorities is however identified and disseminated; a philosophy the Audit Commission plans to continue. It will "share notable and innovative practice around workforce issues with the local government community" (ibid 2008: 6).

A wide range of regional vacancy and turnover rates exist for children's social workers across England. The following tables (Table 2.7 and Table 2.8) demonstrate the variation over the latest two years on which data exists (2010).

Table 2.7 Regional variation of vacancy rates

Vacancy rates	Lowest	Highest
2005	5.4% - South West	17.6% - West Midlands
2006	4.8% - North East, and South West	12.8% - West Midlands

(LAWIG 2006; LGAR 2007)

Table 2.8 Regional variation of turnover rates

Turnover rates	Lowest	Highest
2005	8.0% - Eastern	15.1% - London
2006	6.2% - North East	12.4% - London, and South East

(LAWIG 2006; LGAR 2007)

In 2002 the situation appeared consistently more severe within the 33 boroughs of London (Douglas 2002) where the reliance on agency workers was most significant (Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006). An estimated 12,527 agency workers were employed across local authority services up to 30th September 2005. Whilst this equates to 5.8 per cent of the English workforce, this rises to 20.6 per cent in London (LAWIG 2006: 20). An element of competition across London was also highlighted, fuelling calls for a 'single market' approach to recruitment between boroughs (Douglas 2002: 4). Concern about competition was echoed within the review of services for children in Wales (ADSS 2005).

The recruitment problem in children's social work in England can be encapsulated as follows:

- An estimated 3500 graduate social workers go on to practice within children's social care each year.
- When the retirement rate of 1.2 per cent, and annual exit rate of 3.1 per cent are considered, the number of new graduates is only sufficient to maintain the 2006 9.5 per cent vacancy rate, rather than impact on it (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 19).
- This is in the context of increasing service user need.

2.3.4 Public Services

"Recruitment and retention of appropriate staff is the most critical issue that faces social care services in all sectors" (Denise Platt in DoH 2002c).

Distinctions in occupational role can be drawn between 'professions' and 'vocations'. Citing Mackay (1998: 57) and Martin (2000: 76), Clark (2006: 8) aligns attributes of commitment, enthusiasm, and caring with teachers and nurses in their embracing of a vocational role, and inter-personal distance, neutrality and self-protection, with that of social workers in a professional role. However, he elucidates these are not exclusive categories but often attributes of both.

Problems in recruiting and retaining professional staff have been explored across the public services workforce, including: midwifery (Ball et al. 2002), the police force (Yearwood and Freeman 2004), teaching (Tomlin 2003), and across professions within the National Health Service (Buchan et al 2003; Andrews et al. 2005). UK government targets have previously included: 35,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors by 2008 (DoH 2002); 10,000 more teachers by 2006 (DfES 2001) and 9,000 more police in 2003 (Home Office 2002 cited in Audit Commission 2002: 3) with significant improvements being noted. This is exemplified in the latest vacancy and turnover rates for teachers, in 2006 at less than 1 per cent (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 5). This is particularly noteworthy in light of the information within Table 2.9 that compares reported difficulties in recruitment and retention across social work groups, occupational therapy, and teaching.

Table 2.9 Reported problems for recruitment and retention problems

Occupation	Jan 2004		June 2005	
	% Rec	%Ret	% Rec	%Ret
Occupational Therapy	72.7	56.8	61.3	47.5
Teachers	52.3	31.8	42.1	28.1
Social Worker (adults approved)	51.1	37.5	68.4	52.6
Social Worker (adults community)	75.0	59.1	72.5	61.3
Social Worker (residential)	61.4	51.1	58.8	50.0
Social Worker (children)	88.6	77.3	88.8	72.5

(LGE 2006: 6)

It is also noted that the Mental Health Act 2007 abolished the role of Approved Social Worker and introduced that of the Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP), which is no longer conducted exclusively by social workers. The table was also produced before the protected status of 'social worker', which would now affect results for the residential social worker category. In 2007, 36 per cent of local authorities reported difficulties in recruiting adult community care social workers, a significant drop from 61 per cent the previous year. Likewise, 24 per cent of local authorities reported difficulties in retaining adult community care social

workers in 2007, a fall from 61.3 per cent in 2005 (LGE 2006). What appears to be beyond dispute is that none is more challenged in this area as that of children's social work. The next section examines educational context of recruitment and retention problems, including the fluctuating statistics relating to the enrolment of social work students.

2.3.5 Educational context

At the front end of the recruitment picture, English statistics on enrolment to social work courses are presented by one main source, namely the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) cited this source in its review of the children's social care workforce (CWDC 2008). A separate government source however, Skills for Care and Development (Skills for Care and Development), provides differing figures (Skills for Care and Development 2009). All identified sources do appear to portray a generally healthy interest (UCAS 2010) and subsequent uptake into social work education, especially onto the "children, young people, their families and carers and family" pathway, followed by apparently high levels of subsequent timely employment. When these are considered in a 20-year context, however, an overall downward trend is evident.

Moriarty and Murray (2005) found that governing body statistics from 2003 confirmed motivation to join the social work profession remained strong, following a general decline in applications to universities in the late 1990s, when a fall of 55 per cent over the previous 5 years was estimated (Topss England, 2000 in Moriartly and Murray 2005: 6). Between 1995 and 1998, applications reportedly declined significantly with contributory factors being the introduction of course fees and a lack of financial support (Eborall and Gameson 2001).

In 2000 such a decline in enrolments to social work training was highlighted by Topss England (Topss 2000) which was somewhat reversed over the subsequent five years up to 2005 (GSCC 2005b). Perhaps believing the reported reversal would continue, albeit slowly, Moriarty and Murray predicted it may be some time before any lasting effect on the workforce was realised (Moriarty and Murray 2005).

Reasons for the reported increase during this time could be some success in the £1.5 million advertising campaign (DOH 2001b), tuition fees, a £3,000 annual bursary, and perhaps most significantly, the introduction of the new social work degree in September 2003.

The following data however, from a 'Shortage Report of Social Workers for the Migration Advisory Committee by Skills for Care and Development in 2009 (discussed in section 2.3.3) demonstrated a downturn in enrolment to the degree in universities in England following the initial surge in 2005-06 following the full introduction of the social work degree.

Table 2.10 Social work degree enrolments 2004-08 England

Year	Student enrolment	-/+ %
2004-05	4748	
2005-06	6063	+28.0
2006-07	5720	-5.6
2007-08	5309	-7.1

 (in Skills for Care and Development 2009: 12)

The table below sourced from GSCC annual data packs and the workforce report by CWDC (2008), did not concur with student intake reported by Skills for Care and Development. Apart from differing individual statistics, the reported downturn is less significant.

Table 2.11 Social work diploma and degree enrolments 2000-09 England (CWDC and GSCC)

Year	Student enrolment	-/+ %
2000-01	4005	
2001-02	4298	+7.3
2002-03	4771	+11.0
2003-04	5382	+12.8

2004-05	4770	-11.4
2005-06	5553	+16.4
2006-07	5470	-1.5
2006-07 (Academic year)	5667	+2.1 (on 05-06)
2007-08 (Academic year)	5452	-3.8
2008-09 (Academic year)	5763	+5.7

(GSCC 2002; GSCC 2003; GSCC 2004a; GSCC 2004b; GSCC 2005b; GSCC 2006a; GSCC 2006b; GSCC 2007; GSCC 2008b; CWDC 2008: 78; GSCC 2009, GSCC 2010a)

The DfES (2004: 39) reported that by 2003, 2411 students had registered for the then new degree and it is evident that numbers increased following its introduction; both SWAS and UCAS recorded a rise in applications (Moriarty and Murray 2005; UCAS 2010).

A total of 5382 enrolments were eventually recorded in 2003, including 2971 final DipSW applicants, representing a 34 per cent rise in the overall number of registrations since the 4005 enrolled in 2000 (GSCC 2004a). This rise was despite a reportedly consistent lack of awareness by social work students that in 2003 a government bursary was introduced, and 46 per cent of respondents were still unaware after three years of its introduction (Furness 2007).

The apparent return of a downward trend between 2006 and 2008 was a concern when considered in light of negative media portrayal of social workers feeding negative public perceptions following the death of Baby Peter under Haringey local authority, and significant problems within Doncaster local authority (see Chapter 3.6.1). This decline is, however, negated by the latest 5.7 per cent rise in 2008-09.

The CWDC (2010) include in their achievements some significant developments relating to interest generated in the profession, and the subsequent recruitment of social workers. Their award winning 'Be the Difference' campaign enticed 55,000 people to register an interest in becoming a social worker, and contributed towards a 41 per cent increase in social work degree applications in 2009 (CWDC 2010). The actual number of applications reported by UCAS where social work is identified as a choice is 52,238 (UCAS 2010). This compares to 52,871 applications for Teacher Training (increase of 16 per cent on 2008) and 94,644 applications for Nursing (an increase of 74 per cent) (UCAS 2010). Competition therefore appears tight, as a total of 10,951 students were awarded the social work degree since it began in 2003 to February 2010 (GSCC 2010a: 46; Hubbard 2010 (personal email confirmed discrepancy in GSCC report)).

Additionally, the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) pilot programme has supported over 2000 social workers and involved 144 employers. The Step Up to Social Work project also has training courses available for 200 successful graduate candidates, across 8 regional partnerships and 43 local authorities, starting in September 2010 (CWDC 2010).

Research also signifies what has happened to social workers once qualified. A relatively high number (93 per cent) of qualifying social workers in 2001 were found to actually enter into the working world of 'social work' (Wallis-Jones and Lyons, 2003). This compares favourably to around 75 per cent of qualifying teachers actually entering the classroom according to Smithers and Robinson (2001) (in Moriarty and Murray 2005: 13). Not only does this indicate a high level of take up to the profession but also the employability of completing social work students. The steady increase in applications to social work degree university courses and high levels of employment on qualification into the profession indicate a strong level of commitment (Moriarty and Murray 2005). Around 67 per cent of social work graduates find employment in the first 6 months; this could be more, as employment is not known for nearly 30 per cent of graduates (GSCC 2010a: 57).

This reinforces previous DCSF analysis of HEFCE Unistats data where it was claimed in 2006, 66 per cent of social work graduates became "Public Service Professionals" within 6 months of graduating (in Skills for Care and Development 2009: 20). It also found 94 per cent of nursing, and 91 per cent of teaching students had careers in the same profession six months after they graduated (Skills for Care and Development 2009: 20). Despite the SfCD highlighting concerns with data classification, it maintains a substantial number of social work graduates do not become social workers (ibid). Hussein, Moriarty and Manthorpe (2009) also provided detailed analysis of what happened to 5275 full time students enrolled between 2003 and 2005.

The statistics in Table 2.11 represent a 44 per cent increase in enrolments from 2000-01 to 2008-09, an increase of 1758 students. Although, when this rise is considered within a 20-year context, the upturn fails to indicate recovery from the dramatic fall of approximately 11,000 in 1992 to just over 4000 in 2002 (Jones 2001; Winchester 2002). Reasons cited for this particular slump were that a career in the public sector was perceived to be poorly paid and low in status (Audit Commission 2002). This contributory factor to recruitment and retention problems drives political aims to address the need to increase levels of interest and commitment towards the profession.

Crucially, student enrolment numbers and in most cases the subsequent successful completion of the degree, are not enough to meet children's services' needs (see vacancy rates in section 2.3.3). The newly qualified social worker was, and remains, a major target for recruitment with final placement students being openly courted by agencies with incentives, where they show promise, and now with the fresh enticement in the Newly Qualified Social Worker post (CWDC 2008; DCSF 2009).

The introduction of the social work degree, recruitment campaigns, bursary payments, incentive schemes, NQSW, appears to have contributed to student applicants increasing interest in social work. Just over half of students follow the children and family route and high rates of qualified social workers actually enter

the profession. Vacancy rates appear high and problematic when considered with the retirement issues highlighted in section 2.3.3 but the widely reported 'crisis' is most significantly related to retention and turnover. This indicates that problems occur once these social workers begin their careers.

2.3.6 Policy context

Chapter 3.6.2 examines literature relating to the external factor influence of law and policy on front line social work practice. This section focuses on significant policy initiatives specifically introduced to tackle recruitment and retention problems. So far this century, the social care workforce has been of increasing governmental importance with the publication of numerous policy developments (DCSF 2008; Frost and Parton 2009). General impetus for this focus appears to be the death of Victoria Climbié, and subsequent Inquiry (Laming 2003), and Every Child Matters agenda (DoH 2003b).

The introduction of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), Children's Workforce Unit and Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Children and Young People's Services were each aimed at improving working conditions and, in turn, the service user and employer (DoH 2003b). Government reform involved a significant shift in the overall responsibility of Children's services being placed with the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (subsequently renamed the Department for Education (DfS) by the coalition government).

The aim for improvements in communication and working together across professions, alongside public perception, are underpinned by the principle within the Modernising Social Services document (DoH 1998: 85) that modernisation of social services will be facilitated by a confident and competent workforce. Every Child Matters (DoH 2003b) explained government plans to reduce bureaucracy, back a huge national recruitment campaign, offer more flexible and attractive training routes, and offer incentives and rewards for child protection workers. The professional registration system was also introduced with the aim to uphold the quality of social work through reflective practice, ongoing training and personal, and professional development (GSCC 2004a).

Recruitment and retention of the children's social care workforce are crucial aspects of meeting aims of ensuring staffing levels are maintained in order to meet increasing demand for services. This is emphasised in the above mentioned Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme, which aimed to put in place a national framework to support integration of services so every child can achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes: to be healthy, to be safe, to enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing (DOH 2003; DfES 2004). The 10th and final key element of this programme is for 'workforce reform to help develop skills and ensure staffing levels' (DOH 2003).

Signalling what were then priorities, Liam Byrne, Minister for Care Services stated, "We need to modernise and make proud the social care workforce which is key to improving people's wellbeing" in his introduction of the GSCC annual report 2004-05 (GSCC 2005a). This was arguably a timely comment as around the same time, an independent non-profit organisation highlighted that, as many as 80 per cent of social workers were considering leaving their jobs in a case study of one 'major county authority' (Centre for Public Services 2004: 8). The subsequent Children's Plan (DCSF 2007) suggested, families are at the heart of the wellbeing of children in England, in recognition that only a 5th of a child's life is spent at school.

Key drivers for the plan were provision of world class services and England being the best place for children to grow up (DCSF 2007). The plan also laid out the need for a Children's Workforce Action Plan (2008) leading to the establishment of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) in 2008 to coordinate the Children's Workforce Network, one of five bodies forming the UK Skills for Care and Development Sector Skills Council. Crucially, the CWDC aims included increasing the recruitment into children's workforce and improving retention of high quality employees.

The commissioned report Social Work at its Best: A Statement of Roles and Tasks for the 21st Century (GSCC 2008a) provided a source of insight into the future direction of the English workforce, where the Labour government, through the

GSCC, aimed to modernise the social work profession with a far-reaching agenda informed by extensive research (GSCC 2008a). The report recognised and clarified the unique aspects of the professional role, where multi-disciplinary working is reported to have improved communication in the interests of service provision. However, some roles have become increasingly blurred, feeding a general lack of public understanding of what social workers do (Frost and Parton 2009). What the report describes as the elasticity of the social work role when compared to many other disciplines (GSCC 2008a: 10), may well feed the interpretation of 'wooliness' described in Chapter 3.6.1. Whilst being rooted in well-established common core principles, social work is a profession shaped by those it serves, constantly evolving in response to driving forces such as policy, research, user need and public expectation.

Parents, families, and carers are key in ensuring children and young people achieve the aforementioned Every Child Matters outcomes (DoH 2003) and it is widely acknowledged that social workers also play a significant role. This work frequently involves working alongside parents, families, local communities, and other professionals. Some Labour government publications since 2003 signified a drive towards the integration of services (GSCC 2008) and appeared to offer less clarity on the exact role of the children's social worker. They were criticised for falling short of highlighting the unique nature and significance of the profession (Frost and Parton 2009). This was concerning from a 'profession' perspective. However, the wealth of Labour government publications and policy initiatives, from 2005 onwards, relating to workforce development and recruitment and retention (see Table 2.12 below) at least indicated the significance of the problems and recognition of the need to resolve historical problems.

The Task Force drive for positive reform appeared to show great promise and direction (DCSF 2009), carrying the momentum of a reportedly successful recruitment campaign (CWDC 2010) and agreement to work in partnership with the GSCC, the regulatory body for social work. However, a new threat looms over the social work profession, exemplified by the abolition of the GSCC. Massive public

sector spending cuts under the coalition government (2010) will inevitably impact on social work, education, and health provision (see postscript to thesis).

Table 2.12 Labour government publications from 2005 relating to recruitment and retention of social workers

- The Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES 2005)
- The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce (DfES 2005c)
- Options for Excellence Review (DfES and DoH 2006)
- The Children's Workforce Network (CWN 2006)
- Championing Children (CWDC, 2006c)
- CWDC Induction Standards (CWDC, 2006c)
- Care Matters: Time for Change (DCSF 2007a)
- The Children's Plan (DCSF 2007b)
- The Integrated Qualifications Framework (CWDC, 2007f)
- Statement of Inter-professional Values (GSCC et al, 2007)
- Local Workforce Strategies (CWDC, 2007d)
- Social Work at its Best (GSCC 2008)
- Continuing Prof Development (CWDC 2008)
- The state of the children's social care workforce (CWDC 2008)
- Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children's Workforce (DCSF 2008b)
- Newly Qualified Social Workers (CWDC 2009)
- Multi-agency services: Building the work group (DCSF 2009b)
- 2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy (DCSF 2009d)
- Respect, Recruit, Retain (LGA 2009).
- Building a safe, confident future – the final report of the Social Work Task Force (DCSF 2009)
- Be the Difference (CWDC 2010)
- Raising Standards (GSCC 2010)
- Social Workers' Workload Survey: Messages from the front line (Baginsky et al. DCSF 2010)
- Munro report into Children's services (due 2011)

Whilst uncertainty surrounding the future direction of public services exists the announcement of £73 million towards children's workforce development (DfCSF 2008b) and a profile raising poster campaign (LGA 2009) were indicative of the Labour government's drive to prioritise and resolve recruitment and retention problems. This emerged as the award winning 'Be the Difference' campaign as discussed in section 2.3.5. Social work commentators frequently highlight the significance of recruitment and retention problems, and express concern about the restriction and possible marginalisation of the social work role within children's service. However, the need for social workers appears to be steadily increasing (Frost and Parton 2009; Munro 2008).

The success of previous advertising campaigns is questionable and some lessons appear to have been learnt. Despite an estimated spend of £19.7 million by English local authorities on recruitment advertising for *all* public sector vacancies including £7.9 million on children's services from 1st April 2004 to 30th September 2004 and £18 million during the same period the year before, the problem is claimed to have increased (LAWSG 2005: 9). This is more concerning in the context of a £1.5 million national newspaper and radio advertising campaign launched in October 2001, aimed at both improving social work recruitment as well as public perception (DoH 2001b) and a reported 32 per cent of local authorities recruiting internationally for children's services in 2003 (Social Care Recruitment 2005: 5).

Conversely, local authority feedback from 130 departments following this campaign published by The Employers' Organisation For Local Government highlighted a 72 per cent increase in the employment of social workers from 1989 to 2003. This was attributed to successful recruiting by local authorities (Social Care Recruitment 2005: 3) but still signified a perennial shortfall and increasing pressures on local authorities to recruit replacements speedily. There was also the anticipated reduction of about 1000 newly qualified social workers in 2005 and 2006 due to them continuing their final year of the social work degree. This represented a reduction of 1135 from 2004-05 to 2006-07 according to CWDC (2008). It is also

highlighted, however, that in 2004 'in-house' training of social workers had increased to its highest level since 1995 (Social Care Recruitment 2005: 3). This slightly more positive development cannot detract from the general consensus of a profession in crisis.

A second phase of this recruitment campaign was initiated in February 2006 involving month-long poster and radio advertisements. In a sceptical response to the re-launch the Liberal Democrat MP, Sandra Gidley stated,

> "In 2001, a £1.5m social work recruitment campaign was launched. Five years later exactly the same problems remain. Are we to believe that today's announcement is anything other than merely window dressing?" (Gidley 2006).

It is also noted that on closer investigation, local radio, national newspapers, 'ethnic press' and 'women's weeklies' were vehicles used (COI 2006). However, whilst media accessed by ethnic minority groups and women have been used, nothing specifically targeting men is identified. This is arguably an opportunity missed with an enduring decline in the number of male applicants (Lyons et al. 1995; Perry and Cree 2003) and only 22 per cent making up the field social workforce (Balloch 1997).

The Audit Commission (2002: 9) highlighted key differences between public sector and private sector workers and surmised that many in the private sector were previously public sector employees. Agency workers were being increasingly relied upon for the core business. This is notable within the social work profession with a dramatic rise in the agency workforce from 4506 equivalent full time posts in 2003 to 6981 in 2004 (LAWSG 2005, cited in Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006: 654), most of which were in London (Douglas 2002; CWDC 2008). Locums were found to be no longer employed to cover only absences and project work (Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006), and many benefits were highlighted in the flexibility of the working agreement between employee and employer, the 'free agent perspective'. This suggests that within this imperfect scenario, agency social workers are increasingly

using these contracts as a form of 'cream skimming' – selecting authorities and assignments they perceived to be less problematic (Grimshaw et al. 2003, cited in Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006: 660).

The Audit Commission (2002) also noted four critical success factors for joint action in recruitment and retention to be considered by policy makers. These were:

- matching work experience with people's expectations
- an engaging, enabling and supporting working environment
- people delivering public services should feel valued, respected and rewarded
- active management of the impact on staff of the mixed economy of provision of needs

"Putting these factors in place is as much about leadership and changing the tone of the national conversation about public services as it is about human resources practices or pay" (Audit Commission 2002: 4).

Successfully tackling issues surrounding recruitment and retention is not necessarily guaranteed as demonstrated in respect of the review of social work in Wales, even when statistical improvements are made. The Garthwaite Report, Social Work: A Profession to Value (2005) was subsequently been found to lead to 'pockets of improvement' according to the original author (Community Care 2009: 9). Garthwaite reported that whilst vacancy rates have dropped from 10 to 15 per cent, many of the issues raised in 2005 remain.

2.4   Conclusion

This chapter identifies the extent of the problems relating to recruitment and retention and contextualises this study internationally and nationally, and within educational and political arenas. Whilst many state sector professions have had, and indeed, continue to experience recruitment and retention difficulties, they are

most prevalent within the general social care workforce. The crisis relates most specifically to the children and family professional social workforce and even more closely to children's social care teams.

Turnover of social workers is widely reported to be problematic by employing agencies. This is despite a steady reduction in turnover rates between 2000 and 2006, where on average one in ten social workers leave their employer each year. Statistically, recruitment problems centre on an inability to impact on the retirement rates of social workers at the end of their careers. Despite a current (2010) successful advertising campaign, increasing interest in social work education and growing number of social workers registering with the GSCC, recruitment and retention in children's social care is often described as in 'crisis'.

Social work students and especially qualifying social workers are a highly valuable asset and considered to be 'gold dust' by local authorities competing to attract those with most potential into their agencies. Wide ranging government policy focusing on the children's social care workforce, and influencing recruitment and retention has been published indicating the significance of the problems, and political desire to address them.

The next chapter provides a further review of relevant literature, focussing on the ecology of social work practice. An overview of ecological theory is provided followed by analysis of literature on case, individual, organisational, and external factors. The literature indicates recruitment and retention problems are significant, deep rooted, and impact on humankind on various levels.

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"Plants don't flourish when we pull them up too often to check how their roots are growing…" (www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecture1 in Munro 2004: 1092).

3.1   Introduction

The introductory chapter set the scene for this study, arguing that social workers remaining within the organisational setting are well placed to provide insight into recruitment and retention problems, and thereby provide valuable evidence for making necessary improvements. The second chapter considered the extent of problems associated with recruitment and retention of registered social workers within children's social care teams. The literature indicates recruitment and retention problems are significant, deep rooted, and impact humankind on various levels. Despite increasing interest in social work education and growing numbers of social workers registering with the GSCC, children's social care is often described as in 'crisis' (Jones 2001; Douglas 2002; Lymbery 2004; Asquith et al. 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006; Skills for Care and Development 2009). Whilst recruitment into children teams has been challenging, high turnover rates appear to be most significant. I argue that most organisational research is of a quantitative nature and a gap in the literature exists relating to the ecology of social work and how the lived cultural experience of the work impacts on social workers' wishes to leave or remain within the job.

This chapter considers retention issues within the ecological context of children's social care work and the fundamental requirement to navigate human relationships. A Decision Making Ecology model (Baumann et al.1997) is used to help present the relevant literature. Although Baumann et al. (1997) designed this model to explain decision making, I found it offers a useful framework with which to consider the working world of social work.

Table 3.13 Using the dimensions in the Decision Making Ecology model to present the literature

Dimension	Pages
Case factors	61 - 72
Individual factors	72 - 90
Organisational factors	90 - 105
External factors	106 - 113
Relationship between factors	113

Literature relating to the working world of social work is presented with the above-mentioned levels presented as four influential factors. Firstly, the conceptual model for the ecology of children's social care on which these factors are based is introduced. Secondly, the model is used to examine literature relating to 'case' factors involving service users, 'worker' factors followed by 'organisation' factors, and 'external' factors. The chapter highlights the complex and challenging nature of social work and considers the relationship between and within the associated factors. Gaps in the literature are identified, and the implications for this study are discussed in the construction of the methodological approach and subsequent data analysis.

3.2   The model for Decision Making Ecology

The concept of social ecology is historically associated with both psychology and concerns of the natural environment often involving global conservation concerns (Hawley 1950). However, ecological theory is increasingly applied to other paradigms including that of human interaction and work (Baumann et al. 1997). It is widely recognised that work within the English Public Services is often complex and challenging (Munro 2009). Research suggests this is amplified when considering social work generally and more so in children and family social work. Chapter 2 highlighted research that informs the perception that social work with children and families is in crisis and general disarray within an international context.

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Baumann et al. (1997) provide an exposition of how consideration of four key ecological factors within social work processes can help unpick these complexities in studying the influences on decision making. Their model essentially provides a framework for understanding the environment of practice and therefore can contribute to both understanding and responding to issues of recruitment and retention. These four factors are:

- cases [service users]
- individuals [workers]
- organisations [workplaces]
- the external world

Figure 3.1   Decision Making Ecology

Diagram removed for copyright reasons

(Baumann et al. 1997)

The Decision Making Ecology model (Baumann et al. 1997; adapted by Hollows 2003) recognises a complex (Fluke 2009) and reciprocal set of interacting factors in the decision-making process that contribute towards an action. Their research demonstrates how a greater understanding of the decision making process can lead to meaningful and effective solutions to recruitment and retention problems.

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Ecology in the context of this study refers to the rarely seen world of social work and the experience of social workers 'behind closed doors' and forms the primary focus for this research.

Baumann et al. (1997) highlighted four related consequences that can be predicted by different features of the Decision Making Ecology in their consideration of the children's social worker as decision maker. These are:

- burnout
- turnover
- organisational ratings of staff performance
- actual performance.

Within this framework Baumann (1997b) undertook a major quantitative study of decision-making, burnout and turnover in the USA across a sample of 1488 people (n=186 Adult Protective Services, n=1154 Child Protection Services and n=148 unspecified). His assumption was that 'to understand the decisions caseworkers make one must understand the context in which they are made', (Baumann et al. 1997: 15).

They found that burnout and turnover were more likely where Decision Making Ecology factors were negatively linked to casework. Conversely, social workers were more likely to stay where those factors and casework were positively linked. Additionally, negative features of casework can be 'buffered' by positive features of the individual or the organisation. Hollows (2001) reached similar conclusions about the ecology of practice in her qualitative study on judgement in U.K. Children and Family Social Work. More recently, Wells et al. (2004) also effectively used the decision making framework to consider ecological factors and screening in child protection services.

As demonstrated, these factors effectively explain the decision-making process and outcome of decisions. Baumann et al. (1997) and Hollows (2003)

demonstrated how the Decision Making Ecology could illuminate the inter-relational factors involved in social work and the influences on worker decisions to either remain within or leave their current employment. Whilst Baumann et al. (1997) highlight 'individual' and 'organisational' factors associated with predictability of burnout and turnover, I argue that 'case' and 'external' factors can also have significance on turnover. The literature from empirical research relating to all four factors within this chapter below helped inform the methodological design and analysis of this study. Literature relating to the first of these factors will now be examined.

3.3 Case Factors – the Service User

"Social work is about people, it's that simple and that complicated," (Socialworkandcare.co.uk 2007)

Social work involves a broad range of influential issues falling within the four previously identified factors in the ecology of practice that can be summarised as being:

- service users (cases) for whom social workers work (Shaw and Gould 2001),
- workers,
- organisational settings and senior management, and
- society and the external world.

It is appropriate that focus turns firstly towards the people for whom the social work profession exists, service users, often referred to as the client, less frequently the customer, as dictated by the cultural setting of the organisation (Foucault 1974; Goffman 1961). The concept of service users, as 'cases' as an identifying label, will now be further explored, followed by an exploration of the literature around cases and casework.

3.3.1 Influencing the definitions of 'cases'

 "Child protection work inevitably involves uncertainty, ambiguity and fallibility…and there is no definitive way of balancing the conflicting rights of parents and children" (Munro 2008: 1).

In decision-making ecology, case factors are issues relating to individual cases that influence a decision to take action (Baumann et al. 1997; Hollows 2003; Hollows 2011 forthcoming). In commonly used social work language, 'case' is the impersonal term used to describe the person, or more often the family allocated to a social worker, or awaiting such. Social work with 'cases' is therefore the work relating to, and associated with, that particular person (service user) or group of people involved within (service users). Caseload is often associated with case allocation as a way of quantifying individual workload (Munro 2009).

Language, including the distinction between 'cases' and people within a case, influences appreciation of concepts of discourse and power (Foucault 1974), professional relationships (Frost and Parton 2009) and arguably, the need for objectivity in some situations. The 'case' concept can therefore act to depersonalise and objectify service users. This can be illustrated when we consider anecdotal reports that suggest social workers spend between 60 and 80 per cent of their time completing 'casework' on computers, rather than working with people face to face. This is said to be an historical challenge that has worsened since the introduction of the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (DCSF (2007) contrary to developmental aims (Bell and Shaw 2008; Cleaver et al. 2008; Parton 2008; Shaw et al. 2009).

The term used to describe the children and families within this study is 'service user(s)', reflecting my own working experience and it is the term most used by participants within the study, as well as being the terminology generally used by government.

The two direct quotes above, from a social work recruitment campaign (www.socialworkandsocialcare.co.uk 2006) and that of Munro (2008) hint at the

complexities of the human relational underpinning of social work, with 'people' central to practice. In social work education Thompson (1997) illuminates these case complexities by placing people at the heart of his 'PCS' model to illustrate how oppression operates within and across personal and psychological, community and cultural, societal and structural dimensions of social work theory.

The building blocks for social work and professional values are provided in Roger's humanistic theory (Roger and Dymond 1954; Banks 2001; Trevithick 2005) resulting in a prevalence of person-centred approaches to assessment and intervention (Truax and Carkhuff 1967; Bozarth 1998). These help practitioners identify the centrality of service users, especially the child, within the professional relationship and the significance of the subjective cognitive experience of the individual. This is perhaps despite criticism that recent policy has rendered the social work profession bureaucratic and target-driven, in which 'human qualities' are secondary (Kirton 2009), increasingly functionalist, defensive, overly procedural, and narrowly concerned with assessing, managing, and insuring against risk (Parton and O'Byrne 2000: 1). Additionally, claims from the political right are that policy has resulted in a nationalisation of childhood (Kirby 2006).

Social workers have long considered the importance of ecological perspectives in their involvement with children and families. The theoretical framework for this is illustrated in numerous publications, including, Jack (1997); Garbarino and Collins (1999); Jack (2000); Jack and Jordan (1999). These perspectives also underpin the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need (DoH 2000) and more recently the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (DfES 2006). An appreciation of the holistic experience of the service user is therefore key to work involving the people, voluntarily or reluctantly, using the services of social workers and their employers. As Hollows (2001: 89) noted, "Knowledge and understanding about the wider environment of children's lives contributes not only to judgements about the issues affecting children but also to the development of strategies to overcome the adversities and difficulties that children may face".

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Ecological systems theory (Brofenbrenner 1979) helps social workers use holism to understand how systems and their interactions influence human behaviour. Although differing in terminology and the number of identified systems (Baumann et al.'s four to Brofenbrenner's five) Baumann et al.'s (1997) model reflects Brofenbrenner's (1979) principles of environmental systems and their influence on human beings. This is particularly relevant to the complexities involved and the need for contextualisation in order to developing understanding of human behaviour. The relevance of Brofenbrenner's work to modern society is, however, questioned by Sudbery (2010: 154) claiming, "…it is hard to see a body of research creating his 'grand unifying theory'. Although he does acknowledge the valuable prompt the work gives to developmental researchers. Its use in this study was aimed to highlight how such systems influence child protection in North City. The case context, in which service users are located, needs to be included in understanding the ecology of social work practice and its relevance to worker recruitment and retention.

3.3.2 National context of cases in children's social care

Statistics from a range of government sources indicate the range and scale of work involved in children's social care in England. There are around 13 million children living in families or with carers in England.

Table 3.14 Children In Need, Looked After and Subject to Child Protection Plan

Year	Children 'In Need'	Children 'Looked After'	Children Subject to CPP (previously known as CP register)
2001	-	58,900	26,800
2002	-	59,700	-
2003	-	61,200	30,200
2004	-	61,200	31,000
2005	385,300	61,000	30,700
2006	-	60,300	31500
2007	-	60,000	33,300
2008	-	-	34,000
2009	-	-	37,900
2010	382,300	-	-

(DfES 2005; DfES 2006; DCSF 2006; DCSF 2010: 125; Frost and Parton 2009: 95; NSPCC 2009, DfE 2010)

Frost and Parton (2009) highlight that of the 596,300 referrals to children's social care from March 2005 to March 2006, just 31,500 (one in 18, or 6 per cent) was entered onto a child protection register (now classified as 'subject to Child Protection Plan' CPP). Kirton (2009: 2) also identifies from Creighton and Tissier (2003) that between 50 and 100 children die annually from maltreatment in England; although this appears to offer a wide margin for error. The data highlights two key aspects; firstly, the more obvious relevance to children and the context of statistical inference, and secondly, relating to the high volume of practical work done by the children's care workforce in receiving, assessing, judging and processing these 'cases'. Frost and Parton note the scale and complexity of the task of managing such a system in ensuring that children are both safeguarded and have their needs met (2009: 74-5).

The recognition of this work is important to this study, especially within the historical context of media and public criticism (Eborall and Garmeson 2001). Some of this work is presented below.

Table 3.15 Children in each stage of the referral and assessment procedure, 2003-07 (year ending 31st March)

	Numbers				
	2003	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**
Referrals of children to SSDs*	570,000	572,700	552,000	569,300	545,000
Initial assessments completed	263,900	290,800	290,300	300,200	305,000
Core assessments completed	55,700	63,600	74,100	84,800	93,400
Registered during the year	30,200	31,000	30,700	31,500	33,300

(Frost and Parton 2009: 76)

*Since the above data was collected a considerable increase in referrals to local authority children's services and non-government organisations (NGOs) since the death of Baby Peter in August 2007 was noted (Pile 2009).

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A fundamental shift in the nature of children's social care work is widely reported with a move towards child protection, away from preventative work, involving less time for direct one-to-one work with children and their families and reflection. This being driven by a rise in bureaucracy, accountability and risk aversion (see examples in, Parton 1998; Charles and Butler 2004; Munro 2004; 2009; Parton 2009).

Around the beginning of this study in 2003, the Social Services Department (SSD) of the case study became part of a Children and Young People's Services Trust, bringing together services at a strategic level for all children and young people from birth to 21 years in the city. This was aimed at delivering the aspirations of the Laming (2003) inquiry into Victoria Climbié's death and 'Every Child Matters' Green Paper (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2003). This was followed by the local introduction of a 4 Tier Model of Needs and Services to illustrate the distribution of services.

Figure 3.2 Four-Tier Model of Needs and Services

This model was used to help shape methodological considerations and subsequent analysis within this study, as I suspected participants would refer to the 'tiers' when

describing the nature of their work. The case context within the ecology of practice has been highlighted above. The following section will elucidate the apparently cyclical worker/service user relationship and retention.

3.3.3 Impact of retention problems on 'cases'

Social workers need to ask the fundamental question, 'what is it like to be this child?' in order to assess and make key decisions in that child's life (Horwath 2008). Professional authority, a wide-ranging knowledge base, and core skills, including communication, are necessary to develop a holistic picture that considers needs and risks. Human relationships and more specifically, effective communication with children are therefore essential. The significance of time and resources to facilitate this effectively cannot therefore be underestimated. The literature indicates strong links between the inability to fulfil their role in effective communication and wanting to leave the job.

Holland and Scourfield highlight the lack of research exploring children's perspectives within the "…child protection-orientated interventions with social workers" (2004: 25). Research highlighting the views of children who are 'looked after' is however more readily available (Morgan 2006, Thomas 2002). Children also rarely attend the major decision–making arenas of child protection conferences and courts (Thoburn et al. 1995; Lyon and Parton 1995; O'Quigley 2000). Obtaining views, wishes, and feelings from children in social work is a fundamental requirement of practice, underpinned by s.22 of the Children Act 1989. At the same time, information technology is increasingly being used by social workers as a means of communication (though not with service users) but also to support administrative functions. The balance between direct work with service users and the need to record and account for work done electronically is a sensitive one, and is discussed in more depth later in this chapter (see 3.4).

Rose and Barnes' study of serious case reviews between 2001 and 2003, found that whilst electronic information sharing was necessary, there remained a need to remember 'the power of personal contact' (2007). Additionally, many of the 161 children involved (of whom two thirds had died) came from families known to adult

services. They advised it was critical for adult sector staff to have awareness of child protection issues.

More recently two high profile child death inquiries for Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Baby P) have criticised professionals for not finding out directly from the children 'how they were' (Laming 2003; Laming 2009). This is not fresh criticism; lack of communication was of major significance in the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974); a case of great historic consequence to children's social work (Parton and Thomas 1983; Parton 1985; Butler and Drakeford 2005) as discussed in Chapter 2.

Despite historical criticism levelled at social workers and problems associated with recruitment and retention, limited literature providing children's perspectives highlights their very positive views of their relationships with social workers (CWDC forthcoming; Morgan 2006) and there are similar perspectives from adults (Doel and Best 2008). These relationships are, however, jeopardised by the high turnover; the consequence is clearly not missed by this care leaver:

> "The longest I had a social worker for was 3 months, then from there I've had 14 different social workers. It's hard because you get to know and trust one and it [sic] leaves" (Morgan 2006: 28).

In 2006, the Children's Rights Director, Dr Roger Morgan conducted research involving around 100 children from 13 focus groups, and an additional 502 returned child friendly question cards. Ages of participants receiving a child care service or living away from home, ranged from 4 (with some adult help), to a 21 year old care leaver with an average age of 14 years. Whilst the informal nature of the research makes it difficult to quantify the findings, they appear to reflect the impact high turnover has on children and young people and also give insight into the significance of their relationship with social workers; most rated their social workers 8 out of 10, with 10 being the best and 0 the worst. Arguably more powerful are the words expressed about how positively the children felt about social workers. A couple of examples being, "no-one's perfect, but she's close enough!" and "you

feel as if you can say anything and they will understand", Morgan 2006: 5). Some less positive general points included that social workers were changed too often and did not always share information, they did not always seem to listen to them, they did not react to problems quickly enough, they sometimes focussed on what was best for the adults looking after them and they did not speak with them alone during visits (Morgan 2006).

The demands of social work within short-staffed teams are exemplified in Laming's criticism of Victoria Climbié's social worker and of the pressure under which she was placed.

> "… the fact remains that Ms Arthurworrey failed to complete a number of key tasks in relation to Victoria's case, and she worked considerably in excess of her scheduled hours, notching up by the end of 1999 some 52 days of time off in lieu, which could not easily be taken because of workload pressures" (Laming 2003: 6.16).

This preceded Laming's recognition that performance would be improved when turnover was addressed (Laming 2003). This sentiment is shared within American literature where the gravity of life-altering child welfare decisions required not only a competent and professional workforce, but one that is stable (Ellet (2002: 3). Mor Barak et al. (2001) found high turnover contributed to service user's lack in confidence in the service, whilst in Ireland, Buckley et al. (2008) note that service users' perception of high turnover of social workers is associated with organisational and individual worker indifference.

The threat to children posed by social workers leaving is most recently summarised within the government launch of a national Respect, Recruit, Retain campaign,

> "Just when we need to be tightening the safety net to do our best never to repeat the mistakes that contributed to the death of Baby P there becomes an increased danger that the gaps widen as people decide it's time to get out" (LGA 2009b: 5).

The literature provides a picture of how the building of human relationships and positive outcomes for children are dependent on effective social work practice within a retained workforce. This appears at odds with aspects of practice reality that contribute towards social workers deciding to leave their jobs, leaving fewer social workers available thereby increasing workload for those that remain. Whilst many aspects influencing retention appear to relate to organisational and external factors, the literature indicates the significance of case factors within the decision-making process.

3.3.4 Impact of cases on recruitment and retention

Despite an apparent wealth of anecdotal evidence about the negative cyclical impact of recruitment and retention on increasing work, DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) found that caseload and workload had rarely been studied. However, they established that emotional exhaustion and lack of supervisory and administrative support in their work related to turnover and intention to leave (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008: 13). Such organisational issues are some of the most frequently cited within recruitment and retention literature covered later within this chapter (3.5). The literature indicates that social workers say less about how service users contribute towards the challenges that make them either want to leave, or actually leave their employment. However, there are exceptions to be found.

An anonymous writer in a publication about sharing practice experience from health and social care provides personal reflection on the changing relationship between service user and social worker (Anon 2004: 24-25). He/she begins in the early 1970s as a generic social worker across the spectrum of individual needs. The writer describes a 'great deal of personal choice and autonomy' in the work with service users, whose perception of social workers was of 'friendly authority'. Work focussed on building relationships with people and communities and responding to demand and feeling generally accepted and safe. Resources appeared to be more forthcoming and available through informal routes.

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Significant changes were noted on returning to generic social work from a career break from 1977 to 1984 focussing more on children and family issues. Procedures became more significant, resources were particularly stretched, Social Security Benefits reduced, injured or abused children were prioritised, visits were more investigative, there was less personal autonomy, management was more defensive, there was an increased agenda setting by workers than service users and no time for community activities (Anon 2004: 24-25). It is within this context that the change of perception towards social workers was noted as that of interfering and disempowering, where stigma was associated with involvement. Service users were more openly critical, threatening and abusive although mildly sympathetic.

Some positives were also noted; managers became more proactive, resources were distributed more evenly and joint working was often supportive and avoided favouritism. Whilst this is one social worker's reflection, it has striking resonance with much of the above-mentioned anecdotal evidence and 'grey' literature. It also reflects the turbulent environment (Hughes and Pengelly 1997) within the political battlefield of the historical State/family relationship; one of normalising and moralising (Cree 1996; Parton 1998) shifting towards increasing powers to coerce and increasing accountability (Hollows 2001; Parton 1998).

Hughes and Pengelly (1997) and Hollows (2001) note the centrality of loss in work with service users, where workers describe their job as being 'full of sadness', contributing greatly to their stress and distress. As indicated in Chapter 2, other service user issues that affect social workers are the increasingly high levels of complex need (Laming 2003; Ruch 2005; Clark 2006; Parton 2008; Munro 2009), increasing drug and alcohol misuse (Copello et al. 2009) and violence (Batty 2001; Eborral and Garmeson 2001; Littlechild 2005; DoH 2005). There is also an increasing policy-driven emphasis on safeguarding, and the needs and potential of all children (Frost and Parton 2009).

New Right ideology has had considerable influence on the development of the concept of consumerism. Whilst this is arguably more evident in adult community care, children's care services are becoming increasingly accountable in their response to consumer choice and need (Ransom and Stewart 1994; Lymbery 2004; Asquith et al. 2005). However, there are wider issues at stake within the protection of children that cannot necessarily be contained within consumerist approaches. It is therefore incontrovertible that many parents who have their children removed within the child protection service would express appreciation of empowerment through consumer choice. Whilst consumerism contributes towards a less hierarchical relationship, it is argued the power to assess, 'gatekeep', judge and preside, remains with the social worker (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse 2005).

The literature demonstrates the complex relational aspects of social work between service user, case and worker and the connection to retention issues including the significance of case factors,

> "…there is some evidence that when compared with worker and organizational factors, case characteristics may exert the greatest influence in decision making" (Baumann, Schwab, and Schutz 1997).

These may be decisions to stay in or leave the team, employer, service user pathway or the profession altogether. The next section identifies literature associated with 'worker' factors within the ecology of practice; focussing more closely on the lived experiences of being a child protection social worker and their relationship with recruitment and retention.

3.4   Individual Factors – the social worker

> "Social workers do what social workers do" (Thompson 2003:13)

Recent media portrayal of social workers surrounding the death of Baby Peter has rekindled societal perception that the profession is embedded in negativity. Social

workers are frequently publicly vilified and condemned, reflecting McMohan's (1998) Australian sentiment; 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't'. This is despite knowledge within social work that, contrary to media and public bias (see 3.6) many positive outcomes are realised and go unreported to the wider world (LA 2009). This section begins with an examination of positive concepts in social work followed by the challenges.

3.4.1 Positive experiences

Chapter 2 indicated the general rise in applications to universities and the motivational factors for entering into social work. Many hopes and aspirations are not necessarily unfounded, with wide-ranging in-service reports that the work is rewarding (see examples in, Holland and Scourfield 2004: 28; NASW 2004; Social Lives 2009), valuable (Audit Commission 2002) and that social workers are proud of what they do (Community Care 25-04-07). Political recognition of the essential nature of social work £73 million was indicated by the Labour pledge to tackle recruitment and retention problems (DCSF 2009).

Consideration of motivation to join the social work profession appears important, particularly in light of the general upturn in applications to train to become social workers, as highlighted in Chapter 2. Public sector workers state that the predominant reason for their choice of employer was 'the opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of service users, and for local communities' (Audit Commission 2002: 3). Furness (2007) also found this to be the most popular motivation for students (34 per cent) in her survey of 497 participants conducted over 4 years in one English university. This, in addition to anecdotal evidence, is arguably why a statement like "wanting to make a difference" has become something of a cliché within the social work profession and a source of self-effacing banter that resonates with social workers (see 3.5.3). Social work student motivation has also been found to be a complex issue (Christie and Kruk 1998; Furness 2007).

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The will to 'do good' is also reflected in a British Social Attitudes study of 4200 participants, where John and Johnson (2008) found 45 per cent of public sector workers in 2005 were more likely to value their job because it was considered to be useful to society and intrinsically rewarding. These concur with the ADSS Cymru project findings that nearly 80 per cent (n=796) of Welsh social workers believed the most rewarding feature of the job was 'helping people, achieving good outcomes for service users and carers' (ADSS 2005: 85). Student motivations to join the profession go far beyond altruism (Parker and Merrylees 2002) and include unconscious motivations (Vincent 1996; Lackie 1983), perceiving social work as a vocation (Reamer 1987), life-events including psychological trauma (Rompf and Timberlake 1994) and idealism (Csikai and Rosensky 1997). Cultural differences also need to be considered depending on the country and arguably region informing student motivation.

Reasons social workers choose to remain within their profession are varied, and as demonstrated is despite facing many challenges. An American literature review (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008) highlights the significant recent increase of studies involving workforce and retention of child welfare staff. However, many of the studies identified remained unpublished and difficulties were encountered due to the variety of terminology, differences in analysis and application of constructs such as burnout (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008: 12). Despite this, they concluded that "worker's commitment to child welfare, self-efficacy and low levels of emotional exhaustion" were key personal factors for retention (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008: 1). They conclude that future research relating to retention of child welfare social workers and the way they are analysed needs to be more rigorous, with greater consideration of evaluation of changes made to improve worker retention. Conversely, Fook et al. (1997) conducted an Australian qualitative study on the theory of expertise, interviewing 30 social workers. Students reported disillusionment with social work, whilst 'experts' were ready to defend the challenge of social work more positively.

Some studies highlight concern that the pervasive nature of high turnover leads to the best and brightest employees leaving the service (Abbasi and Hollman 2000;

Willis 2003; Galvin 2004). However, demonstrating this is challenging without a clear definition of social worker performance. This is also problematic because it implies that somehow 'lesser' than the best and brightest are at least less likely to fit within this category. Although, Curry et al. (2005: 944) suggested that competence could be a predictive factor in retention, with competence being defined by higher capability to 'manage the cases'. Perhaps more importantly, they argue for the inclusion of training and development activities in staff retention programs.

As indicated, social workers' commitment to service users is high (Eborral 2001; Willis 2003; Wallis-Jones and Lyons 2003; Social Lives 2009). Willis (2003: 33) conducted a desktop review, interviews of senior managers and questionnaires of 85 social services staff, including social workers, in one local authority and found providing a high quality service (100 per cent), making a positive difference (99 per cent) as strong motivational forces. Whilst these terms are not defined and we cannot be certain what staff meant when completing their responses, Willis concludes that understanding staff motivation is key to addressing issues with high turnover rates endured within her London Borough. Although it is unlikely this small-scale local study was peer reviewed, and much of the literature is from 'grey' sources, Willis manages to highlight the many key themes reflected in the literature about the need for organisational change to meet the challenges of recruitment and retention.

In their American study on retention of child welfare workers, using a mixed methods approach, Mor Barak et al. (2006) questioned what was keeping workers in their jobs despite such negative work and organisational environment related interview responses. The literature appears to rarely ask this question despite great potential for informing future retention policy decisions. Mor Barak et al. (2006: 567) highlight only five American child welfare studies (Reagh 1994; Rycraft 1994; Dickinson and Perry 1998; Ellet 2001; Smith 2005) where the active decision to stay, despite a stressful job within a challenging organisational environment is questioned. It follows that answers relating to this will be key to promoting retention. Wallis-Jones and Lyons (2003) also found that whilst a high level of

dissatisfaction exists, so does a high level of commitment to the service user and also to team colleagues. A study of recruitment and retention in Ireland considers this same question and contradicts the debate that turnover of child protection and welfare social workers is high, with two thirds of interviewees wanting to remain in their jobs (Burns 2009). Key themes, however, relating to positive influences on retention were highlighted as follows:

- quality of supervision
- social exchanges between social workers and their co-workers
- high levels of autonomy
- career preference for social work
- wide variety in the work
- social workers' commitment to co-workers and service users
- perception they are making a difference

(Burns 2009: 200).

The question asked of 'retained' social workers invites opportunity for workers to consider positives about their situation and therefore gives a more balanced and rounded response as found by Mor Barak et al. (2006) and Burns (2009).   Mor Barak et al. (2006) indicated that most workers stay through a devotion to their child and family clients and an appreciation of the rewarding life-changing work they can achieve with them while so many of their colleagues choose to leave. Good quality supervision, and in some cases with older employees, flexibility, independence, competitive salary and benefits are also cited. However, the majority of interviewees explained their continuing employment by expressing…"satisfaction and pride in having a positive impact and in making a difference in their clients' lives" (Mor Barak et al. 2006: 565). Additionally, the sense of client responsibility and commitment outweighs that given to their employer; a phenomenon believed to be unique to the helping professions, especially that of child welfare (Mor Barak et al. 2006).

Mor Barak et al. (2006: 566) concur with their review of organisational and employment literature that demonstrates associations between job dissatisfaction, lack of organisational commitment, plus being younger and less vested in the

organisation. Additionally, they found high stress levels are linked to intention to leave and turnover. They conclude that studying intention to leave is important for two reasons: helping predict turnover and giving an indication "of a workforce that may not be working at its full potential, thus possibly affecting their own well-being as well as client outcomes" (Mor Barak et al. 2006: 568). Arguably, these findings are contradicted by Allsopp (1995) who found high job satisfaction expressed by child protection social workers continuously investigating child abuse allegations (Allsopp 1995), given the reportedly high levels of stress associated with this work (Eborall and Garmeson 2001; LGA 2009b).

3.4.2 Challenges

Figure 3.3   Damned if you do, damned if you don't

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(www.thefarside.com)

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Challenge in social work is cited as a motivational force to join the profession (Fook et al. 1997; Furness 2007: 247). However, the balance between challenge creating an engaging 'buzz' about the work and that of being completely overwhelmed appears to be an important one. Challenges with negative effects on social workers are highlighted throughout Chapters 2 and 3. However, the key themes of the social worker experience will now be explored namely stress, burnout and morale. This is followed by an examination of the literature relating to another key theme of supervision.

In 2007 a BASW sponsored Community Care survey of over 1000 social workers, across the range of provision, 'paints a complex picture of a proud profession' (Community Care 2007). Whilst 83 per cent are proud to work in social care, most respondents indicated concerns about present and future practice issues:

- 57 per cent of children's social workers work five or more hours overtime a week
- 75 per cent of all respondents spend more than 40 per cent of their time on administrative work away from service users
- 34 per cent spend more than 60 per cent of time on administrative tasks
- 59 per cent find it somewhat or very difficult to meet their 5 day PRTL training/learning requirement in a year
- 72 per cent feel worried or negative about the future of social work
- 31 per cent of children social workers believe social work will not survive as a distinct discipline in five years
- 25 per cent are considering leaving the profession
    - the top 3 things that would dissuade them are:
        - 68 per cent – less paperwork, more client contact
        - 61 per cent – more resources
        - 59 per cent – better pay (Community Care 2007).

Although the electronic survey is relatively small, the findings reflect many of those found within peer reviewed empirical studies as well as the latest Respect and

Protect government initiative (LGA 2009b) as previously highlighted. It also resonates with Asquith et al. (2005: 40) who consider 'social workers may be less disillusioned about social work as a profession than with social work in local authority settings'. Resultant factors from the associated pressure of children's social work, particularly in teams with retention problems are considered next.

According to Charles and Wilton (2004) themes identified as tensions dominating statutory children's social workers' work are:

- conflicting needs of organisations and families
- resource constraints
- the marginalisation of relationship skills
- lack of attention accorded to the 'how' of social work practice (Charles and Wilton 2004: 180).

They perceive social workers being in the middle of a metaphorical 'tug of war', with disparity between, on one hand, the need for child-centred practice, where their power issues are responded to sensitively and rights are promoted, and on the other hand, the need to meet targets, complete paperwork, and for accountability exists. The literature demonstrates how elements connected with this 'tug of war' negatively influence the profession, outcomes for children, for workers, and for employing organisations. Stress and burnout are reportedly two such negative outcomes experienced by social workers.

3.4.3 Stress, and Burnout

The Health and Safety Executive Stress defined stress as, 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them' (Health and Safety Executive 2004). Studies have demonstrated the high level of commitment social workers give to service users in addition to feelings of professional pride. However, a wealth of empirical evidence suggests that many social workers find their work stressful, especially within children's care services (Coffey et al. 2004). The impact of high turnover rates combined with the challenge of day-to-day child protection/welfare work/general social work has been extensively covered within the literature, more frequently from America and

Australia (see American examples in, Bernotavicz 1997; Cohen and Austin 1994; Drake and Yadama 1996; Ellett, Ellett and Rugutt 2003; GAO 2003; Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin 2005; Samantrai 1992 and Australian studies in Knud and Walker 2002; Lloyd and King 2002; Troy 1999). An increasing body of research on stress in social work has also been developed within the UK (see examples in Fineman 1985; Collings and Murray 1996; Coffey, Dugdill and Tattersall 2004, Moran and Hughes 2006; Dickens 2006). These studies recognise the significance of stress for social workers linking this to high caseload and subsequent problems with retention and high turnover of social workers.

Social workers experience increasing levels of stress when they feel they lack support and feel undervalued (Huxley et al. 2005) contributing towards burnout tendencies (McLean and Andrew 2000). Hollows (2001a) also notes the anecdotal terminology of 'bombardment rate' that appears linked to feeling completely overwhelmed. The UK government has recognised this as a serious problem requiring attention in highlighting the plight within the profession acknowledging the social work role is complex, stressful, demanding, misunderstood and publicly vilified (DoH 2003). This is amplified within child protection social work where media, and especially tabloid newspapers, condemn social workers following each highlighted the tragedy of child death or severe abuse (Aldridge 1994) (see 3.6).

The government also acknowledges the dilemmas in social working with children where the, "…decisions are hard, and the consequences of misjudgement serious…" (DoH 1998: 40 and 1995). Conversely, pressure is applied through the Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters' that highlighted an increased need for children and family social workers to become more professionally competent and accountable for their actions (DoH 2003). Within the management context of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, Laming (2003) identifies many complex failings in the agencies involved in the case. Lack of supervision, high levels of stress and burnout were all significant factors that led towards the ethos of "conveyor belt social work", as one social worker described it (Laming 2003: 6.16). As previously

noted Victoria's social worker had amassed a total of 52 days 'time off in lieu' (Laming 2003: 6.16); a clear indication of over-work and inappropriate supervision.

Following national interviews with social workers, Jones (2001: 551) states the clear message about State social work in England is that: "the job is awful"; stress being a major cause for concern. It is argued that low morale and high stress levels are prevalent within child protection teams. So, it seems logical that social workers are their employer's biggest asset and should therefore be protected from the excessive stresses and relentless threat of burnout (Thompson 2000).

Stress is given as a main cause of absenteeism by Social Services Departments (Morris 2003). However, according to Morris (2003), this goes largely ignored. This point highlights a significant factor considered within this study; that high level absenteeism through sickness is not counted as turnover or a vacancy but may have equal effect, depending on the length of absence. It is arguable that the effect is worse because of the necessity to keep the post open. Although this is likely to depend on integral contingency plans to arrange for staff cover, if available.

Within the field of psychology, stress is presented in many ways including a physiological model (Seyle 1956) explaining the body's responses to stress, and interactional models that consider processes between stressor and stressed: an arousal model (Mandler 1982), a psychosocial stimuli model (Kagan and Levi 1975), transactional model (Cox and Mackay (1976), general facet model (Beehr and Newman 1978) and interactional model (Lazarus 1976). Inevitably, personality appears to be the determinant factor in feeling and dealing with stress. Important personality characteristics that provide understanding on individual experience of stress are: self-esteem (Coopersmith 1968) where a high self-efficacy is considered to be linked to good mental health, locus of control (Rotter (1966) where people with external locus of control perceive life to be controlled by external events, whilst people with internal locus of control perceive they are in control of

themselves. Gender, sexuality and disability are additional influences as stressors relating to oppression.

The psychological concept of 'burnout' is rooted in research conducted by Maslach (1976) within care giving and service organisations. Using a later developed tool for measurement, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Maslach concluded that burnout involves an underlying consensus of three core dimensions (Maslach 2001: 403):

1. emotional exhaustion – where the emotional demands of the work can exhaust the worker's capacity to respond to and be involved with the need of the service user

2. cynicism – known as depersonalisation, where the worker creates distance between the self and service user by considering them as impersonal objects rather than unique human beings

3. inefficacy – reduced personal accomplishment and erosion of the sense of personal effectiveness

Burnout is therefore distinct from stress and considered to be inextricably linked to the emotional exhaustion dimension.

Evans et al. *(*2005) used the MBI and survey methods with 237 mental health social workers to establish that whilst emotional exhaustion was very high (over two thirds of participants) only 8 per cent were 'burnt out'. Approved social workers (ASWs) as they were then known (especially men) were stressed and dissatisfied with their jobs. They concluded the same fate might apply to other professions if extended statutory duties were applied to them thereby having consequences for recruitment and retention.

Some hope is indicated in research conducted by Baumann et al. (1997: 4) where burnout, perception of being overworked and bureaucracy combine when a child protection worker reaches the 'middle years of…tenure' and crucially, those

workers who work through this experience perform at the highest level, 'case skills, performance ratings and caseloads are highest'. This complements latest government initiatives not only to retain experienced workers but to encourage the return of those who have left with clear employment incentives (DCSF 2009). Baumann's study also highlights the perverse benefit in workers somehow persevering through the experience of extreme challenge and stress. No further research could be found to enhance this theory although Horwitz (1998) developed a helpful theory of resilience in social workers as enabling 'survival' in adverse working environments.

It is suggested that stress and burnout are relevant to any study researching participants within children's social care settings, based on the prevalence of the outcomes experienced by social workers. However, whilst consideration of these concepts helped shape the methodology and data analysis, the rich story within participant self-report and subsequent researcher observation of the psychological dimensions were considered more relevant to the constructivist approach. Stressor scales and the MBI were therefore not considered suitable for this study.

More recently commissioned non-academic research of children's care service workforce appears less focussed on stress with questionnaire design, favouring issues relating to morale and the consequence of image and public perception (for example, LGA 2009b; Social Lives, 2009).   The pivotal nature of the worker/supervisor relationship is widely recognised within social work literature as being key to retention of social workers by helping reduce stress and burnout through formal support.

3.4.4 Supervision

Supervision is defined within a health and social context by Knapman and Morrison as…

> "…a process in which one worker is given responsibility to work with another
> worker in order to achieve certain professional, personal and organisational

objectives. These objectives include competent, accountable practice,
continuing professional development and personal support" (1998: 4).

Employment literature identifies the supervisory role as an integral part of
management process, providing a 'link and buffer' between the expectations of
senior management and front line workers (Mullins 1996: 407). It involves use of
breadth of knowledge, human relational skills and the ability to manage work
activities. Studies in business management demonstrate the significance of
supervision in worker satisfaction claiming that considerate and thoughtful attitudes
towards workers have positive effects (for example, Scarpello and Vanenberg
1987; Bassett 1994).

Supervision within the children's social care context should be supportive (Morrison
1993; Hughes and Pengelly 1997; Doel and Marsh 2005) and rather than being
seen as just a process to navigate, it should be of good quality in order to facilitate
social workers' ability to promote positive change for service users (Morrison
2002). This insight combines with the literature identified in Chapter 2 to indicate
the significance of supervision in social work. Whilst case management is
important, worker welfare must also be considered essential. Reflecting
complexity and the range of necessary considerations supervisors need to make,
Knapman and Morrison (1998: 11) illustrated four key functions in their model at
Figure 3.4. I would include the service user at the centre of this model as a
reminder of the core business, and to illustrate how these key functions need to
work coherently for effective service provision.

Figure 3.4   Four key functions of supervision

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                  ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
                  │ Professional Development Function │
                  └──────────────────────────────────┘

┌────────────────────┐                          ┌────────────────────┐
│ Mediation Function │◄───────────────────────►│ Management Function │
└────────────────────┘                          └────────────────────┘

                     ┌───────────────────────────┐
                     │ Personal Support Function │
                     └───────────────────────────┘
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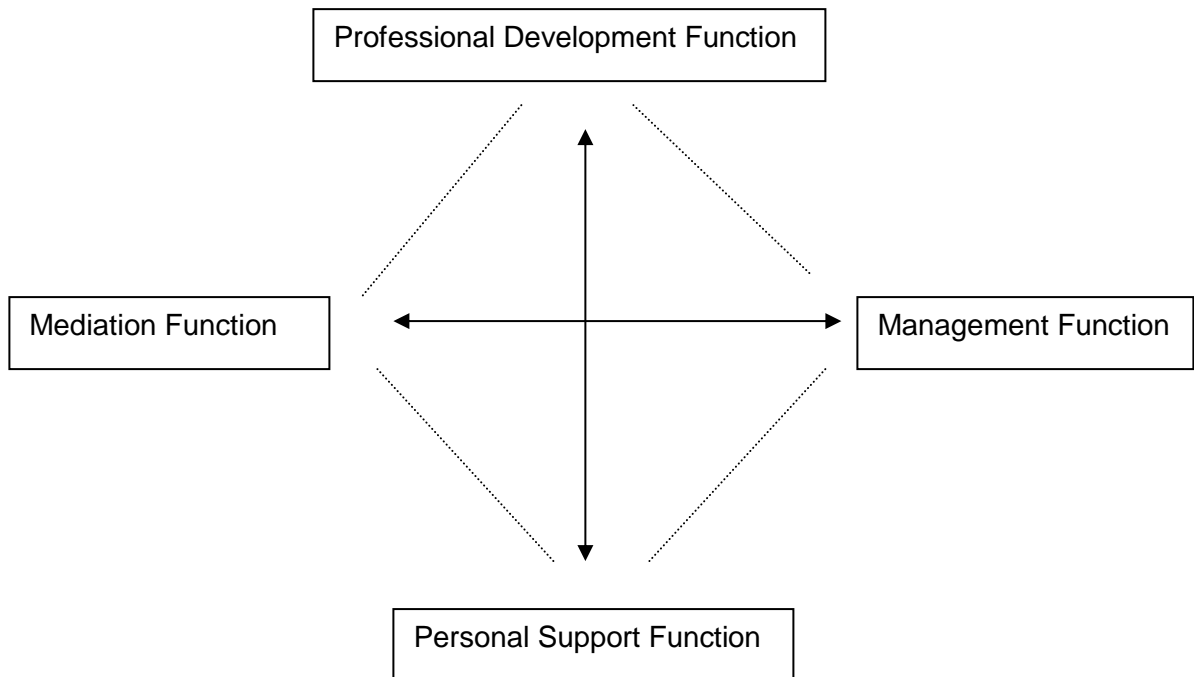
Tsui (2005) identified the following five guidelines for supervision, from empirical research using focus groups, and 40 experienced supervisors in Hong Kong, stating that supervisors should:

1. be ethical and dedicated
2. have a sense of professional and social responsibility, balancing social work values with administrative requirements
3. have a positive attitude towards themselves, their staff and service users
4. be rational and logical
5. be continuously learning, receptive to new knowledge and skills

(Tsui 2005)

Tsui (2005) also identified two contrasting models of supervision that continue the theme highlighted by Rushton and Nathan (1996) who noted a shift in focus of the supervisory role from one of emotional support and professional guidance to that of case management procedure checking. These are, the casework model, characterised by a high level of administrative accountability, and the autonomous

practice model with high level of professional autonomy. Government guidance suggests a middle ground is necessary,

> "Supervision should include scrutinising and evaluating the work carried out, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the practitioner, and providing coaching, development, and pastoral support. Supervisors should be available to practitioners as an important source of advice and expertise" (DoH 1999: 109).

All social workers, from newly qualified to the most experienced, need formal support for personal development and practice skills (Marsh and Triseliotis 1996). This is especially relevant in the world of child protection where violence directed towards social workers is the main cause of their fear (Smith and Nursten 1998; 2000) and a particular contributor to their stress and anxiety (Balloch et al. 1998). Littlejohn (2005) conducted research into the effects of violence on child protection staff using questionnaires (n=48), follow up semi-structured interviews with social workers as victims of violence (n=7) and additional interviews with managers in the same agency (n=20). Most violence involved verbal threats made by service users towards social workers. The study highlights the importance of supervisory skills in providing worker support as well as assessing for role conflict, ambiguity, and aggression affecting the protection work (Littlejohn 2005: 397).

Dinn (2003) identified the key role of the practice teacher in valuing the student, within a supportive learning environment. The 72 returned questionnaires also indicated poor student experience where practice teachers were absent or unsupportive and where the team offered a lack of support. This concurs with Parker and Whitfield (2006) who used electronic questionnaires, followed by telephone and face-to-face interviews. Although, findings were of a more holistic nature with macro-level themes highlighted. These studies are important in light of Parker and Whitfield's (2006) findings indicating 49 per cent (n=85) of new starters in that year up to March 2005 within one Council with Social Services Responsibilities (CSSRs) had undertaken practice learning within their employing authority' (Parker and Whitfield 2006: 48). However, while qualitative studies exist,

a paucity of quantitative data to support links between placement experience and recruitment and retention is reported (Parker and Whitfield 2006).

Negative experiences in supervision also include those where organisational bureaucracy is prioritised over restorative and formative worker needs (Hawkins and Shohet 2000) reflection and emotional expression (Charles and Wilton 2004: 182). The completion of administrative tasks is seen to give the possible illusion to all those within the organisation that work is completed satisfactorily, and within target. However, this may have little to do with the tangible needs of service users.

The Laming Progress Report recommends the establishment of "guidelines on guaranteed supervision time for social workers that may vary depending on experience" (Laming 2009: 86). Whilst it is recognised this is guidance, the need for implied discretion around experience may negate best intentions as each worker and case is unique: a discrepancy may lie in what an experienced worker with a particularly complex caseload needs and what time a manager is prepared or able to dedicate within the minimum recommendation. It appears the weighting mechanism discussed in the caseload context within the same report (Laming 2009: 88) would help in supervisory time allocation. In any case, mechanisms and models are only as effective as the people that use them. Core principles around the supervisory relationship should be explicit in the day-to-day experience of social workers in order to reduce the opportunity for lack of time to be used as a reason for it being either ineffective, rushed on non-existent.

In their serious case reviews report, Rose and Barnes (2007) concluded the need for good emotional support and supervision for staff in enabling them to become flexible, self-aware, and sensitive. The importance of supervision now appears more frequently cited in guidance, and recruitment and retention-related government publications, indicating recognition of the importance of correlation between positive supervisory experiences and retention, and negative experiences and attrition (see DCSF (2008); DCSF (2009b); DCSF (2009c); DCSF (2009d); DCSF (2009e).

The nature of the relationship between worker satisfaction and supervision is also addressed within international literature, including American, Australian and Swedish studies. In a study with specific focus on retention in Stockholm, Tham (2006) used survey methods, issuing a comprehensive questionnaire to 309 to children's social workers, with a 97 per cent completion rate, 86 per cent of whom were women. Using Dallner et al.'s (2000) QPS Nordic measuring instrument she found those intending to leave rated 'their immediate superior as considerably lower [than those intending to stay] and the social climate…as less encouraging and supportive, less relaxed and comfortable, and more distrustful and suspicious' (Tham 2006: 13). However, the relationship between intention to leave and the two variables, 'fair leadership' and 'support and feedback from superior', was not statistically significant. This did not therefore support the findings of Rycraft (1994) and Samantrai (1992) who both found positive correlations of statistical significance among social workers, in the USA and UK respectively. Nearly half (48 per cent) of Tham's participants said they were 'fairly likely' or 'very likely' to leave within a year.

USA studies into the turnover and experiences of staff in general groups within human service organisations (see examples in, Vinokaur-Kaplan 1994; Wright and Cropanzano 1998) and more specifically children's welfare services (see, Dickinson and Perry 2002; Mor Barak, Nissley and Levin 2001; Smith 2005; Vinokaur-Kaplan 1984) highlight different key factors in workers wanting to leave. However, in reflection of the U.K studies above, consensus appears to be reached around the supervisory relationship and turnover (Fleischer 1985; Samantrai 1992; Rycraft 1995; Landsman 2001; Dickinson and Perry 2002; U.S. General Accounting Office 2003; Smith 2005). Smith (2005) used the following conceptual model to help demonstrate where supervision can be considered within the characteristics of a social exchange framework (see figure 3.5 below).

Figure 3.5   Conceptual Model of Retention

Diagram removed for copyright reasons

(Smith 2005: 158)

Supervision of social workers is embedded in good practice combining formal and informal methods and is not exclusive within the realm of manager/worker relationship. Doel and Marsh (2005: 99) advocate the strength of group supervision in 'developing yardsticks of good practice' and fine tuning their judgements, adding that peer feedback can have a greater impact in shaping self-assessment than that of supervisors. Benefits of peer supervision in social work are also noted by Becker (2005: 234), whilst high prevalence, costs and gains of inter-professional supervision involving 170 cognitive behavioural psychotherapists (the majority being mental health nurses) was found to create rich opportunities for learning and practice development (Townend 2005). Within management literature, peer feedback on skills, decision making and technical capability were beneficial within '360 degree supervision' (Pollack and Pollack 1996).

The methodological approach within this study was shaped to reflect the pivotal role the team manager plays as front-line supervisor, 'change agent' and key

player in the retention of staff. The particular emphasis on worker 'perception' was considered (see Chapter 4).

In summary the literature reiterates the complexities relating to decisions social workers make to remain with their employer or not. Worker factors need to be considered alongside case factors in order to more fully appreciate 'push and pull' influences (Audit Commission 2002). The working life in children's social care is one of many positives mostly associated with direct work with people, including the ability to effect positive change with and for service users. Social workers are generally proud of what they do but feel frustrated when service user needs are lost within bureaucracy and process. Stress and burnout, appear related to the pressure of work often created by, not only increasing 'red tape', but the cycle of problems in recruiting, high caseload and high turnover. Supervision is frequently cited as key in influencing worker satisfaction positively and negatively and is therefore an important consideration of retention policy. The next section examines the role organisational factors play within the ecology of practice model.

3.5   Organisational Factors – the world inside

"[We] take up a position somewhere between identification with an organisation and opposition to it" (Goffman 1961: 280).

Organisations vary considerably but Mullins (1996: 70) suggests three common factors

- people
- objectives
- structure

Organisational success and effectiveness is said to depend on the relationships between these factors and available resources (Mullins 1996: 70). Organisational

theory also suggests the following basic principles of organisation and management apply:

- attention to design of suitable structure is needed
- management involves clarification of objectives, planning, organising, directing and control
- essential administrative functions need to be conducted (Mullins 1996: 83).

Johnson and Scholes (1999: 33) identify the explicit nature of the political dimension and budgetary control of government agencies as the distinguishing feature compared to other types of organisation. Language of 'mediocrity' and 'limited budgets' is used in relation to public service organisations, as is the need to encourage improvements for 'value for money'. Resource allocation, audit and control are important in this respect. Social work literature suggests little to contradict these sentiments.

Government employers include the National Health Service for general practitioners, nurses, midwives, health visitors, occupational therapists, adult's social workers and other health care professionals, The Home Office for the police, Department for Education for teachers and classroom assistants, children's social workers and care workers. These public sector organisations, involve complex dynamics and frequent change, which will now be explored following brief contextualisation of social work organisations.

3.5.1 Context of organisation and the workforce

The historical context of the social work profession is provided briefly in Chapter 2 of this study; and extensively in Parker (1995), Parton (1998), Frost and Parton (2009), and Sheldon and Macdonald (2009). Lymbery (2004) also charts the organisational changes that have affected British social work and concurred with the above observation of political power over the organisation of social work, demonstrated in the substantial amendments to the language of the first versions of the rules and regulations for the Diploma in Social Work (CCETSW 1989; 1991). These strongly advocated the need for social work to 'combat injustice and

discrimination' (Lymbery 2004: 46) effectively bringing social work into direct conflict with the government (Jones 1996). More conformist language was subsequently used (CCETSW 1995) and continued for the social work degree (DoH 2002; Lymbery 2003).

Organisational pressure has been strengthened by poor public perception and media portrayal (see 3.5.1) in a climate of limited resources and increasing need, resulting in a crisis in the social work profession caught between three conflicting tensions:

- economically – reduce costs, and do more for less
- political climate increasingly unsympathetic to social work
- service user groups more assertive and demanding (Lymbery 2004: 47).

Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse (2005) conducted a literature review of the role of social workers, commissioned by the Scottish Executive, in which they were concerned that the professional role was less preventative and therefore 'fulfilling an organisational function that conflicts with professional values and principles and with the reasons that provided their motivation to enter social work in the first place" (2005: 4). It is within this public service context the Audit Commission (2002) considered organisational factors and relevance to retention. In interviews with public service employees the following reasons for dissatisfaction were given:

- The sense of being overwhelmed by bureaucracy and paperwork (this was most important to 50 per cent ex-employees interviewed)
- Insufficient resources, leading to unmanageable workloads
- A lack of autonomy
- Feeling undervalued by managers, government and the public (68 per cent said image of profession would discourage new recruits)
- Unfair pay when compared to others doing similar work
- Imposed and irrelevant change agenda

(Audit Commission 2002: 3)

This indicates an underlying significance of organisational factors in the decision making ecology for workers leaving the profession. The Audit Commission (2002: 3) additionally found:

- that the above reasons can be 'background annoyances' when in isolation but lead to a decision to leave when the factors combine
- these are 'push factors' within the control of the employer rather than 'pull factors' relating to compelling alternative work or life options.

The significance of social work teams in consideration of recruitment and retention is great because they provide the primary organisational structure for practice (Rosen 2000). However, Ruch (2005) identifies that empirical research on teamwork, especially supportive aspects, in social work is limited (Masson 1990; Morrison 1990; Chapman 1995). Separate Swedish studies by Oxenstierna (1997), and Söderfeldt and Söderfeldt [*sic*] (1997) emphasised the need for further research into organisational factors when considering stressors and strain when working with service users. Tham's (2006: 16 and 2009) recent studies in Sweden note the significance of the 'human resource orientation' of the organisation and the positive effect of staff feeling valued. This was a key factor in 'stay' or 'leave' decisions of public service workers (Audit Commission 2002) and important for social workers in other studies (ADSS 2005; Burns 2009; Gibbs 2001).

3.5.2 Audit and Accountability

Accountability is defined as ultimate responsibility within employment literature, means (Mullins 1996: 572). Audit serves as the backbone of public sector management (Munro 2004: 1078) and is a necessary activity for those accountable within public sector services to ensure the aims and objectives of service provision are being met in relation to service user need and expenditure public funds. Munro (2004) warns that within the function of audit, social work is over simplified and service outcomes take priority over service user outcomes.   She offers a fresh perspective in suggesting that if audit were linked to research methods, results would provide reliable evidence relating to efficiency and effectiveness of provision.

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This falls within the child protection context of an inherent conflict between safety and cost (Munro 2009). It is claimed the increased need for audit in public services and demand for public sector accountability reflects a reduction in public trust of professionals running the welfare state, corresponding with the political shift to neo-liberalism of the Labour government (Walker 2002).

From a public perspective, the results of audit partly culminate in the star rating system for social work departments. This is the product of the analysis of performance indicators (PIs) submitted for Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The Local Government Act 1999 introduced the concept of Best Value; the ability for making 'secure continuous improvement', followed by the Audit Commission conducting inspections from 2000-01 and resulting in the star rating system and CPA reports on County Councils being published on 2002. Since September 2005 corporate assessments of Councils' ability to lead the community have been conducted at the same time as Joint Area Reviews of children's services. Inspection reports and national performance information combine to produce a score, which results in the award using the star rating system. Future plans include increased reliance of performance indicators and less on inspection. Also, in April 2009, CPA was replaced by a Comprehensive Area Assessment to include consideration of the wider scope of public service provision of councils in addition to 'private and voluntary sectors' (Audit Commission 2009).

Concerns surround the considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting that performance indicators have a perverse effect on practice. Munro (2004) warns of the potential danger in government targets overriding the welfare of users. This resonates with the concerns expressed above (in 3.4) by social workers that emphasis of professional practice is shifting away from service user need towards that of the organisation. Difficulties in meeting workload targets combined with increasing administrative responsibility were additionally found to contribute towards worker stress (Collings and Murray 1996). This apparent contradiction

between bureaucracy and motivation to join the profession (Audit Commission 2002) has relevance to recruitment and retention.

It is arguable that numbers attracted to the service may decline, but more probable is, Munro (2004: 1092) warns, that *people* likely to be attracted will be less interested in the human relational aspects, and more willing to adopt impersonal, standardised approaches. Additionally, the threat of time to direct work with service users, is not only likely to reduce working relationships, and the quality of the information gathered (Munro 2009: 128) but also the number of people willing to remain within children's social work (Audit Commission 2002).

3.5.3 Culture

Moghaddam et al. (1993) referred to culture as the human-made part of the environment within which humans can shape and be shaped. Triandis (1990) described cultural syndromes as consisting of behavioural, attitudinal, belief, value and accepted norm elements that combine to distinguish them from other cultures. It is also recognised that cultural influences can be fluid, meaning more to some than others and at different times, indicating the challenge to study culture as a concept. Trompenaars (1993) attempted to link cultural variance and organisational behaviour with particular reference to nationality and religion. The findings, however suggest a Eurocentric bias and over-generalisations that conflict with social work values. Although, the impact of workplace culture on new recruits is convincingly highlighted implying the need to protect and nurture students and newly qualified social workers entering the profession. Thompson et al. (1996) highlighted the crucial influence of organisational culture in gaining understanding of work related stress which, as previously indicated, is inter-related to job satisfaction and retention of social workers. Within this context the significance of blame culture is now considered.

The most tragic outcomes in social work involve pain, injury and the death of between 50 and 100 children from abuse or neglect each year (Frost and Parton 2009). Part 8 inquiries were superseded when the Children Act (2004) introduced

Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCB) that investigates such cases, providing information aimed at shaping future practice. Future LSCB reports are likely to be published in their entirety following the Munro report due in 2011.

These tragedies, as well as other safeguarding incidents are sometimes attributable to mistakes made by practitioners. Bostock et al. (2005) identify a culture of blame and condemnation of workers when mistakes are made that inhibits opportunities for organisational learning. Drawing predominantly on healthcare research (DoH 2001a; NPSA 2004), they reflect Fish, Munro and Bairstow (2008) in their argument for positive organisational change in order to learn from mistakes in child and family practice. This learning process involves genuinely valuing front line social workers and their clients. With sentiment shared by Ferguson (2002) and Pearson (2009) it is suggested that more positive approaches to mistake making and things that go wrong, promotes a constructive way to consider local safeguarding incidents. These can be used in addition to LSCB serious case review findings relating to child deaths and serious injury to children.

Fish, Munro and Bairstow (2008) questioned the culture around organisational learning, arguing that an adapted systems approach to learning, like that adopted within health, engineering and other high-risk industries is central to developing and improving the quality of service provision. The current method of LCSB serious case reviews have been criticised for their apparent inability to effect change; similar findings and recommendations are reported with similar problems reoccurring (DoH 2001a; NPSA 2004). This directly contributes towards a blame culture, where honesty in mistake making is discouraged for fear of disciplinary action; the antithesis of a learning organisation (Munro 2009).

Additional unsatisfactory work experiences are explained in masculinist culture operating within a predominantly female workforce (80 per cent - LGA 2009b: 9). For Dominelli (1996) social work is losing sight of feminism and an ability to advocate for society's oppressed. Harlow (2004: 171) referred to the 'managerialist reconfiguration' of social work resulting women 'voting with their feet'

whilst employing agencies struggle to retain professional staff.   Charles and Butler (2004: 61), however, postulated that patriarchy perpetuates the value in heroism and being strong, illustrated by the 'superwoman' concept of Langan and Day (1992).

> "Anxious not to feed into stereotypes, workers become sucked into the masculinist principle of never revealing their vulnerabilities because the agency resents helplessness", Charles and Butler (2004: 63).

Munro (2009) suggests this resulted in a reluctance to show emotions and feelings where empathy and intuition become marginalised. One of Jones' (2001) forty social worker interviewees highlighted similar concern that 'macho' principles lead to reluctance of help seeking (Jones 2001: 559). He does not clarify gender, and no further research could be found identifying how this phenomenon specifically affects male workers.

Further cultural problems affecting work satisfaction are reflected in the student placement experience, where Thompson (2000) suggests they may fare particularly badly as their knowledge is rubbished in an anti-intellectual culture. He claims they often face negativity within their own teams through an anti-intellectual attitude and general lack of understanding of the complex relationship between theory and practice. This appears to be explained, in part by identification of the lack of explicit, systematic use of theory in social work informed by practice and research (Gomory, 2001a, 2001b, Munro 2002, Thyer 2001a, 2001b). Munro (2002) argues the anti-intellectual stance is perhaps the greatest threat to evidence based practice. Thompson also warns this approach devalues, oversimplifies and demeans social work practice as well as patronising and discouraging the student of learning (2000: 154-155).

Conversely, cultures can have positive effects on workforce. Parton (2006) and Munro (2009) refer to the link between recruitment and retention within positive learning cultures where practice experience is a team concern to ensure students are nurtured, supervised, encouraged and protected. Parton (2006) implies the

positive message of a learning culture embedded in an authority's recruitment strategy also leads to improvements in retention.

Figure 3.6   I think we just have to accept it

Image removed for copyright reasons

(http://www.clareinthecommunity.co.uk 2007)

Few British studies consider the complexities of humour in social work, with Witkin (1999) and Van Wormer and Boes (1997) being notable exceptions. The pilot within this study, in addition to personal social work experience, signalled a need for an evaluation of any evidence of organisational culture encouraging or inhibiting humour and any relationship with coping and work satisfaction. Selection of methods was therefore considered with this in mind. Moran and Hughes (2006) conducted a quantitative study involving 32 Australian social work students. Thorson and Powell's (1993) Multidimensional Sense of Humour Scale (MSHS) incorporating a four point Likert scale was used to measure participant humour. This was followed by completion of a Stress Scale (Moran and Colless 1999) adapted to reflect the university setting as opposed to the front line workplace.

Finally, participant health was rated using Greenberg's (1987) Symptom Checklist. Contrary to expectation the researchers found 'liking humour' correlated positively with stress and symptoms, indicating an association between liking humour and poorer wellbeing. A correlation was also found between tendencies to use humour

socially and lower levels of stress (Moran and Hughes 2006: 513). They concluded that reduced stress might be attributable to social support gained through the use of humour, rather than through the humour itself. They argued for teaching about humour in social work education as encouraged by Powell and Andreson (1985). Whilst I am not convinced humour can necessarily be taught, the appreciation and understanding of its function should be included in social work education. This is especially relevant given the way social workers use humour, banter and badinage in their practice (see Chapter 7.4.5). Research conducted by Baid and Lambert (2010) in nursing and midwifery education adds weight to this argument.

In summary, a widespread disparity between senior managers of social work organisations and front-line social workers exists that appears to be politically and bureaucratically influenced. Although, workplace culture is often seen by social workers as being established by senior managers, research suggests such cultures are more locally influenced. Recognition of this and the need for social workers to reclaim workplace culture against increasing trends towards reductionist understandings of human behaviour is required (Schofield 1998; Ruch 2005). Focus now turns to the working environment; this being the ecology in which cultures are understood to function.

3.5.4 Working Environment

> "As we pursue our dreams and desires, we do so within the social context of our lives, the constitutional makeup of our physical being, and the physical environment surrounding us, which may also influence our destines" (Urdang 2002: 3).

Social Work at its Best (GSCC 2008: 8) highlights the variety of settings where social work is conducted, local authority children and adult services, NHS primary and hospital care, joint teams and multi-disciplinary services, voluntary, not-for-profit bodies and user-led organisations, private sector companies and private practice. Structure within local authority, NHS and interagency services are often

within specialist teams: child protection, children in care, family support, disabled children, leaving care, children's centres, fostering, adoption and permanence, child and adolescent mental health, youth offending, care management, disability, learning difficulty, substance misuse, mental health, and older people. The physical working environment of children's social workers can be identified by the location of the organisation, where they spend a high proportion of time. However, it is also varied, being wherever the work may lead; service user homes, cars, public transport, and courts (see examples in Healey 1998; Hollows 2001; Wagner et al. 2001; Dickens 2006; Glisson et al. 2006).

Asquith et al. (2005) noted a dearth of research surrounding the organisational context of social work. Whilst this appears to be contradicted by the wealth of literature highlighted above, they refer to the working environment and argue that social workers work well and effectively within a variety of multi-disciplinary contexts. This reflects the increasing shift towards integrated services in matching government policy with needs of children (Parton 2009). Indeed, few social work articles specifically related to environment were identified, most originating from the USA and Australia. According to Asquith et al. influence over professional identity and role will be more determined by core values than by the organisational environment (2005: 40).

Nevertheless, research suggests the significant effect of environment, not only on worker satisfaction but on professional social work practice itself (Healey 1998; Hollows 2001; Wagner et al. 2001; Dickens 2006; Glisson et al. 2006). For example, Dickens (2006) found a combination of inexperience and the stress associated with the court environment in child protection proceedings contributed to high turnover, within six English local authorities in 2001/2002. Human resources literature also provides a wealth of research into environmental impact on worker experience, performance, satisfaction, and training transfer (Kupritz 2002).

3.5.5 Resources

Resource allocation is a key factor in organisational management, and can be key in retaining social workers (Community Care 2007) as noted in 3.4.2. Mullins identifies two broad categories of resources within organisations as:

- "non-human – physical assets, materials and facilities; and
- human – members' abilities and influence, and their management", Mullins 1996: 71).

Johnson and Scholes (1999: 155) add financial, sources and uses of money and intangibles such as 'good will'. Whilst an underpinning principle of this study is that employees within the profession are the key resource for social work, this section considers the financial and material requirement for practice and how this impacts on retention and turnover.

In 2006-07, Children and Families' Services received £5.025 billion (25 per cent) of the £20.1 billion budget for councils with social services responsibilities (CSSRs) in England (Information Centre 2008). Within the managerialist culture and emphasis on market economics (Healey 2002), the need to meet service demand within budget and resource constraints is ever more necessary. Munro (2002) notes the inevitable influence of values in decision making on action and selecting approaches with service users; these being partly influenced by the practice evidence base but also by systemic judgements based on economics, resources, morals and politics. Whilst social workers need to promote best value for money and appropriate use of resources, as advocates they have the responsibility to notify managers of quality, inequality and unmet need issues that compromise service users' human rights (Hafford-Letchfield 2009: 93).

Resources implemented to assess staff performance and electronic recording programs have been identified as problematic by workers and the government (Garrett 1999; 2003; Munro 2004). The ICS is effectively an electronic system incorporating a single approach to the core social work processes of assessment, planning, intervention and review to children in need. Concern has increased since

the introduction of the ICS in 2007-08 (see 3.3.1), resulting in more pressure on social work time, problems with implementation and with electronic systems generally, and an environment of continued change (Holmes et al. 2009).

One particular contradiction of anecdotal and academic evidence is the finding that between 2001-02 and 2007-08 '…a substantial increase in *both* the estimated number of hours *and* the proportion of time spent in direct contact with children and families as part of the planning and review processes…' (Holmes et al. 2009: 14). Holmes et al. (2009) believed this may reflect greater importance now given to these procedures compared to 2001-02. It is noted that none of the 6 local authorities involved in the first data collection period matched the 6 involved in the second. It should also be noted that the initial data collection was conducted without consideration of increasing social worker time on indirect work, or whether change can be related to the implementation of the ICS.

However, the study involved focus groups with a total of 454 participants across the two periods representing the range of children's services work using the ICS. It is argued the findings will therefore be somewhat representative of the children's workforce, despite variances in familiarity with the ICS. Particular frustrations of workers are incompatibility of design with practice, a complex and repetitive interface, and insufficient and untimely training (Holmes et al 2009). Additional factors were reported to contribute to the reported increased time on administrative and indirect procedure, including a shortage of administrative support. Change is recommended and further investment is required to enable social workers to spend more time on core work with children and families (CWDC 2008; Laming 2008; Holmes et al. 2009).

Bell and Shaw's (2008) study noted the implementation of ICS was slowed by the reluctance of some workers to embrace computer technology, implying not only that training needs to be tailored accordingly but also a possible negative bias within some workers that could hinder further developments. Implications of this could be significant for senior managers as resistance to change by some may be demonstrated regardless of positive organisational intentions. Worker criticisms of

the ICS should therefore be considered within the context that it is relatively new and, as Cleaver et al. (2008) suggest, involves a learning curve for social workers in its use.

Evidence to suggest the significance of the relationship between resources and retention can be found elsewhere. The 'For Scotland's children report' (2007) found the shortage of resources was a detrimental force against the principles of integrated children's services as services kept what they had rather than sharing resources and working collectively. Whilst in Australia, Wagner et al. (2001) found dissatisfaction was strongly linked to organisational constraints which was later reiterated in the USA where LaRue Gertz's (2005: 10) national survey results (82 per cent response rate) indicated the child welfare workforce felt budget constraints and lack of resources were most significant in recruitment and retention. Light (2003) also found disparity between managerial expectation of front-line human services workers and the resources provided to do the task, which contributed towards 75 per cent of them feeling frustrated, and 51 per cent unappreciated.

3.5.6 Change

> "When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills" (Chinese Proverb).

A developing theme within social work workforce research is one of 'change', which can be applied across each of the four factors in the ecology model. Asquith et al. (2005) noted that whilst not all organisational change is perceived negatively, it is necessary to recognise the continual changes the social work profession has made in order to adapt to new conditions and arrangements. Drivers to these over the last four decades include smaller departments, increasing mixed economy of welfare provision, and increased collaborative working (2005: 36). Governance and the pursuit of quality, in the move towards increased administrative social work are highlighted as an increasing concern to social workers, there is a comparable consideration in police work, nursing and teaching (GSCC 2008).

In Australia, Wagner et al. (2001) highlighted the above mentioned concern of disparity between policy and front-line practice. Using 6-week journals and two follow-up workshops, government child welfare workers explained their perception of little opportunity for their contribution to policy development. Workers preferred to subvert the system for client gain rather than attempt to address policy failings at an organisational level. Whilst frustration and blame were evident, little impetus for joint work for change was evident. Wagner et al. (2001) proposed an analytical framework of individual, group/team, organisational and political factors that reflect similarities with Baumann's (1997) and those within this study. Wagner et al.'s (2001) findings imply that plans to encourage workers' inclusion in policy development (Charles and Butler 2004) could be met with reluctance, resistance, or scepticism, despite dissatisfaction in those policies.

However, Parton (1996) perceives social workers' subversion more positively where they exert considerable personal, professional and organisational control through creativity and self-determination, within the context of significant change. Charles and Butler (2004) acknowledge the challenge but argue convincingly that reflective practice can effectively challenge cynicism and encourage workers towards more inclusive approaches. It follows that increased self-efficacy and locus of control are likely. The relationship between the concept of change, worker dissatisfaction, motivation, and how this is dealt with was considered an important aspect within the analysis for this study.

3.5.7 Pay

National salary scales in England are discussed in Chapter 2. The literature is inconsistent with regard to the relationship between salary and retention, although a wealth of anecdotal evidence reinforces academic research suggesting it is influential in the recruitment of social workers, as discussed in Chapter 2. The Welsh report into recruitment and retention (ADSS 2005) found most respondents believed fair pay was the most effective way to make staff feel valued (25.9 per cent of respondents) with financial recognition of skills, responsibilities, and

experience being third (17 per cent). Salary was the key incentive for retention (52 per cent). This concurs with the influence of fair pay on recruitment in Audit Commission (2002).

It is apparent that the crisis in recruitment and retention has had significantly beneficial effects on some workers who appreciate their increased 'market value' as a limited resource. Between 2004 and 2005 Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2006) interviewed 28 participants of various social work organisational positions, including 20 agency social workers (13 from children's services and 7 in adults). Their strong position due to scarcity was concurrent with increased pay of up to £5000 for newly qualified workers compared to state social workers. Resource implications of this are found in children's services 2006 the equivalent of 5500 full-time posts (around 13 per cent of workforce) cost an estimated £110 million (Information Centre 2008).

In the USA, LaRue Gertz (2005) surveyed state public child welfare administrators in 42 states and found salary was a greater barrier to recruitment than retention. However, once a worker has begun, salary becomes less significant in decisions about leaving. This was contrary to Zlotnik's (2005) systematic literature review that found at an organisational level, better salary contributed towards retention of child welfare social workers.

Examination of the literature indicates a disparity between organisational and individual factors that appear related to retention, and also to some extent, recruitment of social workers. The disparity appears rooted in organisational factors inhibiting effective front-line work with service users. Section 3.3 suggests direct work is a key motivation for students and social workers to join the profession. It is the inability to fulfil these aspirations of effective intervention in meeting service user need that leads to frustration and job dissatisfaction, which contribute towards decisions to leave. External factors need to be considered in order to establish the holistic nature of social work within the ecology of practice and fully appreciate issues of recruitment and retention. These centre on image, media and public perception, legislation, and policy.

3.6 External Factors – the world outside

"To perform at their best, social workers require active support from government, employers and the public" (GSCC, 2008: 9).

This section considers the literature relating to the wider world within which social work organisations function. Firstly, the general public and media are presented as significant in defining a generally negative image of social workers. Identifying the dominant force for image making is not necessarily clear, and the social work profession has some responsibility for, and connection to this. The legislative frameworks within which the profession operates is then presented as complex and changing. The literature indicates a need for the voices of social workers and service users to be heard more effectively by politicians to enable positive change in recruitment and retention.

3.6.1 Image, media portrayal, and public perception

Post-war social work involved social workers having key responsibility for resolving and navigating the indistinct relationship between family privacy and state responsibility to the public (Frost and Parton, 2009). The landscape of social work reached a turning point following the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 and subsequent Public Inquiry as noted in 3.3.3 above. This signalled a shift towards increasing political, media, and public scrutiny intensifying with each subsequent child death Inquiry; most notably, Jasmine Beckford (London Borough of Brent, 1987), Tyra Henry (London Borough of Lambeth, 1987), and Kimberley Carlile (London Borough of Greenwich, 1987). The professionals involved were criticised for not doing enough to protect the children (Frost and Parton, 2009). Conversely, the Cleveland 'affair' of 1987 (Secretary of State for Social Service, 1988) highlighted concern that professionals had over-reacted in removing over 100 children and young people suspected of being sexually abused (Frost and Parton, 2009).

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It is within this context that stereotypical views of social workers are shaped and embedded, where British media and the general public perceive them as 'ineffectual wimps' or 'bullies', 'politically correct dipsticks', 'dopey' 'geeky', 'do-gooders' (Eborall and Garmeson 2001: 12-13), and either 'do-gooders' or 'interfering' (Audit Commission 2002). Within a climate where the general public has little understanding of what social workers do (Eborall and Gameson 2001) the enduring negative perception of social workers is heavily influenced by media commentary, often of high profile child abuse cases as noted above. This creates a culture of disapproval and unwillingness to cooperate (Thomson 2000), a particular concern where building relationships with service users and other professionals is essential. The problem is compounded when as many as 80 per cent of children's social workers report to have been physically and verbally abused (Batty 2001).

A recent example is provided in research following the death of Baby Peter. A Local Government Association (2009) on-line survey to councillors (n=165) responsible for Children's Services in English local authorities in May 2009 provides evidence of the negative impact the reporting of the Baby Peter case has had on social workers. With a response rate of almost 48 per cent the results were as follows:

Table 3.16 LGA survey results of negative impact of reporting the Baby Peter case

Reporting of the Baby Peter case	Councillors (rounded to nearest whole no.)
Negative impact on morale	88% (n=65)
Negative impact on public perception	93% (n=67)

Whilst these results are arguably expected, it is perhaps alarming that 3 councillors appear to believe that the reporting of Baby Peter's death had no impact on either morale or public perception (2 believed it had a positive impact on morale and 1 believed likewise about public perception). This arguably indicates apathy or detachment from the reality of perceptions of social workers and English society in general. Although the research method may dictate no opportunity for clarifying

reasoning behind these statistics, further insight from these powerful, albeit relatively few councillors, appears lacking**.**

These findings correlate with the views of children's social workers that 87 per cent (almost 9 out of 10) believe negative media stories about social work make the job harder to do with 92 per cent feeling the public undervalues their work (LGA 2009b: 15). The same study notes the distinction between the social work profession and individual social workers with both being 'hurt' by negative media representation (LGA 2009b: 22). Additionally, 68 per cent of social workers believed their negative public image would stop people from wanting to join the profession (Audit Commission (2002). Such negativity can have an overwhelming effect on social workers, leading to stress (Collings and Murray 1996).

As indicated, vilification of social workers, is widely reported in the UK (Jones 2001; Audit Commission 2002; Harlow 2004; ADSS 2005; Galilee 2005; DfES and DoH 2006), especially within child protection work (Franklin and Parton 1989; Franklin and Parton 1991; Franklin 1998; Franklin and Parton 2001; Eborall and Garmeson 2001; Reid and Misener 2001; Asquith et al. 2005). Similar perceptions are reported in the USA (NASW 2004), and arguably less harshly, in Sweden (Tham and Meagher 2009). Newly recruited Australian agency workers also reported their disappointment at the comparatively poor image of social workers in the UK (Eden et al. 2002). Further criticism can be found from visiting American social workers who found their UK counterparts, '…badly stressed, badly paid and badly educated' (Benn 2003: 22).

Evidence to suggest what feeds negative imagery and lack of understanding of the profession can be found in the very complex nature of social work. Expert practice is not necessarily determined or defined by an ability to articulate the use of formal theory (Fook et al. 1997); what Kondrat (1992) refers to as 'practical rationality'. Adaptive and flexible approaches involving a broad, complex, and eclectic theory base, contribute to social work experts having difficulty expressing underlying theory at a particular time (Fook et al. 1997). These in turn seem likely to contribute to public misinterpretation where, for example, a deep level of intuition is

perceived as directionless or mere common sense. Fluidity is also evident as social work evolves in response to 'new policy aspirations, expanding knowledge and rising public expectations' (GSCC 2008: 10).

It is argued that social work should remain an eclectic …'field of operation – the troubled and/or disadvantaged and/or discriminated against individual in society – ensures that it will depend for theoretical sustenance on concepts and findings drawn from a wide variety of sources' (Sheldon and Macdonald 2009: 46). To the 'insider', criticism of social workers being 'woolly' ignores the necessity for sensitivity to complexity and the need for open mindedness. Given the apparent relationship between the nature of social work and political, media, and public perception, greater understanding of practice and effect depends on the articulation of underlying professional principles (Munro 2004).

Evidence of positive and effective promotion of the image of the social work profession appears to be lacking within the literature, despite particular attempts (http://www.socialworkandcare.co.uk/socialwork/ [accessed 8th March 2007]; LGA 2009a). Asquith et al. (2005) identified an urgent need for social work to strengthen its professional identity and an inextricable link between this weakness and the recruitment and retention crisis. It aims to counter this by building on the strengths identified within the profession. The reported lack of a single authoritative voice to represent the profession is also problematic (Eborall and Garmeson 2001). This however, is one of the identified deficits aimed at being rectified by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) through registration and positive promotion of the profession. An exception to the dearth of positive public promotion of social work can be found in the Stand up Now for Social Work campaign (Community Care 2009b) but no evidence to indicate the effect of this currently exists on the public or to recruitment and retention of social workers.

An additional connection can be made between media and social work image in the portrayal of children and young people (and marginalised groups with whom social workers frequently work). One of the key areas of the Children's Commissioner in England is to address the misrepresentation of children in the

media (Office of the Children's Commissioner (2006). The government is a significant external factor in the ecology of practice that impacts on recruitment and retention and is considered next.

3.6.2 Law and Policy

The law sets out what social workers do, to whom they are responsible and accountable to, and the principles that govern public services (Brayne and Carr 2008). Children's social care law and policy has been considerably developed since the introduction of the Poor Law 1930; with the Children Act 1948, the Children and Young Persons Act 1963, the Seebohm Report of 1968. Development has been particularly significant over the last decade since the introduction of the Children Act 1989, as illustrated in Table 3.5. This is somewhat contradicted by the Scottish '21st Century Review' of social work that noted a dearth of national political commitment, particularly through the 1990s, evidenced by the lack of degree level qualifying training and regulation of the workforce (despite recommendation by The Orkney Report of 1992) and a robust approach to independent inspection (Asquith et al. 2005).

Table 3.17 Recent key social work developments, policy, guidance, and law since 1989

Key social work developments
Children Act (1989)
Working Together to Safeguard Children: A Guide to Inter-agency Working to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Children (DoH, HO and DoEE 1999a)
Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, HO and DoEE 1999b)
Assessing Children in Need and their Families (DoH 2000)
Adoption and Fostering Act (2002)
About the Integrated Children's System (DoH 2003)
DipSW to social work degree (2003)
Every Child Matters: Change for Children (DfES 2004b)
Every Child Matters: Next Steps (DfES 2004c)
Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Social Care (DfES 2004d)

Children Act (2004)

Youth Matters: Next Steps, Something to Do, Somewhere to Go (DfES 2005)

Protected professional status (2005)

Introduction of Children's Trusts (2005)

Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care
(DfES 2006a)

Options for Excellence (DfES 2006b)

The Lead Professional: Managers' Guide. Integrated working to Improve
Outcomes for Children and Young People (DfES 2006c)

The Lead Professional: Practioners' Guide. Integrated working to Improve
Outcomes for Children and Young People (DfES 2006d)

Common Assessment Framework (2006)

Directors of Children's Services (2006)

Dept for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

Care Matters: Time for Change (DfES 2007a)

Staying Safe (DfES 2007b)

Change for The Children's Plan (2008)

Social Work Task Force (2009)

Munro review of Children's Services (due 2011)

Whilst the law is essential, and effective policy change benefits service users (Platt
2006), children's social care organisations must respond to the shifting social,
legislative, economic, and political influences prevalent at any given time (Hafford-
Letchfield 2009: ix). The volume of influences indicated above reinforces previous
Audit Commission (2002) concern that bureaucracy overwhelms front-line social
workers. Policy failures are also reported to have contributed to an enduring state
of crisis within the profession in the mid-1990s (Douglas 2002; Lymbery 2004;
Asquith et al. 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006). Evidence suggests an
underlying dimension the social work profession deals with is individuals, groups
and communities failed by policy areas of crime, health, education, housing,
employment services in Britain (Crosskill 2001; Asquith et al. 2005; Walton 2005)
and in America (Anna Casey Foundation 2003).

Law and policy need not necessarily be perceived as top-down directives being thrust upon staff, thereby serving to disengage and distance them from the employer (Audit Commission 2002). Munro (2005), and Fish, Munro and Bairstow (2008) see value in the direct influence social workers and team managers can have in this respect. Their 'systems' approach (see 3.5.3) not only highlights this relationship, but reinforces the need for practitioners to be part of the decision making process. The approach, for example, dictates that human error is recognised as the starting point of an investigation as opposed to its conclusion (Fish, Munro and Bairstow 2008: 19). A lesson learned in the USA is that success of agencies depends on the involvement of stakeholders (central and local government, staff, and the public) in prioritising goals (General Accounting Office 2003). The concept of 'bottom-up' creativity and the need to value social worker, individual and professional contribution towards future the direction of social work is discussed further in Chapter 9 and is considered an important element of this study.

Section 2.3.6 highlighted significant policy initiatives introduced to tackle recruitment and retention problems, indicating more inevitable change for social work organisations. This is reflected in local level structural change with the introduction of new professional social work grades (newly qualified, consultant and advanced practitioner). Whilst such change implies disruption, the Audit Commission (2002) findings imply the successful integration of change will depend on workers feeling valued, included in the process and senior managers communicating relevant and beneficial long term aims effectively. This indicates the significance in worker perception, not only of what organisational change is made, but *how* it is implemented. Asquith et al. (2005) cite worker frustration in the increasing emphasis to meet organisational agendas of audit and accountability at the cost of direct work.

Ultimately, constructive organisational change, progression of the social work agenda, effective recruitment and retention policy, positive outcomes for service users depend on the government with the critical role of funding provision and policy implementation (Healey et al. 2009). This reinforces the earlier message

that consideration of the relationship between the factors highlighted within the ecology of practice model is essential. The literature indicates that if recruitment and retention problems are to be effectively addressed, the voices of service users and social workers need to be heard by senior managers, politicians, and government. Social workers are responsible for ensuring this happens.

3.7   The relationship between ecological factors

In order to more fully understand the above case, individual, organisational and external factors relating to recruitment in children's social care, the relationship between them needs to be explored. As this and the preceding chapter indicate the world of social work is complex and operates at many levels. It is important to acknowledge that the boundaries of the four dimensions used to frame this chapter and subsequent interview and observational data (see Chapters 7) are neither concrete nor definitive, despite the likely implication in their presentation. For example, social work senior managers could be considered within the individual factor, or (as I have done) within the organisational factor. However, as my justification for using Bauman et al.'s model suggests (see section 3.2.1), it is particularly helpful at providing indicative framework of dimensions relevant to recruitment and retention of social workers.

Just as the factors work together in making decisions within social work, as illustrated in Baumann et al.'s model (1997) (see Figure 3.1), I argue that these factors are inter-related and influence recruitment and retention. These factors can be considered in two useful ways. Firstly, within each of the findings my social worker typology can be considered specifically in terms of 'valued or undervalued', 'positive or negative', 'attached or detached' (see examples in Chapter 7 sections 7.3, and 7.5). Secondly, the findings suggest that whilst connected, some dimensions are more significant that others when job satisfaction, decisions to leave, and actually leaving are concerned. In this respect they relate to what the Audit Commission (2002) called push/pull factors and should also be considered in relation to the findings.

3.8   Concluding comments

This chapter highlights the wealth of international quantitative research that considers the problems relating to recruitment, but most often retention of public sector, generic social work, adult and children's social care and child welfare workers and protection workers. Literature from business and employment sectors generally concur with issues that promote and impede retention.

Insight is also gained through the use of Baumann et al.'s model of decision making ecology, to demonstrate key influences and interactions of the four factors of front-line social work practice and how cases, workers, organisations and the external world relate to, and influence not only job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, but 'stay or go' decision making. This provides the context for the identification of what encourages, and what inhibits workforce retention. However, it is argued the window into this world could be clearer, or at least offer an additional perspective; that of the researcher, informed by first-hand observation.

Whilst the worker perspective is essential in research of this nature, this chapter recognises the dearth of accounts of social work practice and of research using ethnographical methodology, thereby increasing the apparent mystery surrounding exactly what social workers do. This is compounded by the general lack of qualitative research around the working lives of children and family social workers, especially using observational approaches, despite the wealth of anecdotal reports of challenge and complexity, i.e. what informs the decision to remain in or leave what has become a child protection job?

The next chapter identifies and justifies the case study research design and the approaches considered and adopted. Epistemological, ontological, and methodological issues are presented, followed by description, and evaluation of the individual methods of data collection.

Chapter 4 - The Natural History of the Research

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 highlighted the original conception of this study and the subsequent developments in approach and design. It indicates the significance of how researcher ownership was deemed essential in the conduct of an effective study, and one that meets the criteria for PhD research (SHU 2010). The chapter also demonstrated how the research questions were initially formulated through a literature review, personal experience, and informal consultation with peers within the child protection work environment. These questions formed the basis on which the research design was realised in order to address the overarching aim of this study, to gain insight into recruitment and retention of social workers in a children's services department.

This chapter identifies and justifies the case study research design, by locating it within my ontological paradigm of constructivism, and my epistemological philosophical framework as interpretivist. These underpinning principles imply the most appropriate research strategy to be qualitative where the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of social workers are explored in relation to issues of recruitment and retention in a children and family department. The centrality of ethics, and axiology (the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics and religion), and quality issues are also discussed. The following table illustrates the research approach.

Table 4.18 Research approach

Philosophical and methodological considerations shaped by personal and professional values and ethics	
Role of theory in research (Model)	Inductive; generation of theory
Ontological orientation	Social constructivism
Epistemological orientation	Interpretivism
Design strategy	Case study
Methods	Semi-structured interviews
	Participant observation
	Nominal group technique
	Desktop review

The second half of this chapter continues the theme of ethics within a critique of the strategic approach. This is supported through reflexivity and reflection, presentation and justification of the specifics of research design and the application of using mixed methods to data collection using: interviews, observation, nominal group technique (NGT), and documentary analysis. This enables more effective thematic analysis through triangulation and grounded theory. Analysis is based on the principles of grounded theory, especially the development of codes. This was conducted iteratively and centred on the development and cross checking of emerging themes.

This is followed by the practical implications of the strategic approach, including, access to data sources, sampling, rapport, timing, ethical issues, and 'false leads' (Alasuutari 1995). Here, I present an insight into the natural history of the empirical research 'journey', reflecting the methodological challenges faced, and the exciting and engaging experiences within. Whilst carefully planned approaches are presented, examples of chance opportunities and unplanned 'happenings' (happy accidents) combining to enhance my understanding of research are also noted. Arising issues and how they were addressed is also presented.

The chapter closes with an illustrative timeframe providing clarity of the research process, reflecting the natural history, and personal context of the study (Silverman

2004). The next section presents the framework adopted for this study and some of the considerations made in arriving at the decisions made.

4.2   Framework for the case study approach

The preceding chapters identify that recruitment and retention of children and family social workers is complex, and problematic at: international; national; regional levels; and locally in North City. The focus of this study is to examine the problem in the local children and family social work service within North City. The exploratory nature of the research implied the appropriateness of a case study approach because it enables in-depth insight into complex, and unstructured organisational problems (Easton 1992; Yin 2008). Stake (2003: 134) identifies that whilst a 'case' may also be simple, a case study is not a methodological choice, but one of *what* is to be studied. He adds that a case is: a 'bounded' (also see Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Yin 2008), and integrated system; purposive; a functioning specific; and a system (Stake 2003: 135). A case study approach is an intensive, detailed examination of a particular setting, and its diverse issues and contexts (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

Case studies are widely used within qualitative enquiry (Stake 2003) and public sector organisational research (Yin 2008), allowing for multiple method approaches, and providing data bound by context and time for a detailed explanation of the source (Yeager 1998). This approach allows for 'the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (Yin 2008: 3) such as organisational or professional ecology of practice. It is of particular value when the phenomenon to be explored (recruitment and retention problems) is closely related to its context (North City CSD), (Yin 2008).

It is important to see case study as a distinct approach, rather than simply the pragmatic application of mixed methods of data collection. A key advantage of the case study approach is that it permits in-depth exploration of a subject in which considerable detail about the practices and processes under scrutiny can be

understood in relation to specific contexts. In enabling intensive examination, case studies are often associated with qualitative research, although not exclusively so; both qualitative and quantitative methods can be employed (Yin 2008, Stake 2003). In this study for example, quantitative human resource data was used to consider North City workforce demographics, and the relationship with recruitment and retention, in addition to the qualitative methods identified in the introduction to this chapter. Issues relating to mixed methodology and triangulation are discussed in Chapters 5.4.1 and 10.

Features that help identify this research project as a case study are:

- The 'case' is identified as North City's Children and Young People's Directorate, with responsibility for the recruitment and retention of local authority children and family social workers.
- The case is a 'bounded system' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003), framed by time (length of PhD study) and place (four worksites in a single City – see Table 4.2).
- A detailed in-depth picture of recruitment and retention issues was provided through extensive and multiple sources in data collection (Cresswell 1998: 36-37).
- A case study structure involving exploration of: 'the problem'; 'the context'; 'the issues'; and 'lessons learned' was followed (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Table 4.19 The case

North City Children and Young Peoples Directorate	
Worksite 1	Firthport Area Office
Worksite 2	Wentworth Area Office Floor 2
Worksite 3	Wentworth Area Office Floor 5
Worksite 4	Ridgeways Area Office

With the case identified, the nature of the case study can be considered. Stake (2003: 139) identified three types of case study: intrinsic; instrumental; and collective. This study was initially considered to fall within the intrinsic category as

a better understanding of the particular case is sought. Recruitment and retention issues in North City are not necessarily representative of those elsewhere but that it is the 'particularities *and* ordinariness' (Stake 2003: 139) of these issues that are of interest. However, further reading which included Becker, Greer, Hughes and Strauss (1961), provided a deeper understanding of case study research, and reconsideration of the research question within my research, I believe an 'instrumental' case study better encapsulates the nature of the research. Here, North City is the case that plays a secondary, supportive role, facilitating a greater understanding of recruitment and retention.

The context-specific nature of case studies provides the basis for widely reported criticism of the approach in that the research findings are not generalisable; findings from a single case cannot be applied to the wider world. In this sense, the aim of the case study is not to generalise findings but to focus on, examine, and illuminate a particular phenomenon in order to gain a greater understanding (Yeager 1998). Whilst the study design was underpinned by the need to optimise understanding of the case, rather than to generalize beyond (Stake 2003: 135), I will later argue that 'naturalistic generalization' (Stake and Trumbell 1982) deems this possible to an extent (see section 4.3.2). Greenwood and Levin (2003) support this further through 'action research' and Williams (2002) with 'moderatum generalisations' (also in section 4.3.2). It is however acknowledged, "the purpose of the case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (Stake 2003: 156).

A well reported advantage of case studies is the flexibility in the approach in allowing for a mixed method design (rather than methodology) (Johnson et al. 2007) where triangulation can help clarify meaning and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation of data. Denzin suggests that by "combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources, sociologists can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, single-observer, single-theory studies" (Denzin 1970: 313). Whilst this underpins strength in my approach, multiple observers were not adopted thereby limiting the ability to negate the inevitable element of personal bias (also see 4.4).

The following section considers the research strategy in this context of this study involving, and being about, social workers that work with vulnerable, and often-marginalised people. It also clarifies my personal and professional value position.

4.2.1 Case study approach: professional and personal contexts

Having argued for the case study research approach with North City CSD identified as the case, further justification is now presented with a brief consideration of the social work profession, and the social workers employed within. I also offer reflection on my multiple personal stances as: a 'person', a research student, and Registered Social Worker. The connectedness of the strategy to service users is also noted.

The literature in Chapters 2 and 3 suggest a broad range of research strategies relevant to this study. The focus was necessarily recruitment and retention related, highlighting research driven by qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It suggests that research helps the social work profession through: building knowledge for practice; describing or explaining social problems; and informing the reciprocal relationship between social work and research. This study was influenced by criticism of social work research and the wish to meet the requirement that research in the profession should, according to Shaw and Gould (2001: 3):

- "contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practice and services
- enhance social work's moral purpose
- strengthen social work's disciplinary character and location
- promote social work inquiry marked by rigour, range, variety, depth and progression".

Macdonald (1999) and Thyler (1989 and 2000) (cited in Shaw and Gould 2001: 5) indicated concern that social work research is generally lacking in the areas of scientific rigour, outcomes, and generalisation. Shaw and Gould (2001) also reflect concern that social work research lacks 'methodological imagination', perhaps feeding Western countries government departments' perception as being mistrustful of anecdotal or mystifying qualitative social work research findings. Trevillion (2008) also noted that UK social work research, whilst focussing on improving service outcomes, rarely seeks to develop core knowledge or the traditional underpinnings of the profession. For Smith (2009), this falls within a context of social work agencies, and government generally lacking commitment to research processes. Shaw (2008) also charged social work academics with failing in the area of presentation of findings and providing functional recommendations applicable to practice. On balance, commentators on social work research also frequently highlight good quality studies (see examples in Padgett, 2008; Shaw, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2008; Shaw and Norton, 2008; Smith 2009).

The introduction of this chapter indicated the relevance of my position in this study. I adhere to codes of practice and ethics according to my roles as: a registered social worker (GSCC 2001; BASW 2002); senior university lecturer (SHU 2010) and PhD research student (SHU 2010). It is recognised that in addition to these professional codes, my personal value base inevitably influenced this study. I am male (40 years old at the time of submission of the thesis), White, able-bodied, and working within a middle class profession. It is therefore important to acknowledge the way I view the world and how I believe knowledge is created. Whilst this is discussed in the next section, I can clarify that my intention for this study was to be of benefit and practical use to the local social work agency, its employees (especially social workers), and importantly, service users within North City. It was also hoped that benefits would be gained through provision of new knowledge to the social work profession, and the wider research community. This was clearly not altruistic, as an overarching aim was to further personal and professional self-development.

Chapter 4 - The Natural History of the Research

The following section presents the key philosophical considerations underpinning this study, including ontology, epistemology, and subsequent methodology, further justifying the case study approach.

4.3   Philosophical framework

The landscape of research is a contentious one. Guba and Lincoln (1994 and updated in 2003: 258-263) help distinguish characteristics within each research paradigm, contending for "legitimacy and intellectual and paradigmatic hegemony" (2003: 253). These are identified as: positivist; post positivist; post modernist; critical theory; constructionist; and (as updated by Heron and Reason 1997) participatory paradigms. Boland (1989; 1995) observed a significant shift in the social sciences towards more interpretive and criticalist thinking and doing, with their legitimacy becoming well established and perceived as at least equal to conventional (empiricist and in particular the positivist) paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

At its base, the philosophical concept of constructivism and interpretivist principles lays the rejection of the assumption that positivist methods from the natural sciences can be successfully applied to social science in explaining human conduct. This is a necessarily subjective process where reality, and meaning (especially for further action) is derived from community consensus (Lincoln and Guba 2003: 264). However, positivists argue that knowledge and truth are established as facts and laws through the verification of hyphotheses through objective, "disinterested scientists" (ibid 2003: 260).

As previously described, my personal research paradigm is that of constructivism, as I believe 'reality' is created and constructed by individuals (social actors), and that an understanding of these perspectives is necessary. The 'truth' is dependent on the situation, and the perception that is applied by individuals, and influenced by values, beliefs, and attitudes (Lincoln and Guba 2003). My epistemological stance is interpretive, as I believe knowledge to be a personal experience that is subjective and unique (Lincoln and Guba 2003). This is informed by the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and concept of *Verstehen* in understanding the meaning of social phenomena (Schwandt 1994: 119). An understanding of the world is gained through interpretation. To elicit research findings is therefore to

"offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies" (Schwandt 1994: 118).

Justification of my constructivist and non-postivist stance is that the language of objectivity, distance, and control oppose my personal and professional social work values. Social inclusion and engagement are central to my belief that social science can inform and improve the lives in need through both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Whilst identifying a constructivist paradigm, the fluid nature of categories relating to the theoretical and paradigmatic strands of research where boundaries shift is acknowledged (Lincoln and Guba 2003: 264). Far from suggesting that 'everything goes' (Feyerabend 1988) constructivism, including the associated axiology most closely relates to my value base. Lincoln and Guba (2003) update their 1994 presentation of research paradigms with the view that axiology is "part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of paradigm proposal" (2003: 265), thereby highlighting the fundamental nature of ethics.

4.3.1 Additional methodological considerations

Whilst I have argued for the focus on an interpretive, qualitative approach to research within this study, my decision to join the 'qualitative revolution' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: vii) was not without debate. A positivist approach embracing quantitative methodology was necessarily considered within the scope of the research outline. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the historical weight of quantitative approaches to social work organisational research (most recently identified by Burns 2009). Survey methods have been widely used to extract recruitment and retention related findings across large samples, predominantly by government bodies in the UK (see CWDC 2008). Also identified is the emergence of qualitative and mixed method approaches specifically focussing on issues of recruitment and retention of social workers (see Fook et al. 1997; Mor Barak et al. 2006; DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008). These often highlight the sensitive and emotive nature of the subject of job satisfaction and the need for participants to be

given the opportunity to discuss their social world through rich description often associated with qualitative interview techniques.

Questionnaires are frequently adopted within 'grey' literature, such as Community Care, and Professional Social Work. Indeed, most of the findings presented in chapter 5, from my documentary analysis of primary data within North City, are the result of quantitative approaches, including survey methods. An increasing body of qualitative research is however, beginning to inform these issues, and justification for adopting such an approach within this study has been presented.

Whilst the methodological framework was not a pre-requisite, the participatory body in this study, 'North City children's services' was already identified in the University and local authority contractual relationship. Recruitment and retention in North City was problematised and the research questions were considered collaboratively. (Also see Chapter 9 for discussion on mixed methods).

4.3.2 Social action

Within the constructivist paradigm, this case study involving the social work organisation is a means of attracting 'champions' purposefully willing to consider recommendations as contributing towards action planning (Guba and Lincoln 1981; 1989). Ethical issues are also a driving force for action, which in this study (and in social work) involve outcomes having an eventual positive affect on service users. This concept is also reflected in action research, which is described as being a "socially meaningful" mission (Greenwood and Levin in Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 133). Positivist criticism perceives such a link in the application of the researcher's work as a threat to objectivity and also that, the researcher's intellectual autonomy is threatened by connectedness to the social world beyond the university (ibid).

Restriction in the researcher/case relationship has not been a feature of this study and whilst findings and recommendations are bounded (Yin 2008) they were always intended to be socially meaningful. Greenwood and Levin note, 'results' in

the form of outcomes are important to those in society who are marginalised and want assistance in dealing with the presenting problems faced; "poverty, addiction, racism, environmental degradation and so on" (2003: 138). As indicated in the previous two chapters, the literature suggests a particularly low social and political value of the social work profession, perhaps a reflection of the perceivably low value of those individual social actors whom social workers work with most. This reflects the indirect value of this case study to service users. It is within this social context that Padgett argues for the ideal suitability of qualitative reports giving a voice to study participants, noting the restriction on expressing themselves through power imbalance (2008).

As noted in this chapter, methodological terminology is complex and contested. Boundaries between methodological stances shift according to the author (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). I have found this confusing and challenging, and sometimes helpful. As my confidence has developed I appreciate how I can contribute in some way to such debates. I have gained good insight into the advantages of reading around research paradigms, approaches and ways to gain knowledge. For example, whilst this study does not claim to be that of action research, I found on reflection that within the case study approach my efforts to work positively with organisational stakeholder resonated with what is referred to as "cogenerative inquiry processes" in action research (Greenwood and Levin 2003: 148). To this extent researcher and key stakeholder collaboration was important to varying degrees in:

- defining research objectives
- constructing research questions
- learning research skills
- pooling knowledge and efforts
- conducting the research
- interpreting the results
- applying what is learned to produce positive social change

(Greenwood and Levin 2003)

The NGT method (see section 5.3.4) exemplifies collaboration where the participative consensus approach includes the presentation of findings and application of skill sharing. Organisational access was also dependent on collaboration.

It is acknowledged that an exclusively collaborative approach was not adopted and that a balance, underpinned by bias reduction and avoiding feeding a managerialist agenda was believed necessary. This approach reflected my social work principles where using holistic and inclusive approaches, informed through use of an exchange model of assessment (Parker and Bradley 2010), identifies service users as, to some extent, experts of their own situation. This also reflects Dewey's (1927/1954) philosophy that meaningful knowledge creation processes should include the ethics of participation (Greenwood and Levin 2003). Both researcher and stakeholder knowledge are essential and help create a powerful research team (ibid).

4.3.3 Generalisation

Yin (2008) argued that generalisations are not the aim of case studies, as previously stated. Additionally, criticism of generalising from small samples is not possible because of the unique nature of the particular case.

However, Greenwood and Levin (2003) suggest how this can be considered possible within action research using a two-step model highlighting how 'context-bound' knowledge can be used in different organisations and settings.

1. Contextual conditions in which knowledge was created contextualises the knowledge itself.
2. Transfer of knowledge requires contextual knowledge of the new setting, differences, and reflection on consequences of applying actual knowledge in the new context (2003: 152).

Williams (in May 2002: 125-43) highlight possibilities of 'moderatum generalisations' in interpretivist research. Grounded in the concept of cultural consistency' and the "…existence of some shared norms, a common language and physical referents can allow at least some reciprocity of perspective between researcher and researched, as well as viable comparisons between places" (Williams 2002: 157). Whilst he suggests the necessity and inevitability of generalisation, Williams warns of the moderate nature of 'moderatum generalisations', but counters this in that "they need only to be so" and can be left to stand or be developed further (2002: 139).

Additionally, Trumbell and Stake (1982) argued for 'naturalistic generalisation' in case studies where the reader of experiential and contextual research reports gains awareness, understanding and the construct of knowledge. These appear more likely if the issues are recognisable through previous experience, an ability to make comparisons, and are reinforced through social processes that enrich understanding (Stake 2003). Trumbell and Stake (1982) also acknowledged that a choreographed research report is inevitably 'edited knowledge' and the reader will in turn edit that this.

4.4   Ethics and Quality

Consideration of ethical implications is an essential part of any research proposal and subsequent study (Barnes 1979). Human rights legislation and the Data Protection Act (1998) also influence research methods. Despite this, Peled and Leichtentritt (2002) identified the problem that ethical considerations were marginal in most phases of qualitative studies reported in social work journals, following a 10-year review. This section demonstrates how consideration of ethics was central to this study and with research ethics having strong resonance with social work ethics.

Formal ethical approval of the full project was sought following Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) procedural processes. The North City Health and Social Care Research Consortium Ethics Committee granted this in September 2005 and SHU

subsequently confirmed ethical approval through their Social Care Ethics Committee. Ethical decisions were crucial to this study, especially because access to area offices was gained where personal information about service users and the workforce was available. Confidentiality and participant autonomy were therefore upheld, and clarity provided from the outset that these would only be broken in exceptional circumstances, such as a child being at risk of significant harm under s.47 Children Act 1989. As a registered social worker I was also bound by the rules and regulations that apply to my profession including the code of practice (GSCC 2001; BASW 2002).

The research methods needed to be ethically sound, and whilst the director of North City social services provided overarching consent, additional measures were taken to ensure participants were fully informed. This included provision of a researcher biography, clarity that participation was voluntary, and subsequent acquisition of informed consent. These measures included meetings, consultations, supervision sessions, telephone calls, email and paper correspondence, and use of tools such as consent forms. Issues for ethical consideration necessarily included: honesty and trust, reciprocity, intervention, advocacy, and finally, risk assessment (Lincoln and Guba 2003).

Research within organisations involved in the protection of children requires sensitivity to ethical issues and anti-oppressive practice. Social workers often work with people, who are marginalised in society, need some kind of help, or protection from harm. It followed that this case study, directly or indirectly involved service users, involving sensitive topics and should not cause harm to participants (Silverman 2010). The welfare of service users was especially relevant in this study because it was anticipated that I would have direct contact with them, albeit rarely. This was proposed to be during home visits, meetings, and court hearings although these particular sites, and therefore service user contact were, in the main, curtailed for practical reasons.

Ethically aware research behaviour (Bulmer 1982) was an important thread running through the case study. The research aims, objectives, and recruitment and

retention focus were made explicit to all participants of all grades, as they could have assumed their practice would be scrutinised and criticised. An honest and transparent approach was aimed to encourage: rapport, opportunities to observe more natural behaviour, honest responses, and a reduction of possibilities for defensive feelings. The next section argues that ethical awareness is linked to the need for researcher awareness of the inevitability of bias, and the need for reflexivity in order to uphold the quality of the study. This supports Janesick's (2003: 56) declaration that research objectivity, regardless of methodological approach, is a myth and claims as such cannot be taken seriously.

4.4.1 Bias and reflexivity

Hammersley and Atkinson (1996) acknowledge the need to build and maintain rapport between researcher and participants. For example, gaining trust is an important aspect of the observational technique and is a particular challenge to the researcher. This includes the importance of self-presentation and appearance and the need to avoid any 'sharp differences' (1996: 86). A helpful comparison is made between the researcher and "…social actors in general, whose social competence requires such sensitivity to shifting situations" (1996: 87). As a 'fellow' social worker I believe I was generally perceived as an interested (but tangential) companion, and managed to maintain good rapport.

My empathic skills combined with the experience of using the observational method through day-to-day interaction, and in-depth interviews, helped me appreciate the participant perspective of me as a researcher. The following scratch note (Figure 4.1) provides an illustrative example of this. It depicts my encounter with a social worker who confided in me about her length of service, and reflected frankly how our interaction, combined with my previous offer of help, had changed her assumption of me:

Figure 4.1   Observational fieldnote

Direct observational fieldnotes:

"Qualified in 1981. Worker on the 2nd Floor at Wentworth in 1993 and has been within

North City SSD since. "No one else knows this!" she confided.

She has a very dry sense of humour and is deceptively shrewd.

She said I have surprised her because she read my 'blurb' (intro letter to my study) and

thought she wouldn't like me at all! She thought…'two years qualified, what would he

know?' She was very grateful for my help with her desktop computer recently. I think

this is what broke the ice".

(W5 13 OBS).

Further indication of participant perception of me was provided within the observations where occasional inference was made to me being either a 'saviour', or a 'spy' (see section 5.3.3).

Throughout the study, I remained mindful that the danger of misunderstanding was especially great within familiar settings (Hammersley 1990 cited in Silverman 2010: 29). The terrain was recognizable to me as a social worker and the need to avoid 'over-rapport' was ongoing (Silverman 2010: 30). I was frequently reminded of my potential for bias throughout the period of data collection. Here follows a second excerpt from observational scratch notes, this time reflecting my frustration at the lack of resources available:

"Just established that Child Protection plans are supposed to be printed on lilac paper. This is apparently the most expensive coloured paper you can get and is therefore generally unavailable. However, PC knows where a supply of lilac paper exists and whispers its location to JC. Up to now they have had to use pink paper as a cheaper compromise! Pure gold!! I'll use this as an example of the perception of a local authority holding back on resources because they are stingy. It's like the printers not being serviced from yesterday. These perceptions all build and create an overall perception that social workers will not be given the appropriate resources and are therefore undervalued and under appreciated"

(W2 16 OBS).

Barton (1994) (in Munro 2008a: 21) highlighted the concept of 'biased observation' in social work practice, which resonates with theory of participant observation in

social research. I believe my communication skills developed through social work helped me notice potential blind spots where evidence that contradicts my beliefs is concerned. This reflexive approach was supported in my observations of some senior managers being particularly positive about, and supportive of their staff.

Reflexivity, where Fook (2001: 127) argues subjectivity is an asset rather than a problem, requires philosophical reflection and problematisation of personal assumptions. Consideration was given to my values, value systems, social standing, class, ethnicity, family, upbringing, gender, sexuality, physical and mental ability, age, environment, life experiences: basically all the things that make me who I am, and think the way I think. Reflexivity enabled me to appreciate how I influenced every aspect of this study and each decision made. This includes analysis, presentation of findings, and subsequent completion of this thesis and contributed towards the overall quality of the study.

4.4.2 Quality, trustworthiness and authenticity

Issues of quality within the study were addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) proposed primary assessment criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity. These were considered as being more appropriate than considerations of validity and reliability, which are widely (though not universally – see Kirk and Miller 1986; Mason 1996) associated with measurement of quality in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This distinction is based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) fundamental principle of the interpretist argument for more than one version, or multiple versions, of absolute truth.

Firstly, issues of trustworthiness are considered in four ways: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Secondly, authenticity is assessed using five categories concerning the wider impact of the research of: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The flexibility of the case study approach, combined with my recognition of value for reflexivity, underpinned periodic assessment for quality within this study. Quality of this study is now presented through the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity.

As indicated, the first consideration in trustworthiness is credibility.

i) Credibility parallels with internal validity in quantitative research and relates to the previously mentioned interpretivist notion of more than one version of social reality and interpretation of an event (Janesick 2003). Credibility of the study determines the acceptability of the research to the reader. I argue this study is a feasible and credible account of the 'case' because it adhered to the principles of good practice in research (see SHU 2010) and because study findings were presented to North City CSD in July 2009, where subsequent discussion and debate confirmed my description, explanation, and understanding of the case. Presentation slides were also followed by a written summary report. Respondent evaluation or member checking (Janesick 1998; Lincoln and Guba 1985) was further employed, as interview transcripts were emailed to each interviewee, with a request for notification of any necessary amendments or disagreements. Credibility is also underpinned through the use of triangulation (see Chapter 5.4.1).

ii) Transferability parallels with external validity in quantitative research and the extent to which the study findings can be transferred to other social contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued the detailed account of qualitative inquiry enables judgement of transferability to be made by the reader. Such rich account or 'thick description' (Gertz 1973) of the case is demonstrated in my extensive fieldnotes, with particular focus on participants and the four observed worksites. This record is available for scrutiny and supports an informed assessment for transferability to other 'cases'. It is argued the literature review (in Chapters 2, and 3) suggests a high degree of transferability. (Also see section 4.3.3 on generalisability).

iii) Dependability parallels with reliability in quantitative research where an audit approach is adopted (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As indicated above, the complete records of the study are available for access by the research supervisory team. Whilst an audit has not been deemed necessary for the whole study, use of the supervisory team has been made in considering the format of the interview and observational data.

iv) Confirmability parallels objectivity in quantitative research in acknowledging that objectivity is not an aim of qualitative research (as explained in section 4.4.1) and refers to the researcher's need to act in good faith. My presence within the research design signifies inevitable subjectivity resulting in bias in this study. My social work training and subsequent professional practice have empowered me with increased self-awareness, recognition of personal values, capacity for reflexivity and strength in reflection. Confirmability is identified as an auditing role, and I argue that my values and research paradigms have not manifestly swayed 'the conduct of the research and findings derived from it' (Bryman 2004: 276). In sum, I have maintained an open mind about my findings, especially where they might conflict with personally held views, whilst acknowledging, and valuing the inevitability of the subjectivity of qualitative research.

Following this is Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of authenticity, fairness being considered here first.

i) Fairness: Views from within all aspects of service provision within the 'case' have been represented within the study. Chapter 8 indicates the unique representation of senior managers' consensus of facilitators to the recruitment and retention problems. Interviews and observations also capture wide-ranging perspectives. The predominant body of data from within this case study relates to front line social workers and is representative of the case.

ii) Ontological authenticity: Feedback throughout, and following data collection and presentation of findings, indicated a general appreciation of the research and beneficence in that their story has been heard, and subsequently told. I believe this to be the case for front line workers as well as senior managers. Additionally, confirmation of a *greater understanding* gained by participants of their social situation was expressed by some following presentation of findings (see appendix Q). Expanding this understanding further is a personal aim, as demonstrated in Chapter 9, where I argue for recognition of (and recognise the challenge in) the mutuality of the roles across service provision within the 'case'.

iii) Educative authenticity: A strength in this study, I believe, is that adopting the case study approach, and using multiple methods specifically designed to elicit the perspectives, and perceptions across the grades in organisational children's service provision, facilitates opportunity for a greater participant understanding, especially across the perceived front line/senior management divide. An example of this is provided in Chapter 6.7.2.

iv) Catalytic authenticity: Ongoing contact between 'case' representatives and I enabled participants to engage in constructive action. This included my supervision as an honorary employee during the data collection period. It is recognised that the issue of power imbalance in the front line worker/senior management relationship is relevant in influencing positive action and, as acknowledged above, following final presentation of findings the senior manager confirmed recruitment and retention policy changes had been made. This was reported to have improved recruitment and retention problems. These may, or may not be related to the research findings and dialectic supervisory relationship.

v) Tactical authenticity: It is too soon to establish whether participants within the 'case' have been empowered to engage in action for change in their situation. Findings indicate this is a necessary outcome and the discussion presented in Chapter 8, provides the challenge to participants that encourage this very process.

Whilst the criteria for assessing quality in qualitative research are contested, this section is indicative of a study that is of good quality according to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) proposed primary assessment criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity.

4.5   Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the theoretical, methodological underpinning, and details of study design in the context of the natural history of my research. This reflects the lived experience and the journey taken throughout the study. The

location of this study is provided and justified in adopting a social constructionist epistemology and an interpretivist theoretical perspective within which the case study methodological approach sits.

The case study design is located within a qualitative approach using mixed methods to provide opportunities for triangulation. Quantitative human resource data gained also helped contextualise the case and confirmed the existence of recruitment and retention problems in North City. Consideration of methods is presented in relation to the research question and detail of the case study design provided. The decision to use participant observation, semi-structured interviews, desktop review, and nominal group technique is also presented as an effective combination in illuminating the following:

How can problems of recruiting and retaining children and families social workers in North City children's services be explained, and what evidence is there for resolution of the problems?

The next chapter presents the specifics of the research design and argues for the appropriateness of the techniques used. This extends reflection on the collaborative research relationship and thorough consideration of ethical issues. This begins with the pilot study, issues around access and theoretical sampling, followed by the data collection and analysis.

Chapter 5 – Fieldwork

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided justification for, the adoption of a social constructionist epistemology and an interpretivist theoretical perspective within which my case study methodological approach sits. It argued for a qualitative approach using a mixed method design of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, desktop review of local data, and nominal group technique. This chapter describes the practical detail of the design and its subsequent use in the fieldwork.

5.2 Specifics of research design

The following table presents the methods of data collection used within the case study design, where, and when they were conducted across the data collection period.

Table 5.20 Methods of data collection

Date	Method	Where	Sample	Duration
Feb 2003 – Aug 2003	Desktop review	North City Directorate	See Chapter 6	n/a
Oct 2005 – Nov 2005	Non-participant observation	Firthport area office	29 front line workers	15 days
Nov 2005 – Dec 2005	Interviews	Firthport area office	8 front line workers	n/a
May 2006 – July 2006	Non-participant observation	Wentworth 2 and 5 area office	45 front line workers	17 days
July 2006	Interview	University	Ex-employee	n/a
July 2006 – Aug 2006	Interviews	Wentworth 2 and 5 area office	8 front line workers	n/a
July 2006	Nominal group technique	Away day – neutral venue	28 senior managers	Half-day

Sep 2006 – Oct 2006	Non-participant observation	Ridgeways area office	22 front line workers	4 days
Oct 2006	Interview	Ridgeways area office	1 front line worker	n/a
Feb 2009 – May 2009	Desktop review	North City Directorate	See Chapter 6	
Totals	**4 methods**	**4 work sites**	**Obs n = 96** **Ints n = 18** **NGT n = 28**	**36 days of obs**

5.2.1 Access

This section demonstrates how access to the worksites and participants was achieved in order to conduct this research study. My experience reflected Van Maanen and Kolb's (1985) observation that gaining access required careful planning, hard work, and a degree of luck. Negotiation was essential and my communication skills helped with progression and I believe a key 'door-opener' was that I was a (fellow) Registered Social Worker. I was also planning research designed to provide ideas for addressing agency recruitment and retention problems.

Access was inevitably supported by North City being identified from the outset as the focus of the research. As explained in Chapter 1, North City part funded the study to provide an informed response to their recruitment and retention problems. Initial meetings were held with North City senior managers across children and adult services to introduce me as the researcher, and the proposed nature of the research. This included a key meeting with senior social work practitioners to discuss the relevance of the study and the potential research methods to be used. Prior to this meeting the senior manager with recruitment and retention responsibilities stated that the problems previously identified in recruiting and retaining staff were no longer apparent. However, the senior practitioners, who highlighted the crucial need for the study, did not uphold this perspective. They

provided encouragement for the proposed methods; although they warned of the challenges in participant diary keeping.

A document to formally introduce my personal details and the study to all potential participants was emailed to two senior managers and a team manager (see appendix F). However, this was not distributed to North City staff as anticipated. Contacts were provided within one worksite for the proposed pilot study. Once the pilot was completed, a subsequent meeting with the (then) Director of Social Services provided opportunity to feedback my initial findings and future proposal for the shape of the study and how it would be conducted. More comprehensive citywide contacts were provided in order to progress with data collection.

The introductory document was subsequently updated and emailed to a business support worker who forwarded it to all staff on my behalf. Following initial problems within the pilot study, introductory visits were made to each area office involved where study proposals were presented. Paper copies of the document were distributed by hand during initial team meetings. Monthly supervision was also negotiated, and provided by the Strategic and Operational Manager. This provided an opportunity for the development of a reciprocal relationship where insight from both strategic and operational perspectives was gained, as well as the sharing of ideas about the practicalities of research methods in the field. It was, for example, within one such supervisory meeting that I concluded the diary method would not be feasible, despite my original determination in pursuing this. I was also able to share emergent themes and topics, whilst being mindful of not breaking confidence or being perceived by participants to be colluding with senior managers. I learnt that workers' perception of this particular manager was favourable and believe this to have had a positive effect on my status as a researcher.

Overall, the methodological consultation process between various key members and individual teams helped build rapport and my credibility with managers and workers alike. I believe this served to shape the research design in enabling the relatively smooth access to participants.

Three key figures (two within separate business support teams and one with the training and development team) were identified and contact maintained in order to make the practical arrangements for data collection, such as: becoming an honorary employee in order to obtain a security pass, access to the staff intranet and email facilities, using desk space, and booking rooms for interviews. The position of researcher as an honorary employee and registered social worker reinforces Scott's (2002: 927) suggestion that social work academic researchers are 'honorary insiders'. These figures were particularly valuable to me and their help was central in contributing to the positive progression of the practicalities associated with access in the study.

I was generally warmly welcomed by staff of all grades throughout, with high levels of interest in the publication of findings. The latter eventually became the cause for great personal anxiety as the delays in completing the writing up of the study became increasingly problematic. Only once did I feel less positively about the researcher/participant relationship, during the NGT event (see Chapters 5.3.4 and 8). For the duration of each observation I became an accepted part of the teams, albeit briefly, within the personally familiar office terrain of social work practice.

The period of observation within each worksite served as an excellent way to further discuss me and the study with interested individuals and an opportunity to consider sampling for interviews and eventually the nominal group technique session. Details of sampling methods used are discussed in the next section.

5.2.2 Sample

Theoretical sampling is the selection of groups to study on their relevance to the research question and the researcher's theoretical position (Mason 2002). With North City identified as the case, social work teams most affected by recruitment and retention problems were identified through consultation with key stakeholders and human resource data. The following factors also contributed towards the sampling strategy:

- boundaries of the case, i.e. North City CSD;

- boundaries of the PhD study, i.e. time, one researcher;

- accessibility, and;

- practicality of observation, including timing and locality of participants.

Once the four worksites where Duty and Looked After Children (LAC) teams worked were identified as: Firthport Area Office; Wentworth Area Office Floors 2 and 5; and Ridgeways Area Office, access was negotiated, as previously described. An observational sample was provided which included all front line employees within the targeted worksites. A within case, maximum variation sample was therefore obtained and used to document diverse variation and identify common patterns (Hubermann and Miles 2002). This was aimed to illuminate multiple perspectives about the case (Cresswell 1998) (see Chapter 6) and enable saturation point to be reached, where no significantly new data is generated (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

During the fieldwork participants occasionally informed me of 'ideal' interviewee candidates. The enticing proposition to target a convenience sample, using a 'snowball' technique (Bryman 2004), was, in the main, rejected because of the anticipated likelihood of negative bias. One candidate (Jim) was interviewed because he had left the child protection service and was considered by an ex-colleague to have a wide range of relevant experiences to this study. Apart from this, a less targeted strategy was deemed likely to capture a more representative response including both negative and positive experiences within the case. A maximum variation sample was therefore also used for semi-structured interviews, where team member volunteers were collected during participant observation.

Every staff member within the observed sample approached agreed, without exception, to volunteer for interview if randomly selected. After each observational period, volunteers were given pseudonyms and randomly selected by an

independent university colleague. The high level of interest demonstrated in volunteering and subsequent participation of all those selected reflected the perceived relevance of the research to North City staff. The opportunities associated with this approach within the bounds of a purposive sample were:

- avoidance of 'only the loudest and seemingly most interesting voices being heard' (a particular concern voiced by staff during methodological consultation)

- reducing researcher bias

- increased 'in case' representation.

The perceived threats to using a random sample approach were:

- lack of social worker grade interviewees
- lack of experience of interviewees
- under-representation of diversity issues (sex, age, disability, and ethnicity)
- reduced opportunity of interviewing 'ideal' candidates

On reflection, I believe the opportunities identified above outweighed the threats and randomisation within purposive sampling for interviewing strengthened the study.

The following data key (Table 5.2) is used to identify key information relating to all 18 formal interviewees presented in Table 5.3. When constructing pseudonyms, the names of existing staff across the directorate were purposefully avoided and any matches would be coincidental.

Table 5.21 Data Key for Interview Participants

Grades	Code
Service Manager	SM
Team Manager	TM
Senior Practitioner	SP
Social Worker	SW
Social Worker Agency	SWA
Trainee Social Worker	TSW
Support Worker	Sup W
Gender	**Code**
Male	M
Female	F
Ethnicity	**Code**
White	W
Black	B
Asian	A
Length of Service/Qualification	**Code**
Up to 1 year	<1
1 – 2 years	1-2
3 – 5 years	3-5
6 – 10 years	6-10
11 – 20 years	11-20
Over 20 years	>20

Table 5.22 Introduction to the Interviewees

No.	Name	Grade	Date	Place of work 2005/06	Floor	Gender	Ethnicity	Length of service in North City	Years qualified	Position Sept 07
1	Jackie	SWA	28/11/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	<1	3-5	Left Service
2	Rachel	SP	28/11/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	3-5	3-5	In service
3	Peter	SW	29/11/05	Firthport	n/a	M	W	3-5	3-5	In service
4	Sarah	SW	30/11/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	3-5	11-20	Left CP but in LA
5	Carol	SW	1/12/05	Firthport	n/a	F	B	<1	11-20	Left CP but in LA
6	Harriet	TM	2/12/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	3-5	3-5	In service
7	Avril	SP	5/12/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	3-5	11-20	In service
8	June	SW	5/12/05	Firthport	n/a	F	W	<1	3-5	In service
9	Jim	SW	20/7/06	Ex-North City	n/a	M	W	3-5	6-10	Ex-employee
10	Stephanie	SW	21/7/06	Wentworth	2	F	W	3-5	3-5	In service
11	Emma	TSW	27/7/06	Wentworth	2	F	W	<1	n/a	In service
12	Trudy	TM	27/7/06	Wentworth	2	F	B	11-20	11-20	In service
13	Jane	TSW	31/7/06	Wentworth	5	F	A	<1	n/a	In service
14	Felicity	SP	3/8/06	Wentworth	5	F	A	3-5	11-20	In service
15	Chris	SW	11/8/06	Wentworth	5	M	A	3-5	3-5	In service
16	Kate	SW	11/8/06	Wentworth	5	F	W	1-2	3-5	In service
17	Daphne	Sup W	11/8/06	Wentworth	2	F	W	<1	n/a	Left Service
18	Kevin	TM	17/10/06	Ridgeways	n/a	M	W	11-20	11-20	Left CP but in LA

The sampling approach incorporated grounded theory principle of 'saturation' (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998) where I did not have a pre-determined number of interview participants. This sampling strategy served to refine my emerging theoretical basis, within its flexible approach. Analytic interpretations developed through the data informed further data collection, which then informed and refined the developing theoretical analyses (Charmaz in Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

I determined that no significantly new data was generated after the 18th interview participant. I anticipated this would be close to the number I would conduct but was receptive to the possibility of conducting more. However, this was a challenging principle to apply in participant observation. This time consuming and sometimes exhausting method required negotiation and organisation with senior managers in North City. Whilst I am satisfied that, in the main, saturation point was reached in this method, I would have liked the opportunity to observe the 'retained' team in Ridgeways before they were relocated to Wentworth. This would have given me an opportunity to consider specific dynamics, make comparisons to the retained team in Wentworth, and check data against study themes.

This approach underpinned the decision to consider nominal group technique (NGT) (see Chapters 5.3.4 and 8) with senior managers as the sample. I was interested to establish insight into senior managers' perspectives on recruitment and retention problems and believed this would give a sense of balance to the study. The sample selected for the NGT was both 'convenient' and 'opportunistic' (Silverman 2010) as I was able to attend a senior team managers' away day in order to conduct the session. Supervision provided by the North City Strategic and Operational Manager helped justify the convenience sampling strategy because arranging a separate event for senior managers would have been problematic, due to constraints on their time. The sample was also purposive because the target group was senior managers (Silverman 2010). It is noted that two team managers (outside the senior management range of grades) attended this event because front line representatives were required for regular away day activities. Once agreed, an explanatory document (see appendix O) was emailed to each senior

manager informing of NGT as a research approach, and included a detailed list of processes.

NGT participants represented all managerial grades from team manager (n=2) up to, and including the head of service within the North City directorate (n=26) providing a total sample headcount of 28. This method is described in detail in section 5.3.4.

This section has presented the theoretical sampling strategies for each method where participants were involved. Data was collected over a six year period with most obtained from October 2005 to October 2006, through a range of methods: documentary analysis; direct observations; interviews; and nominal group technique. This involved staff across all grades within fieldwork practice in children's services in North City. The design incorporated the triangulation of methods for the purposes of data analysis. These are now individually discussed in the following section.

5.3   Methods in action

This qualitative study used between-method triangulation (Denzin 1989: 237 - 41) aimed at "increasing scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings" (Flick 1998: 230). However, Fielding and Fielding (1986) state that while strategies of multiple triangulations can add breadth or depth to a study, they cannot alone make it more 'objective'. Indeed, "…no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable, triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen" (Smith in Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 148). Predominant qualitative methods are identified as interviews and observation, both of which were attractive to me as a social worker. I subsequently learnt of, and gained confidence from, the valuable transferable professional skills (Shaw and Gould 2001) associated with these research methods.

Participant diary keeping as a method of data collection was also considered as a valuable way of cross checking observation and interview data on an individual

participant basis, as well as at the team and location levels. However, this was deemed impractical for social work participants because they were deemed too busy to complete them. I therefore reluctantly rejected the method (see preparatory work in Appendices C, D and E). This was a disappointment because diaries appeared an attractive way to elicit expressions of personal life Plummer 2004). It is argued that diaries are among a group of research tools "…widely ignored and neglected in both research texts and courses, which have enormous potential for exploring concrete social experience in humanistic fashion"...(Plummer 2004: 288). Bryman also noted the value in the researcher-driven diary when the research questions are very specifically concerned with aspects of people's behaviour (Bryman 2001: 139). I believe these would be worth exploring further in future social work research despite implications on participant time.

5.3.1   Desktop review of local data

Eborall and Garmeson (2001) employed desktop research where documentation is reviewed to elicit contributory information linked to recruitment and retention in social care and social work. This included documentary analysis of wide-ranging human resource data specific to the employer in each case. A similar approach was considered necessary in this study to enable me to illustrate and contextualise recruitment and retention within North City. I was particularly interested in making national comparisons with recruitment and retention statistics. This case study design was aimed to be analytically, rather than statistically, representative (Yin 2008). However, in order to achieve a more holistic picture of the complex reality of the ecology of practice within North City children's services, desktop research methods were employed to elicit statistical data through documentary analysis (see findings in Chapter 6).

Supervisory arrangements with the senior North City manager, and observational methods provided access to wide-ranging recruitment and retention documentation from 1999 to 2006 that confirmed and contextualised local recruitment and retention problems.

A particular frustration within this review was my inability to obtain documents relating to exit interviews for un-retained staff. Two senior managers indicated the information existed because some leavers were interviewed; however neither manager could locate the material.

Other documents considered for analysis were social worker case notes. However, through discussion within academic supervision this was rejected despite being of personal interest, because as a social worker with professional experience within similar settings, I already had an appreciation of the general nature of the work involved (later reinforced by interviews and observations). On reflection, I believe this to have been a helpful decision because case recording on service user files is conducted by social workers with a specific purpose that does not necessarily reflect personal views that impact on recruitment and retention issues, although these views might be indirectly referred to, for example, a lack of resources for service user provision.

5.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

In its broadest sense, interviewing is a common and powerful way in which people can be understood and is reflected in what Atkinson and Silverman (1997) and Silverman (1993) refer to as 'the interview society' (Fontana and Frey 2003: 63). As a research method this approach offers flexibility in data collection, allowing the interviewee to explore personal thoughts and feelings, whilst remaining on the relevant topics of interest (Kvale 1996) and is a valuable strategy for discovery of social phenomena (Fielding and Thomas 2001) and some degree of biographical description (Fontana and Frey 2003).

I concluded that a semi-structured interview approach was the most effective technique where, crucially, the process offers flexibility and the interviewee has freedom in how to reply (Bryman 2001: 313). The interviewer inevitably decides how closely to follow the guide, and additional questions outside of the schedule may be asked. Although structured interviews often elicit rational responses they

are considered to fail to account for emotional dimensions (Fontana and Frey 2003: 70) anticipated in this study.

As indicated, semi-structured interviews are extremely flexible because they allow for changes to be made, and for further examination of any issues as they arise. Few resources are required for the interview process other than a suitable room, the voluntary participants, notebook and pens, and a good quality recording device. Interviews are often well attended because they are prearranged around participants; attrition rates are therefore usually less when compared to techniques such as questionnaires (Denscombe 1998). Perhaps the most distinct advantage of this method is the ability to obtain richness and depth in the information gained. The process of prompting and probing, reflection, and subsequent member checking (Janesick 1998) means the interviewer can often obtain a depth of information that demonstrates feelings, beliefs, insight, and knowledge reflecting the participant's reality that questionnaires often cannot provide (Kvale 1996). Denscombe (1998) advised that the quality of data obtained would often depend on the thorough completion of each stage in the interview process. These include:

- consideration of interviewer's gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and ability and whether personal identity will impede/influence open and honest responses
- gaining authorisation to conduct the interviews from the appropriate authorities
- gaining informed consent from interviewees
- gaining the use of suitable accommodation for the interviews (privacy, low noise, no interruptions)
- allowing for time of interviews and subsequent transcription and data analysis
- consideration of appropriate presentation of interviewer (Denscombe 1998: 121)

Semi-structured interviews may also be conducted over the telephone or in groups. Telephone interviews can help save time if meeting the interviewee is a problem and therefore increase the geographical sample. However, these were rejected because non-verbal communication through body language is lost and this limits the amount of data gathered. It is also more difficult for the interviewer to assess how much is understood by the interviewee (Kvale 1996).

The constructivist approach identifies the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection, in the interpretation through analysis, and construction of knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2006; Punch 2000; Silverman 2005). The interviewer therefore plays a key role in this process regardless of where on the structured – unstructured continuum the design dictates. The skills of the interviewer are therefore an essential resource, not to be underestimated (Kvale 1996).

Qualitative data has been described as an 'attractive nuisance' by Miles (1979) because of the richness of information and the difficulties involved in its analysis. Qualitative interviews are not therefore without challenges and limitations, perhaps the biggest drawback being the length of time taken to, collect, transcribe, prepare and analyse the data (Kvale 1996). Transcribed data is often lengthy and not in a standardised format, especially when compared to questionnaires, which provide standardised data that can be more easily analysed and presented. This may have an impact on resources, especially where participants are geographically spread.

Denscombe (1998) also identifies interviewer effect as a disadvantage because the personal identity of the interviewer may influence what the interviewee *says*. This may contrast with what the person actually *does* in reality, thereby adversely effecting reliability of the data collected because consistency and objectivity are more difficult to achieve. Additionally, some issues can cause considerable upset to the participants, which if handled inappropriately by the interviewer can have significant ethical implications.

Chapter 5 - Fieldwork

As previously stated semi-structured interviews produce raw data in the form of tape recordings (if recording has been possible) and written notes. Audio recording is considered important because of the difficulties involved in conducting the interview whilst note taking. Notes are valuable in helping to interpret responses and include observations of body language.

Drever (1995) describes three stages in analysis of the interviews:

- Data Preparation - tidying up the raw data
- Analysis - categorising and reorganising the prepared data, considering patterns relating to the research questions
- Summarising Results - using patterns to develop conclusions.

Silverman (2005) considers analysis as being fluid in nature, conducted throughout the duration of the research process. Whilst transcribing raw taped interview data is time-consuming, an accurate reflection of the words used increases validity. This is therefore reduced the more the transcription is summarised. A more detailed consideration of analysis of qualitative interview data is considered alongside that of observational data in section 4.7.

The process of consideration of the interview method within a qualitative paradigm, combined with the literature highlighted in Chapter 3, provided adequate justification for the adoption of the semi-structured interview method in the pilot study (see appendix A) and subsequently within the eventual study design. The group interview method was also considered, and finally adopted in the form of Nominal Group Technique and is discussed in section 5.3.4.

A list produced by Kvale (1996) and supplemented by Bryman (2004) provided a useful framework for self-analysis in my ability to conduct effective interviews and is reproduced as follows:

- **"Knowledgeable**: is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview; pilot interviews of the kind used in survey interviewing can be useful here.

- **Structuring**: gives purpose for interview; rounds it off; asks whether interviewee has questions.

- **Clear**: asks simple, easy, short questions; no jargon.

- **Gentle**: let people finish; gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.

- **Sensitive**: listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic when dealing with the interviewee.

- **Open**: responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.

- **Steering**: Knows what he/she wants to find out.

- **Critical**: is prepared to challenge what is said, for example, dealing with inconsistencies in interviewees' replies.

- **Remembering**: relates what is said to what has previously been said.

- **Interpreting**: clarifies and extends meaning of interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them".

Bryman adds:

- **"Balanced**: does not talk too much, which may make the interviewee passive, and does not talk too little, which may result in the interviewee feeling he or she is not talking along the right lines.

- **Ethically sensitive**: is sensitive to the ethical dimension of interviewing, ensuring the interviewee appreciates what the research is about, its purposes, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially".

(Bryman 2004: 325).

The aim of the research interviews was to gain participant thoughts, feelings, and emotions by avoiding a strict format of questions and the researcher allowing the interviewee the space, time, and opportunity to think and communicate such insight more freely. An interview guide is an instrument used by the researcher to provide standardisation of approach (Kvale 1996). This was deemed necessary for the semi-structured design in this study and included prompts relating to the research question (see below). Questions were generally of a similar nature for each interviewee, although a degree of flexibility was employed to allow for expression of themes, thoughts and feelings that helped construct a picture of how participants viewed their social world (Kvale 1996). Crucially, interviewees had "a great deal of leeway in how to reply" and the process was flexible (Bryman 2001: 313). The pilot study helped focus, revise and refine the guide and highlighted omissions. As the interviewer, I inevitably decided how closely to follow the guide and what additional areas outside of the schedule were explored.

It is acknowledged that whilst some issues raised during the research interviews were not always anticipated, or deemed relevant, the original intention to adapt the interview guide through the cyclical interpretation was deemed unnecessary. This was because the data was consistently appropriate and relevant to the research question.

On reflection I was surprised at the conciseness of the guide and found that on reviewing Kvale's (1996) and Bryman's (2004) list above, that my transferable social work skills in interviewing upheld my competence and confidence in this method, contributing towards less reliance on following a comprehensive list. In this regard I had a good understanding of what I wanted to ask, whilst remaining comfortable with the aspect of participant freedom. The interview guide headings were as follows (see appendix K):

Figure 5.1 Interview guide

- *Personal relevance of recruitment and retention*

- *Personal journey into social work/experience*

- *Personal expectations*

- *Personal experiences*

- *Suggestions for improvement*

Interviews were arranged to take place in a quiet office within the worksite of employment. This was at the convenience of the interviewee to encourage participation and reduce attrition. Interviewees were given an option of an off-site location but this was never required. One interview was conducted at Sheffield Hallam University for the ex-North City employee.

Three interviews were interrupted, each of these being with a team manager, supporting their claims of how busy they were. One was interrupted three times, which created a particular challenge with 'flow'.

Interviews were often emotive and involved participants reflecting on, and reporting painful experiences. A debrief was therefore conducted informally once the end of each interview had been confirmed, where interviewee wellbeing was checked. On one occasion the interview was suspended while the interviewee recovered from recalling an experience of being victimised and bullied by the employer. We left the interview room and had a cup of tea and recommenced once the interviewee convinced me that she was happy to do so.

Each interview was tape-recorded and written notes were occasionally made. Additional notes were often made immediately after each interview describing personal thoughts and feelings about context and process. Interviews were fully transcribed and emailed to each participant to read and review if necessary with an opportunity for any changes to be discussed and agreed upon where a need arises (Kvale 1996).

5.3.3 Overt participant observation

Observational methods of research originated in social anthropology in the Chicago School of social research, particularly Robert Park in the 1920s and 1930s and Zorbaugh (1929), as a way of studying ever changing social phenomena (May 2001: 147 and Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 158). May (2001: 147) defines the method as follows, "…to listen, observe and experience and to expose theories and biographies to new and unfamiliar social surroundings and relations, with a view to enhancing an understanding of them".

An intention of the study was to observe as many aspects of social work practice as possible in order to capture patterns of behaviour within children's services that contributed towards problems with recruitment and retention. The literature and my personal social work experience informed me that decisions to stay or leave the service were influenced by a range of 'cross-factor' issues. Social work assistants, social workers, team managers, service managers, and more senior managers agreed on the personal relevance of recruitment and retention issues; that they were problematic, and needed to be thoroughly researched. The high level of interest fed my enthusiasm to gather data by observing practice within the workplace. I anticipated that I would enjoy the experience, especially as I reminisced about my old social work team and the 'buzz' associated with front line practice.

Observation is a research technique widely used across the spectrum of positivist and empiricist paradigms, what Adler and Adler (1994: 389) referred to as "the fundamental base of all research methods". How the technique is employed and under which methodological stance is important in determining the appropriateness of its adoption as a method of data collection. Having made the distinction between methodological approaches in section 4.3, and identifying this research as using a case study design strategy (see section 4.2), the value in the traditionally ethnographic method of participant observation was considered particularly strong. In reflection of how the boundaries around methodology can appear unclear

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argued that all social researchers were participant observers. However, as discussed, Yin (2008) highlighted that whilst the case study approach is necessarily bound by context and time; mixed methods of data collection were often used.

Junker (1960) (in Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) provided a model for the theoretical roles for fieldwork in ethnography, which helped frame the stance taken within my role as an observer within this case study. As illustrated, the role ranges from 'complete participant' to 'complete observer' (see Figure: 5.2).

Figure 5.2   Theoretical social roles for fieldwork

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(Junker 1960 in Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 104).

An initial aim was towards the 'complete observer' side in order to reduce bias and minimise over-rapport, and increase objectivity "intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness… and…socially…poised between stranger and friend" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 112). Robson (2002) explained that observation is commonly used in the "…*exploratory phase* to find out what is going on in a situation as a precursor to subsequent testing out of the insights obtained. For this

purpose, the *unobtrusive observation* approach is most appropriate" (Robson 2002: 311-312). Defining characteristics of unobtrusive observation are that it is non-participatory and is usually unstructured and informal.

I found the 'complete observer' (Gold 1958) particularly challenging during the pilot study as not interacting with people (being unobtrusive) felt uncomfortable. I also predicted it to be counterproductive and limiting in my research opportunities. This also contradicted my need to build rapport and would only have rendered me a 'stranger'. Additionally, I planned to attend court and home visits with social workers, which was not possible under the notion of complete observer. My professional social work status also instilled sensitivity to issues of child protection, in the sense that it sometimes shaped informal interviewing and probing (although my direct intervention was never required). So, despite the appeal of *doing* social work, my role as participant observer would remain passive, rather than active (Van Maanen 1978, in Bryman 2001).

Overt participant observation was therefore considered to be a valuable way to triangulate data collection and contextualise individual responses provided during interviews, but also within the observations themselves. The literature helped underpin my awareness of the potential influence over people observed and need to consciously minimise this in order to increase the validity of the data (Bryman, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 2004).

Worksites identified in Table 5.3 were targeted through negotiation with my senior manager supervisor. My key aim in this approach was to provide a unique insight through the window of the world of front line social work practice into North City's children's services. Shaw and Gould (2001: 18) provided social work specific research reassurance in my approach with their claim that "…ethnography sets in the foreground the liberating or constraining features of everyday life, the particularities of culture, and above all an emphasis on context…". The focus on recruitment and retention remained of constant significance throughout.

Chapter 5 - Fieldwork

During the supervisory relationship I was occasionally informed of organisational change prior to publication to front line staff. This helped with planning and it was therefore important for confidentiality on my part to be upheld; North City children's services were experiencing major transitions and I did not wish to provide potential for an additional source of anxiety for social work staff at what was predicted to be a particularly stressful time. Children's Social Services became Children and Young People's Directorate and merged with Education as part of the national change agenda following publication of the Children Act 2004 and the Every Child Matters programme.

Firthport area office was accessed first because it was considered to be relatively stable and I was advised would be a good preparation for what might be a more challenging experience at the two floors of Wentworth House area office located in a city centre tower block. This was followed by observations at Ridgeways located on the opposite side of the city to Firthport and comparatively similar in size and structure. Three weeks were planned for each worksite but this was to remain flexible according to whether saturation point was reached with the data (Silverman 2004). The previous Table 5.1 in section 5.2 presents the duration of observation totalling 36 days.

The pilot study helped in the development of the following set of guiding questions used to help focus the observational data collection:

- What is the working environment for CSD social workers?

- What issues impact on day-to-day job satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

- How do social workers *work*?

- Why are the social workers being observed still working for North City CSD?

- What coping strategies are employed?

- To what degree are recruitment and retention issues relevant to front line workers?

- Banter: what lies beneath?

- What may influence improvements?

During the fieldwork, Spradley's (1979) suggestion of four separate sets of notes was initially followed:

- Short notes taken at the time.

- Expanded notes made as soon as possible after each field session.

- A field work journal to record problems and ideas that arise during each stage of fieldwork – reflection tool.

- A provisional running record of analysis and interpretation (Kirk and Miler 1986 in Silverman 2005).

Initial scratch notes were expanded on at the end of each day of observation, as they were evaluated and transferred into typed form using Microsoft Word. This allowed for more thorough notes of observations, including recall of additional material, analysis of the situation and my personal thoughts and feelings. It was important these notes were made at the end of each day, as memory fades and the account becomes less accurate (Robson 2002: 324). My pilot experience prepared me for the mentally and physically demanding nature of this method. I therefore welcomed the suggestion from my academic supervisor that I might attempt to use a laptop computer onto which scratch notes could be directly recorded. The flexibility of the case study approach enabled me to make use of knowledge gained from the process to inform the next stage of data collection. This method was used throughout the remaining observation sites and saved much time in transcribing basic notes.

However, time was still required at the end of each day to expand these notes and record reflections. The predominant advantage in using the laptop was the general convenience during the actual observational stage and knowing that an electronic source was already prepared on which to work and expand. I believe this also

assisted the coding process because of the flexibility in cutting and pasting and editing and re-editing when compared to using pens and paper.

A particular challenge was the need for what Egan (2002: 81) referred to as 'effective listening' where it was necessary to process what was actually being said whilst musing on what was possibly missing. It was therefore important to balance this with not wanting to 'put words into the mouths' of participants that were not concurrent with their beliefs or intentions. This became easier the more I was able to appreciate the personalities of the participants. Initially, it seemed necessary to focus on building trust and rapport with participants. I empathised and behaved in a manner that I would have appreciated as a social worker being observed. This involved me being courteous, respectful, and discrete. As Stake suggested, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (2003: 154). I aimed to ensure that I did not impede in any way on professional practice.

The general practical method adopted during observations was what I referred to as a 'butterfly approach' where I discretely 'flitted' from office to office, team to team, desk to desk, as light-footed as possible in an attempt to remain relatively inconspicuous and easy to ignore. This was not always possible and I found the more people became comfortable with me and the more accepted I became, I would be drawn into team-wide discussion whether social work related, or not.

An aspect of the observational process that developed less favourably was that of observing social workers and their service users. The original proposal was to shadow practitioners during home visits, meetings, and court work, and whilst each of these were conducted, this was only very rare. In all, three home visits, one formal team meeting, one office-based service user meeting, and one court hearing were attended. I encountered a general reluctance for practitioners to allow this level of access into their work. I accepted this as the general case during observations at the second worksite and decided against pursuing this particular line of observation, focussing on experiences within the work site.

Reasoning behind participant reluctance was often openly described to me as the nature of the visit/intervention, and the fragility or dynamic of the social worker/service user relationship. The underpinning reason for my reluctance to persist in requesting to attend such visits and meetings was my generally perceived practitioner unwillingness to expose this level of intimacy of practice. This perception was reinforced by occasional comments made with casual reference to my role as a 'spy'. On reflection, I believe that despite having a good rapport with participants, and honorary insider status, my perceived role as a relatively unknown interested colleague rendered me an 'outsider'. Once I accepted this as the nature of the observation, I drew reassurance that I had maintained the necessary balance to gain observational material from within the arena where anecdotal evidence suggests 80 per cent of social worker time is reportedly spent in the office.

Interviews were arranged during each observational period and conducted soon afterward with participants from the worksite just observed. This ensured the site-specific observational data, emergent themes and topics were easier to recall and triangulate.

5.3.4 Nominal group technique

A significant chance factor (Silverman 2010) within this study was that I shared an office with a leading researcher in forensic podiatry, and expert in consensus methods including Delphi technique and nominal group technique (NGT). Through academic debate and sharing of research experiences, it became apparent that NGT would enhance this study and add a somewhat unique quality. Firstly, this consensus approach is often used with key stakeholders within organisational research. Secondly, the mixed method design produces qualitative and quantitative data time-efficiently and cost effectively (including immediate dissemination of findings), making it attractive to researcher and participant organisations alike (Gordon and Hamer 2004; Vernon 2005). Thirdly, the literature review indicated only two international social work studies using the nominal group technique had been published. I have also assisted in one small, unpublished UK

study using NGT with social workers. This final point appealed to me because of the unique opportunity to apply a rarely used technique within social work research, in addition to the anticipated usefulness of the data to senior manager participants.

In order to describe NGT is it helpful to identify its origins in the Delphi technique. Dalkey, Helmer and Rescher of the RAND Corporation first devised Delphi in the early 1950's. It involves the completion of rounds of questionnaires by a group of key experts within a specific field (frequently Health). Features of the Delphi technique include anonymity, feedback, statistical group response (Dalkey 1967), use of informed respondents (Miles-Tapping et al. 1990) and group consensus (Grant and Kinney 1992). A particular strength in Delphi is the ability to "sweep rich sources of experiential data" (Mitroff and Turoff 2002: 22) and represents a prime example of Lockean inquiry (see further discussion on this below).

The literature in Chapters 2 and 3 indicates the depth of problems associated with recruitment and retention, social worker dissatisfaction, government attempts of reform and a dearth of senior manager insight.

"The focus of consensus methods lies where unanimity of opinion does not exist owing to lack of scientific evidence or where there is contradictory evidence on an issue. The methods attempt to assess the extent of agreement (consensus measurement) and to resolve disagreement (consensus development)" (Jones and Hunter, 1995).

Jones and Hunter's (1995) description of consensus methods indicates their potential to address the research questions in this study. Whilst the Delphi technique involves anonymity and rounds of questionnaires, NGT offers the opportunity for personal interaction and dissemination within the research process. The advantages of this outweighed the limitation that NGT may inhibit some participants (Vernon 2005). Though possible, I believed this less likely given the professional status of the participants.

Delbecq and van de Ven (1971) first described NGT as an approach to facilitate effective group decision-making within social psychology and it has since been used within organisational research across a range of services (predominantly Health in the UK (Vernon 2005)). Gordon and Hamer (2004) cite the three most typical applications of NGT as problem identification, development of solutions and establishing priorities. As the following table (5.4) suggests, NGT provides perceived advantages over other group decision making processes.

Table 5.23 A Comparison of Group Decision Making Processes

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(Gordon and Hamer 2004: 127)

NGT uses a structured approach that the researcher is advised to follow. This appealed because of my lack of experience in using the method, and involves the following five-stage procedure:

1   Introduction and explanation
2   Silent generation of ideas in relation to the problem (participants working alone)
3   Sharing ideas (between participants)
4   Group discussion (new ideas generated but none eliminated)
5   Voting and ranking (consensus reached and disseminated to group)

(Adapted from Gordon and Hamer 2004: 128)

This is not to imply the structure reduces the challenges involved, as in practice the method proved especially demanding in terms of effective communication, analysis, member checking, rapport, organisation and working within timescales. Differences of opinion and active debate are encouraged within the approach and a degree of control by the researcher, afforded by participants, is therefore also essential.

An additional consideration that provided convincing sway in the application of NGT was the ability to engage directly with senior and middle managers within North City in a way that had not previously been perceived possible. I anticipated the method would produce valuable data from key informants, identified as service managers, operational managers, and the head of service across the whole service provision of North City, including business support. The event would also place recruitment and retention issues at the forefront of their collective concern for at least the duration of the research process.

The NGT event followed the set process in adherence with the research method and ensured the method would be completed (from data collection to presentation of findings) within the negotiated half-day deadline within a senior managers' group away day in July 2006.

A detailed process for the NGT event was produced following two additional consultations with my previously mentioned expert colleague, and correspondence with an additional expert in this field from another university (see appendix O)

Whilst Gordon and Hamer (2004) considered between 6 and 8 participants were ideal for this approach, 28 actually attended the NGT event. I had originally arranged to be supported by my NGT expert colleague who was unexpectedly only able to attend for half an hour to assist in counting votes in Part 5 of the process. I found this particularly challenging and on two occasions, out of my depth, and appreciated one senior manager who provided assistance on each occasion. Whilst it was always a possibility that so many participants would attend, my North City supervisor believed this to be unlikely with an anticipated headcount of around 18. I had previously been reassured by each of my NGT contacts and the literature that, although not ideal, larger numbers could successfully be involved in the NGT (Gordon and Hamer 2004).

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) cite the depth of researcher skills involved during group interviews in order to account for group dynamics. These skills were tested throughout the use of NGT, and especially when one senior manager did not appear to take the research exercise seriously, randomly ticking his vote of choice and sat back in his chair with his arms behind his head. His voting paper was regarded as 'spoiled' and therefore discarded when the votes were counted. I ensured I located the sheet by tracking it during my collection.

'Sloppy execution', is identified by Linstone (2002) as the fifth of eight basic pitfalls in the Delphi method (2002: 568). Both the researcher and participants can have responsibility for problems here. The researcher could be responsible for poor participant selection where the group is either too agreeable (*or too large*). Beneficence may be lost through poor interaction where participants resent being used to educate the researcher.

Superficial analysis of responses is the most common weakness in this approach. It is noted that group consensus can be based on "differing, or even opposing, assumptions; they might also be subject to sudden changes with the passage of time" (Linstone 2002: 568). The need for immediate dissemination of findings from the process helps to address this particular concern. To reiterate Hammersley and Attkinson's (1995) notion of researcher skill, communication between researcher and participants is therefore central to the avoidance of this pitfall and to the effectiveness of the method. Sloppiness on the part of the participant includes the need to 'get it over with' and hastily given responses without adequate thought.

Linstone's full list of all eight basic pitfalls is illustrated below. Each pitfall provided valuable insight into how the novice NGT researcher might make the best of the consensus approach.
:

1. Discounting the future
2. The prediction urge
3. The simplification urge
4. Illusory expertise
5. Sloppy execution
6. Optimism: Pessimism bias
7. Overselling
8. Deception

(Linstone 2002)

On completion of the NGT I was encouraged at being congratulated by some participants for using such an engaging method and one that involved such timely presentation of findings. Also, my colleague and NGT expert reinforced how positively I had handled the challenge of using the method with such a large group. Templates, correspondence, and vote forms including calculations associated with this method are presented in Appendix O for audit purposes.

"…one would be hard pressed to find a better contemporary example of a Lockean inquirer than the Delphi (Mitroff and Turoff 2002: 20).

The mixed method nature of the data collected within NGT may be perceived to conflict with my constructivist ontological and interpretivist stance. However, the philosophy of consensus methods is wholly compatible as indicated by Mitroff and Turoff (2002) above. Lockean perspectives derived from the notion of 'self' and 'tabula rasa', posit that the mind is an empty slate shaped by experiences (sensations and reflections). Truth is therefore experiential where validity of simple observations is based on agreement between different human observers (The American International Encyclopedia 1954; Mitroff and Turoff 2002). The nominal group technique derived from Delphi is therefore concerned with gaining insight through consensus into the real world of its participants, enabling them to make practical use of its findings. This resonates with the Marxist principle that the purpose of science is not merely to interpret the world in various ways, but to change it. The statistics generated within the NGT are considered descriptive and enable key stakeholders to communicate findings in a language that is widely understood by policy makers Vernon (2005).

5.4   Analysis of data

Robson (2002) has indicated that no prescriptive formula exists for the analysis of qualitative data. However, he advised a rigorous and disciplined approach despite the lack of clear guidance although countered with the need to avoid being overly mechanistic (Robson 2002). The main task is that of data reduction and then to display the data to aid in drawing conclusions (Robson 2002). Strauss (1987) suggested guidelines for coding of categories within the qualitative data that contributes to the reductionist approach. Effective analysis therefore extracts typical and atypical notes and quotes to avoid too idiosyncratic an approach (Hallett 1995). Value judgements are necessary in this process, increasing the influence of bias and reliability (Silverman 2010). As previously acknowledged, subjective judgement is an inescapable part of this study.

This is not to suggest that analysis is a separate event conducted at the end of data collection, as it is necessary to recognise the inter-related nature of the collection and analysis (Silverman 2010). Silverman (2010) emphasised the 'pervasive' nature of analysis throughout research. It should not be considered as a separate entity to be conducted once data has been collected and before writing up begins. This highlights the fluidity of the research process and the need to be flexible and well organised. Also key is an ability to shift between considering research methodology and the data available. Silverman (2010: 219) suggested three ways of beginning analysis.

- "Analyse data already in the public sphere.
- Beg or borrow other people's data.
- Seek advice from your supervisor.
- Analyse your own data as you gather them.
- Ask key questions about your data".

Gilgun (1994) considered the main aids for effective content analysis are coding, observer/interview comments, memos, previous research and theory. The issue of coding is most relevant to this study because of the volume of rich data produced by transcribed tape-recorded interviews and observation notes. Developing themes, topics, and concepts that emerged during the pilot study were coded as part of the analysis process. Silverman (2010) emphasised the importance of ensuring the established set of categories are precise enough for other researchers conducting analysis with the same data would arrive at the same findings. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2003) suggested analysis is enhanced through the flexible and heuristic strategies of grounded theory within the constructivist paradigm which include:

- simultaneous collection and analysis of data
- a two-step coding process
- comparative methods
- memo writing aimed at the construction of conceptual analyses

- sampling to refine the researcher's emerging theoretical ideas, and

- integration of the theoretical framework

(Glasier and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003).

An inductive approach was adopted, although it is acknowledged, as Kidder and Judd (1986) state, this is rarely exclusively the case in research. Whilst I did not have a pre-formed hypothesis or set of theories for interpreting my data, the literature suggested grounded theory would be an appropriate approach to data analysis. The intention was for the case study participants to provide their story of their experience of social work, from which theories could subsequently be achieved.

Case study analysis involves collecting the data from multiple sources, where a detailed description of the case, the analysis of themes, and an interpretation about the context of the case emerges (Cresswell 1998). A challenge arises in managing the volume of data and avoiding being overwhelmed (Kvale 1996). Principles of grounded theory were used in that data was analysed as it was gathered which then shaped the data collection process (Bryman 2004). This was supported by the intertwining design of the observations and interviews whilst the time between allowed for reflection and consideration of the research questions.

5.4.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is a term first conceived by Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966) used to describe the multiple use of independent measurement processes to reduce uncertainty of interpretation. This was born out of the ideas of Campbell and Fiske (1959) who demonstrated how multiple research methods could increase validity. Patton added that triangulation involves a combination of

"…multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources" to "overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single-observer and single-theory studies" (Patton, 1990: 464). Denzin (1978) identified three outcomes of triangulation: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction. The prevailing

outcome allows the researcher to "construct superior explanations of the observed social phenomena" Johnson et al. (2007: 115).

Source triangulation was used to increase validity and credibility of the research. Interview, observational and nominal group technique data was compared at different times against theories of recruitment and retention in social work literature. Emergent topics and themes were compared across sources and checked for compatibility until I established the key themes of: feelings of front line social workers, coping strategies, relationships, perception, communication, emotions and the emotive nature of social work. I was mindful that adopting different vantage points should not impede the ability for me to also see incompatibilities (Birley and Moreland 1998).

5.4.2 Using computers in analysis

Computers in social research are most often associated with quantitative methodology and largely confined to statistical work (Silverman 2010). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis or CAQDAS (Lee and Fielding 1991) is widely considered to be one of the most significant developments in qualitative research in recent years (Bryman 2001). Computer technology was used throughout this study. In the initial stage, in identifying literature, note keeping, and writing; in the data collection stage for record keeping, continued literature reviewing, and writing; and in the latter stage where data analysis was of key focus. All word processing in the production of the study was conducted using *Microsoft Word* software. However, *Word* was also used in the analysis of observational and interview data as all interview transcriptions and observation notes were saved as *Word* documents. This enabled the safe and convenient storage of digitalised data as well as opportunities for manipulation. 'Cut and paste' and 'Highlight' commands were frequently used in conjunction with the 'Find' command in order to code and group sections of data into themes and topics. I found this relatively straightforward but somewhat unwieldy due to the volume of raw data.

A one-day training course was undertaken in June 2005 on the use of *NVivo* software in order to enhance computer-assisted data analysis. Being computer-

literate and having a keen interest in computer technology I embraced the opportunity and *Word* documents were imported into *NVivo* and further analysis was conducted. Of particular appeal was the prospect of maximising transparency in my doctoral thesis (Bringer, Johnson and Brackenridge 2004).

However, I encountered difficulties in using the software when compared to *Word* and felt that the depth of knowledge required to gain most benefit from *NVivo* was beyond my capabilities at that time. I could not dedicate the necessary prolonged blocks of time to this process. I also questioned the additional benefits and potential in using *NVivo* over *Word,* gaining reassurance that Stanley and Temple (1995) and more recently Hahn (2008) had also highlighted this observation. My apprehension was also reinforced by my concern that without the acquisition of new and necessary skills I might somehow jeopardise the data. Gilbert (2002) in Bazeley (2007: 7) noted "…the reliability, or trustworthiness, of results obtained depends on the skill of the user in both executing method and using software. The danger for novices using a sophisticated tool is that they can 'mess up' without realizing they have done so".

On reflection, further opportunity to gain the necessary skills and knowledge in order to maximise the potential for CAQDAS, such as *NVivo* would be of personal interest as this represented something of a personal failure for me within the study and a source of frustration. Clearly, the software cannot replace the researcher's organisational and analytical skills required in qualitative data analysis but as a tool to enhance speed and rigour (Silverman 2010: 254) it has its advantages that warrant further exploration.

5.4.3 Process of analysis

I argue that quantification conducted in this study does not compromise my methodological paradigm of social constructivism (Cresswell 1998). Whilst I rejected positivism as a means of answering my research questions (see Chapter 4) analysis and reproduction of secondary data relating to recruitment and retention statistics, and production of a more illuminating 'real time' vacancy rate during the desktop review of secondary data, were conducted for illustrative and

contextual purposes. Likewise, the number of occurrences of laughter during interviews was identified to help illustrate my surprise at the frequency, and more importantly, the relevance of humour within stressful situations. I eventually connected this concept to the theme of coping. Quantitative data therefore served to help me describe in more detail the picture within North City (Stake 2003 and Yin 2008). This corresponds with my previous discussion on NGT in section 5.3.4.

Riessman (2004) identified four types of narrative analysis: thematic, structural, interactional and performance. Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate because it focuses on *what* is said by participants rather than *how* it is said. Although this approach is frequently adopted in qualitative research (Bryman 2004) it is criticised for the threat to context caused by the cut and paste process involved in the coding, grouping and theme development of the data. I countered the risk of fragmentation (Riessman 1993) by ensuring that carefully labelled duplicate copies of material were prepared specifically for the cutting and pasting stage. The original transcripts and notes therefore remained fully intact in both hard and electronic versions. This enabled me to return to check for context by reading around identified topics whenever necessary. Re-checking of data back in its original context was fundamental to the analysis and was especially helpful in the theme construction described in Chapter 7.2. The concept of 'labelling' of participants was an aspect of data analysis that I believed necessary but was one that presented some difficulty.

Reflection on analysis:

The idea of 'labelling' interviewees was initially problematic in an ethical sense because as a social worker I understood how it is linked to the concept of oppression (Becker 1963; Goffman 1959). Despite my initial reservations I realised I could successfully apply labels without oppressing participants because of the ethical considerations made in my preparation, including upholding confidentiality. I also found practical problems in labelling participants as a researcher. Each participant displayed positivity and negativity, yet I wished to apply either one quality or the other to their outlook. Despite the challenges in doing this I believe my judgement was carefully considered and based on a thorough analysis of the source material I had gathered.

Use of both interview and observational data enhanced my confidence in the judgements I made within the labelling approach and helped me appreciate the complexity involved in the coding of data. I also hoped to enliven the thesis by enabling the reader 'get to know' the participants by providing my judgements about typology as an addition to the demographics. On reflection it would have been interesting to know participants' thoughts about my judgements and how they might perceive their own typology, or indeed a 'type' at all. Further research could consider applying this member-checking technique to elicit deeper insight, which could enhance the contextual considerations for the findings. Presentation of both researcher and participant could then be compared and contrasted.

The initial process of interview data analysis involved reading notes, listening to recordings, transcribing interviews and reading transcriptions. Initial analysis of observational data involved reading and expanding scratch notes. This was particularly time-consuming and an opportunity to reflect on, and develop, the emergent topics and themes. These were considered against the research questions, themes extracted from a range of sources, namely, previous literature, the pilot study and the interview and observational guides developed from the pilot study. I considered using a three heading approach of: Individual; Group/team; Organisational and Political developed by Wagner, van Reyk and Spence (2001) in their Australian study of organisational environment for child welfare workers. However, further reading directed me back to the eventual analytic framework adopted by Baumann et al. (1997) using the following headings: Case, Individual, Organisation and External as presented in Chapter 6.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage model was used to guide my analysis. The stages are as follows:

Phase 1: Becoming familiar with your data

Phase 2: Creating initial codes

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 6: Producing the report

A surprisingly enjoyable, yet draining and laborious, aspect of the study was found within the coding stage of data analysis. As mentioned, two copies of each transcribed interview and all expanded observational notes were printed off as hard copies. A degree of pleasure was found in having a tangible copy of the words constructed through the research. Interviews were then re-read at least three times each, but usually around six. Audio tape recordings were listened to more frequently because I was able to play them whilst driving, at my work office and within my home settings. Pulling over to the side of the road whilst driving and listening the audio cassettes in order to note a particular insight or moment of realisation was sometimes necessary; so much so that it became an anticipated part of the process. Coding was initially applied for almost each line of the transcripts and expanded notes. These were then assessed for commonalities and combined into more abstract codes (Charmaz 2004). I was able to cross-refer to original scratch notes taken at time of interviews and observations for additional perspective and context when needed.

Post-it notes and highlighter pens were used to code and recode which contributed to data reduction and the subsequent generation of topics and themes. Examples of codes that became increasingly important were: time, stress, ineffective/effective supervision, agency worker freedom, perception of agency workers, pay, environmental limitations and resources.

Having encountered difficulties during the study, contributing to delays in completion, I was able to re-connect with my participants. I also found that further connections and distinctions between methods were apparent that had not been previously found. For example, one senior practitioner appeared rather distant during observations and very rarely interacted with me at all. However, during her interview I gained great insight into her thoughts and feelings, and established that she was quite shy and more reserved working in the team setting. This helped me establish ideas about organisational masks and how workers conduct themselves

according to their environment. It also reinforced my desire to complete the study and crucially, fulfil my responsibility to disseminate my findings to North City staff. I applied my social work values and skills in the analytical process and ensured that context was not lost. The holistic picture of a situation helped with judgements being made sensitively (Trevithick 2005).

Reflection on analysis:

The creation of theory did not come naturally to me and this is a skill I have developed within my research journey. Again, I reflected back on my social work practice and the requirement to theorise and make judgements. This enabled me to reframe my thoughts and build confidence in my interpretation of the data, and the duty to share them with the various anticipated audiences for whom I write. The need to further inform the social work research community became increasingly important driver as my connection between the literature, and my data, became apparent. I found the process a stimulating one, despite my initial reservation about the bias effect of my theorising. Again I relied on Baumann et al.'s framework to help initiate the process. This helped me apply the coding, abstract coding, topic selection and theme identification and gave me the impetus to make the necessary decisions about the direction of the findings. I was reminded that my thinking about the role of the researcher had developed from one of being a voice for participants (although I maintain part of this remains the case) to one of having a responsibility to apply my own thoughts to the data and to develop these into theories for further consumption. This marked a significant step in my journey towards becoming an independent researcher.

5.5   Conclusion

This fieldwork chapter has presented issues of access, sampling, data analysis, and emphasis on the essential need for participant wellbeing in relation to ethics. The approach adopted is argued to contribute towards the quality and trustworthiness of this study. Reflections on some of the methodological lessons learnt within this study also provided insight into my personal development as a researcher.

The next three chapters present findings from the selected method for data collection and begin with the desktop review. This provides qualitative and quantitative data that contextualises recruitment and retention problems in North City, confirming vacancy and turnover rates are higher than national averages.

Chapter 6 - Desktop Review of Local Data

6.1   Introduction

The literature review demonstrates a general consensus that recruitment and retention in social work, especially in children's services, is a serious national problem, occurring for many reasons. I argued that despite the level of national concern and evidence of the associated effects on service users of not having enough social workers to fill vacancies, a dearth of first-hand academic observational research exists. Additionally, a lack of research has been conducted where the voice of senior managers is presented with specific reference to recruitment and retention. I also argued that a greater understanding of the relevant factors is gained through consideration of factors at: case, worker, organisational, and external levels. The previous chapter presented justification of methods used in this study based on my methodological stance and personal research paradigm. This chapter presents the findings using a desktop review method of analysis of local secondary data. I first provide context of these findings by briefly explaining the data collection process for this study.

Data was collected over a twelve-month period from October 2005 to October 2006, through a desktop review, direct observations, nominal group technique (NGT) and interviews that included staff across all grades within fieldwork practice with children's services. All data collection retained a clear focus on the key issues of recruitment and retention within North City, Children and Young People's Directorate. The 'case' and all participants are given pseudonyms in order to uphold anonymity and maintain confidentiality.

It is argued this case study and selection of methods provide a unique window into the little-known world of front-line social work. The resultant findings demonstrate how social workers are generally proud of, and positive about, the direct job they do; they recognise their significant contribution made at case, personal, organisational, and societal levels. To many, the aspirations held when they began social work training remained strong. However, these were often contrasted with

feelings of frustration, despondency, disempowerment and inability to meet their personal and professional aspirations consistently and effectively. Through an apparent failure to demonstrate effective and consistent workforce appreciation there lays an deep sense of feeling undervalued. Qualitative methods provided a rare opportunity to investigate how this negative force contributes to low morale, stress, poor health, disenfranchisement and attrition of workers within this demanding public sector employment.

The main findings of this case study are presented within three distinct, but closely connected chapters 6, 7 and 8. This first chapter presents findings from a desktop review of data from the following range of sources:

- A local Recruitment and Retention Strategy dated January 2003
- Local CSD Employee Opinion Survey Results from November 2005
- A local senior management report arguing for more local resources dated 12th September 2005
- Local human resources staffing data from 1999 to 2004 including vacancies from neighbouring local authority children's services.

These documents offer a local context to staffing issues as well as demographic data that is considered against national data provided in Chapter 2. A vacancy rate of 15.7 per cent for children's social workers is 3.9 per cent higher than the national average of 11.8 per cent (LGE 2005; CWDC 2008: 53). More detailed examination of the available statistics, however, allows for calculations that are arguably more realistic, and illuminating, and reflect the impact of long term sickness and actual social work posts covered. A 'real time' vacancy rate of 32.9 per cent (reduced to 25.2 per cent in 2006) is therefore presented for the four areas within the case and, whilst it is recognised long term sickness and actual posts covered are not included in the calculation of the national average, it represents an indicative increase of 21.1 per cent. A five-year average turnover rate of 17.3 per cent is also calculated using available local data. This is 4.9 per cent more than the national average over the same five-year period up to 2004.

The next chapter (7) combines findings from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 17 front-line children's workers across grades ranging from trainee social worker up to team manager, resulting from iterative, thematic analysis. An additional interview was conducted with one ex-children's social worker who left child protection work to work with young people within the same authority. Emerging topics and themes were carefully considered and are presented in order of significance to the participants, and underpinned with examples of observational field notes and verbatim interview quotations. The dominant theme of front-line children's services workers feeling undervalued was found, along with the following related themes were also established:

- coping strategies
- relationships
- perception and communication
- emotions and the emotive nature of child protection work

The third Findings Chapter (8) presents data collected using the Nominal Group Technique (Murphy et al. 1998) widely used within healthcare settings (Vernon 2005), but never previously used within academic social work research. Findings here concluded with a consensus of opinion on the top ten facilitators to deal with recruitment and retention problems by the senior management team of 28 conducted during the morning of a team away day on 12th October 2006.
The top ten facilitators in order of priority were:

1. pay and conditions
2. service configuration
3. career development
4. grow your own
5. resources
6. retrench – back to basics
7. work/life balance
8. modelling
9. human resoures support/infrastructure
= 10. celebrating success
= 10. consistency and equity

As explained, this current chapter presents the findings from the data obtained through the desktop review. These are generally presented chronologically, but also where there is a logical progression of information. This is always dependent on the availability of information provided by the local authority. Exact matches of some information could not always be provided, for example 'leaving' data is restricted to all leavers from 1999 to 2004 rather than being broken down to individual numbers per year up to 2006. It is, however, considered to provide indicative recruitment and retention statistics and a local contextual basis for the following two chapters.

6.2 A local recruitment and retention strategy dated January 2003

The above local authority document was posted to social workers within the case study at their home addresses in May 2003 "to ensure that every member of staff affected…receives the important information about the package of measures…agreed between the Trade Unions" and children's services senior managers. Although the covering letter from the Head of the Children and Family Service states the "need to proceed with the implementation as soon as possible", I established that some team managers had been selective in adopting these proposals. In some cases, therefore, measures introduced to tackle recruitment and retention problems had still not been introduced to staff some two years later. Members of one duty team, for example, were particularly aggrieved their team manager had denied them the opportunity to work a nine day fortnight, despite their protestations (see section 6.5.4).

The report, constructed by a children's services manager, is split into three sections. The main features of the recruitment and retention 'package' are included within each:

- new posts
  - creation of a senior practitioner post within each fieldwork team
  - creation of two trainee social worker posts per area office

- o new salary scale and job descriptions for team managers

- working conditions
  - o incremental increases on annual leave, up to three additional days
  - o flexible working
    - term time working based on 38 or 40 week contracts
    - zero hours contracts to create an 'internal agency'
    - 9 day fortnight, 74 hours worked and one day off duty

- equality, and health and safety issues
  - o reassurances given of no risk of redundancy
  - o all new posts appointed via selection process
  - o aimed at providing more consistent and effective management and support to staff
  - o aimed at reducing levels of sickness absence

Job descriptions were included with a deadline for completion being 31st January 2003. This initiative had already been implemented when my data collection began in October 2005. In addition to the above discrepancy in implementation, universal concern was expressed about the stipulation that senior practitioners were not employed to provide practice assessor roles. This concern was shared by senior practitioners themselves and the policy was generally perceived to contradict what they believed their role to include. The attached Senior Practitioner job description clearly stated the role would include 'practice teaching of student social workers'. The next section presents findings from an extract from a senior management report indicating resource problems within the local children's services.

6.3   Local Council Employee Opinion Survey results on 3rd November 2005

The survey was made available to CSD employees on 3rd November 2005 and includes results for both 2004 and 2005 staff surveys. A response rate is not

known and the survey was issued to all staff within Education and Social Services Directorates. Children and Families was one of six service areas. A five-point scale of responses to a series of 56 statements was used to determine scores for each statement. The scale is described as follows:

Agree strongly	+200
Agree	+100
Neither agree nor disagree	0
Disagree	-100
Disagree strongly	-200

The overall score for a group of employees is a mean average of these individual scores. The calculation of scores also advises that a score of +50 and higher can be seen as very positive and not generally reflecting a major concern. A score of +20 or less, however, may reflect issues of concern for employees and should be investigated. Rather than duplicate the entire survey results, a selection of the highest and lowest scores for Children and Families is presented. The opening 6 questions and scores are however included regardless of score because of the relevance of their relevance to this study.

The lowest score provided overall was -12 in 2004 for 'Staff are consulted about how major changes are implemented in my Service'. This was +8 in 2005, still one of the lowest that year. The lowest score for 2005 was +1 recorded for two statements: 'I have had a useful staff appraisal in the last year' and 'The Council's financial systems and procedures are effective'. The highest overall score was +114 in 2005 for 'I am aware of and understand the equalities policies of the City Council'. This was not recorded in 2004.

Table 6.24 Children and family employee survey results 2004 and 2005

	Children and Families	
	2004	2005
Overall score – average of all responses	**49**	**52**
I feel that my Service values the work I do	33	40
I get job satisfaction from my work	73	77
I feel motivated at work	66	57
I feel a sense of pride in being part of North City Council	16	31
City Council is more effective than it was 3 years ago	35	35
I am satisfied with the physical environment in which I work	-6	27
Highest five scores (2005)		
I am aware of and understand the equalities policies of the City Council	-	114
I am confident in my skills and abilities to get a job outside the Council if I decide to leave	88	109
I have the opportunity to comment and make suggestions to my manager	-	103
I have taken action in the last year to improve my own personal development	96	102
My service respect individual differences (e.g. Cultures, backgrounds, disabilities, sexual orientation) of its employees	96	98
Lowest five scores (2005)		
I have had a useful staff appraisal in the last year	-	1
The Council's financial systems and procedures are effective'	-9	1
In general my Service has the technology it needs to deliver the required level of service	-3	2
I am aware of how my Service compares with similar services in other Councils	1	4
Staff are consulted about how major changes are implemented in my Service	-12	8

6.4   A local senior management report dated 12th September 2005

A senior management report arguing for more local resources was obtained on 28th September 2005 and relates specifically to the local authority of the case study. This was used to present statistical human resources data and provides a 'snapshot' of vacancies (from which the vacancy rate is calculated), long term sickness of staff by area, the distribution of children's social work posts across the city, and the distribution by experience of staff. This data also provides insight into senior management perception of local issues believed to influence recruitment and retention at that time, which was around the beginning of data collection through participant observation. This specific data adds weight to the argument that serious problems are apparent, and the local vacancy rate was much higher than the national rate at that time.

6.4.1   Fieldwork establishment

Significant factors relating to a reduction in social work capacity were highlighted as follows:

- development of a Family Support Service (FSS) in 2003
- four social work posts transferring to FSS in 2004 resulting in reduction of the social work Fieldwork establishment to 107.6
- significant increase in demands on social workers in tasks and written work
- establishment has not been increased since 1993
- capacity has reduced
    - due to 15 posts converted to senior practitioner grade in May 2003
    - 4 posts transferred to FSS in 2004 (as above)
- 10 new social worker posts created in March 2005 due to start before 2006
- 4 new support worker posts created from previous interviewing officer posts due to start before 2006

6.4.2 Recruitment and retention

The local extent of problems is presented within the context of the associated national problems:

- difficulties exist in recruiting and retaining high quality staff

- this is exacerbated by the stressful nature of child protection and court work

- the lack of essential car user allowance can affect recruitment and has implications on time and casework capacity for non-car users

- the transfer of 15 social workers to senior practitioner posts has effectively reduced casework capacity of each post by 20 to 40 per cent (3 to 6 FTE posts)

- the additional leave allowance of between 1 and 3 days implemented through the Recruitment and Retention strategy in 2003 equates to 224 days annually

- the allowance of 3 'reading days' was introduced to all fieldwork social workers in June 2005 to promote Evidence Informed Practice (EIP) and equates to 333 days annually

- no additional provision is made to cover the above loss of capacity of a total of 557 days

- the EIP and Recruitment and Retention strategies have effectively reduced casework capacity by 2 FTE social worker posts

- a significant number of newly qualified social workers have no tier 3 and 4 experience and require high levels of support and cannot take on high caseloads

6.4.3 Changes in the nature of the work

Social work within children's services is noted to have become increasingly challenging, reflecting the shift towards child protection and court work away from the preventative work being conducted by family support workers. The following issues are highlighted as having an impact on casework capacity:

- legal proceedings are increasingly complex, lengthy and adversarial
- additional duties, responsibilities and time commitment required for twin track planning – preparing for adoption as well as assessing parents and family members
- 2002 requirement for pathway plans for care leavers to be continually reviewed up to 21 years of age
- 2003 requirement for post adoption support assessments presented to adoption panels
- 2003 requirement for Form Es presented to fostering panels
- 2003 requirement for Personal Education Plans for all looked after children
- introduction of placement panel has led to significant time commitment
- lack of in-house fostering provision has led to increase in out of city placements (n=206, 33 per cent of looked after population)
- impact of travel time and liaising with out of city establishments
- increase in requirement for performance management
- staff with poor sickness records and competency issues often have caseloads reduced or removed, with no capacity to cover
- compulsory learning sets and practice seminars, and post qualifying requirements impact on capacity
- requirement for social workers to maintain direct contact with foster carers
- GSCC requirement for 15 days of accredited training in each 3 year period
- introduction of databases and the Integrated Children's System demand training time and commitment especially from those with limited computer skills
- 2005 introduction of Special Guardian orders under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 require further assessments

6.4.4 Statistical data to highlight problems with caseload capacity

This study has a particular interest in the named area teams and area totals have therefore been calculated separately to other teams. This is because the named teams conduct child protection work (in 'duty' or 'child in need' capacity) and are identified as being the teams where recruitment and retention issues are most relevant. A consideration for this data is that whilst the report is dated 12th September 2005, it is unclear exactly when the statistics relate to or exactly when they were collected. All other tables within the report however, are dated 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005.

Table 6.25 Distribution of social work posts

Area	Senior Practitioners (SPs)	Social Workers (SWs LI & LII)	Practice Teachers (PTs)	Total
Wentworth 2	2	10.5	0.5	**13**
Ridgeways	3	15.1	0.5	**18.6**
Firthport	3	16	0	**19**
Wentworth 5	2	10.7	0.5	**13.2**
AA (Access & Assessment)	5	26.8	0	**31.8**
LAC	2	10	0	**12**
Area Total	**10**	**52.3**	**1.5**	**63.8**
Total	17	89.1	1.5	107.6

Table 6.26 Vacancies by area

Area	SPs	SWs	Total
Wentworth 2	0	2	2
Ridgeways	2	4.5	6.5
Firthport	1	2.5	3.5
Wentworth 5	0.5	2.6	3.1
AA	0	1.9	1.9
P&TC	0	0	0
Area Total	**3.5**	**11.6**	**15.1**
Total	3.5	13.5	17

A vacancy rate for the four named area teams of 23.7 per cent is calculated as follows:

<u>15.1 vacancies</u>   = 0.237 x 100 = 23.7 per cent vacancy rate
63.8 posts

The vacancy rate for all area teams of 16 per cent is calculated as follows:

<u>17 vacancies</u>   = 0.157 x 100 = 15.7 per cent vacancy rate
107.6 posts

The vacancy rate of 15.7 is 3.9 per cent higher than the national average rate of

11.8 per cent for children's services in England (LGE 2005; CWDC 2008: 53).

Table 6.27 Long term sickness (over 6 weeks)

Area	SPs	SWs	Total
Wentworth 2	0	2	2
Ridgeways	0	0	0
Firthport	0	1	1
Wentworth 5	0	1	1
AA	0	2	2
P&TC	0	1	1
Area Total	**0**	**4**	**4**
Total	0	7	7

A total of 7 staff were reported to be subject to performance management procedures as a result of long term sickness. Although vacancy rates do not include long term sickness within the equation, the following calculation is included here for illustrative purposes:

$$\frac{15.1 \text{ vacancies} + 4 \text{ long term sickness} (= 19.1)}{63.8 \text{ posts}} = 0.299 \times 100 = 29.9 \text{ per cent}$$

The following table illustrates how work is being covered across grades and areas and includes agency cover and permanent staff working additional hours.

Table 6.28 Distribution of observed staff by Post (2006)

Area	SPs	SWs Level I	SWs Level II	PTs	Un-qualified	Total
Wentworth 2	2	1.7	5	0.5	2	**11.2**
Ridgeways	1	10	3	0.5	2	**16.5**
Firthport	3	1	14.1	0	0	**18.1**
Wentworth 5	1.6	2.8	5.3	0	2.5	**12.2**
AA	5	11.2	11.1	0	0.8	**28.1**
P&TC	2	6	3.5	0	0	**11.5**
Area total	**7.6**	**15.5**	**27.4**	**1**	**6.5**	**58**
Total	14.6	33.7	41	1	7.8	97.6

An additional illustrative 'real time' rate of 37.8 per cent can be calculated considering cover provided by senior practitioners and social workers across the four named areas. This is assuming practice teachers and unqualified workers do not conduct 'social work'.

7.6 SPs + 15.5 SWs LI + 27.4 SWs LII (= 50.5 SW posts actually covered)

so:

$$\frac{15.1 \text{ vacancies} + 4 \text{ long term sickness} (= 19.1)}{50.5 \text{ posts}} = 0.378 \times 100 = 37.8 \text{ per cent}$$

When it is assumed practice teachers and unqualified staff do conduct social work and are therefore included in the 'real time' rate, a rate of 32.9 per cent is calculated as follows:

$$\frac{15.1 \text{ vacancies} + 4 \text{ long term sickness} (= 19.1)}{58 \text{ posts}} = 0.329 \times 100 = 32.9 \text{ per cent}$$

This 'real time' rate of 32.9 per cent compares with the national vacancy rate in 2005 of 11.8 per cent, a difference of 21.1 per cent. When the original vacancy rate of 23.7 per cent is considered this is still 11.9 per cent (nearly twice) more than the national average.

Data to calculate turnover rates was not provided within the senior management report but are presented in section 6.5.

6.4.5 Update on local vacancy rates for 2006

The table below was compiled after the senior management report but is introduced here in order to provide an update for 2006. This table presents the total establishment for all four named areas and includes the calculated vacancy rates as well as showing the contribution agency and additional cover. Although the raw data for the previous year could not be obtained, the table below appears to be an update on the data used to inform the senior management report described above.

The total Fieldwork Establishment for 2006 (excluding Asylum and Children With Disabilities teams) was 123.6 social workers and 14 support workers. The fieldwork establishment for the four named area teams was 67.8 social workers; an

increase of n=9.8 posts (16.8 per cent) from the establishment of 58 social workers in 2005. The vacancy rate on 1st July 2006 was 25.2 per cent.

Table 6.29 Staffing establishment and vacancy rates at 1st July 2006

All four named areas	Establish-ment	In Work	Vacancies (V)	Vs covered by Agency	Vs covered Add hrs/temp	Sub-stantive vacancy rate %	Vs covered %	Establish-ment covered %
SP	10	5.5	4	-	-	-	-	-
Level II	56.3	29.6	13.1	11.6	1.6	-		-
Level I		23.8				-		-
Practice Teacher	1.5	1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
Totals	67.8	60.4	17.1	11.6	1.6	25.2	77	89

6.4.6 Senior Practitioner Review February 2006

The review was conducted using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and team meetings, involving senior practitioners, service managers, team managers, and peers and colleagues. Points within this report of relevance to this study are presented here.

The senior practitioner role was introduced in April 2003 following implementation of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy presented in section 6.2 of this chapter. It is acknowledged within the report that the original job description was confusing and not well presented; this was subsequently revised and reissued in 2004. By 2006 the post had increased from 19 to 22 across North City, however, substantive posts across the four areas in this study were actually reduced from 15 to 14. This contradicts the senior management report presented above in this section, which gives the original figure of 17 senior practitioner posts rather than 19 (see table 6.7). 11 senior practitioners are reported to have left the role since its introduction, a turnover rate of 50 per cent. However, only one person was reported to have left due to being unhappy with the role. The turnover rate when leaving the local authority (n=2) rather than an internal move is 9.1 per cent. The table below indicates reasons for turnover.

Table 6.30 Reasons for Senior Practitioner turnover

No. of SPs	Reason for turnover
6	Promoted within service
2	Sideways move
1	Downwards move
1	Emigrated
1	Unhappy with role

6.5   Local human resources staffing data from 1999 to 2006

This section presents a selection of local human resource data obtained through a senior manager during the data collection phase of this study. Firstly, the data relates more generally to the local authority headcount and offers demographic information from 2005 and 2006. Secondly, more specific to children's social workers demographic information is provided from 2004. Thirdly, sickness statistics are presented to demonstrate levels across the four named area teams and contextualise the previous long term sickness data considered in the calculations for 'real time' rates in section 6.4. Fourthly, data on leaving social workers from 1999 to 2004 is presented and a subsequent turnover rate is calculated. Finally, comparative vacancy and 'real time' rates are provided from a 'Briefing' from children's services from a neighbouring local authority.

6.5.1   Local headcount August 2005 to April 2006

The following two tables present demographic human resource data indicating the total headcount for all local authority staff in August 2005 and April 2006; an employee increase of 8.7 per cent (n=54) over a 9-month period. Women represent 80.7 per cent of employees, and men the remaining 19.3 per cent. People with disabilities represent an average of 2.8 per cent of the workforce and ethnic minority groups an average of 13.9 per cent. An apparent increase is noted of 56 employees in April 2006, who did not declare ethnicity; this may, or may not be indicative of the way the more recent data was collected. Most employees fall within the 40-49 age range followed by the 50-59 age range with averages of 34 per cent (n=223) and 25 per cent (n=161) respectively.

Table 6.31 North City Local Authority Headcount - August 2005

Age	Gender		Disability	Ethnicity			Total Employees
	Males	Females	Disabled	White	Ethnic Minority Communities	Ethnicity Not Declared	
16-19	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
20-29	19	56	1	61	14	0	75
30-39	22	115	4	117	19	1	137
40-49	42	173	4	172	41	2	215
50-59	33	130	6	146	16	1	163
60-69	4	25	3	29	0	0	29
70+	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
Total	**120**	**501**	**18**	**526**	**90**	**5**	**621**

Table 6.32 North City Local Authority Headcount - April 2006

Age	Gender		Disability	Ethnicity			Total Employees
	Males	Females	Disabled	White	Ethnic Minority Communities	Ethnicity Not Declared	
16-19	0	4	0	1	1	2	4
20-29	19	82	1	66	13	22	101
30-39	27	127	4	118	21	15	154
40-49	44	186	4	175	40	15	230
50-59	34	125	6	140	14	5	159
60-69	4	21	3	24	1	0	25
70+	2	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	**130**	**545**	**18**	**524**	**90**	**61**	**675**

6.5.2 Headcount of children's social workers in 2004

The following table provides data relating to the above two tables, but focuses on children's social workers from 2004.

Table 6.33 Headcount of children's social workers in 2004

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS	2004	%
GENDER:		
FEMALE	73	79.1
MALE	19	20.7
DISABILITY	4	4.3
AGE:		
UNDER 30	11	11.9
31 – 50	53	57.6
51 AND ABOVE	28	30.43
ETHNICITY:		
WHITE BRITISH	70	76.1
BME	22	23.9
TOTAL:	92	100

6.5.3 Children's social workers sickness report 2004

The table below (part a) links with the subsequent table (part b) and presents the number of days of absence of social workers during a 78 working day period in 2004. It includes the four named area teams of the case study, as well a small selection of comparative teams. Overall totals for children's, and older people's services are included for contextual purposes.

Table 6.34 Sickness report January to March 2004 Part a

RELEVANT TEAMS/UNITS	UNIT STAFF TOTAL	DAYS ABSENCE UPTO 1 WEEK	DAYS ABSENCE UPTO 6 WEEKS	DAYS ABSENCE OVER 6 WEEKS
WENTWORTH 2	31	32	31	55
RIDGEWAYS	36	25	8	51
FIRTHPORT	32	43	40	0
WENTWORTH 5	36	27	72	84
CHILD PROTECTION	17	21	0	0
CHILDRENS HOSPITAL	7	0	0	0
SENIOR MANAGERS - C&F	6	0	0	0

FOR COMPARISON

CHILDREN'S SERVICES TOTAL	666	597	1175	1078
OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES TOTAL	301	241	733	471
ALL STAFF TOTAL	1752	1516	2905	2481

Across the whole local authority, the grand total absence rate ranged from none, to 100 per cent over the 78 working day period between January to March 2004; this was heavily influenced by the number of staff employed within each team or unit. For example, 95 per cent (42 out of 44) of units/teams with no absence recorded had below ten staff members. Likewise, the two teams with high absence rates of 100 per cent and nearly 75 per cent absences, in mental health and older people's units respectively, had only one staff member in each. The tables demonstrate that during this time, between the four area teams within this case study, absence was relatively low with 3 out of 4 being below the all staff percentage absence of 5.05 per cent. Absences for children's services were also slightly lower (0.66 per cent) than for older people's services.

Table 6.35 Sickness report January to March 2004 Part b

	POSSIBLE WORKING DAYS	PERCENTAGE SICK UPTO 1 WEEK	PERCENTAGE SICK UPTO 6 WEEKS	PERCENTAGE SICK OVER 6 WEEKS	GRAND TOTAL PERCENTAGE ABSENCE
WENTWORTH 2	2418	1.32%	1.28%	2.27%	4.88%
RIDGEWAYS	2808	0.89%	0.28%	1.82%	2.99%
FIRTHPORT	2496	1.72%	1.60%	0	3.33%
WENTWORTH 5	2808	0.96%	2.56%	2.99%	6.52%
CHILD PROTECTION	1326	1.58%	0	0	1.58%
CHILDRENS HOSPITAL	546	0	0	0	0
SENIOR MANAGERS - C&F	468	0	0	0	0

FOR COMPARISON

CHILDREN'S SERVICES TOTAL	51948	1.15%	2.26%	2.08%	5.49%
OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES TOTAL	23478	1.03%	3.12%	2.01%	6.15%
ALL STAFF TOTAL	136656	1.11%	2.13%	1.82%	5.05%

6.5.4 Children's social workers who left between 1999 and 2004

Less information is available on retention and turnover of social workers. No exit interview data was made available to me despite requests, although the blank forms were obtained. Little is therefore known about the reasons why social workers leave the employer; anecdotal evidence was captured however through other social workers within interviews and observations of this study. One interview with an ex-children's services social worker also provides first-hand insight. The following data provides a breakdown of leavers across a five-year period. The established posts of 107.6 children's service staff is reported not have changed since 1993. An average annual local turnover rate can therefore be calculated, and compared to the national average over the same period. This calculation is as follows:

$$\frac{93 \text{ social workers left}}{5 \text{ years}} = \text{an average of } 18.6 \text{ social workers left per year}$$

$$\frac{18.6 \text{ social workers left per year}}{107.6 \text{ established posts}} = \text{average turnover of } 17.3 \text{ per cent}$$

This local turnover rate of 17.3 per cent compares with a national turnover rate of 10.6 per cent in 2004 and a national average rate of 12.8 per cent across the same five years up to 2004 (LGE 2005; CWDC 2008). This reflects an average 4.5 per cent increase over the national average.

Table 6.36 Children's social workers who left the local authority between 31st April 1999 and 31st March 2004

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS - LEAVERS	01/04/1999 - 31/03/2004	%
GENDER:		
FEMALE	76	81.7
MALE	17	18.3
DISABILITY	3	3.2
AGE:		
UNDER 30	7	7.5
31 - 50	49	52.7
OVER 50	37	39.8
ETHNICITY:		
BRITISH WHITE	79	85
BME	14	15
TOTAL LEAVERS	**93**	**100**

6.5.5 Vacancy information from a neighbouring local authority 2006

This information is presented to provide a comparison to the CSD within the case study. It is sourced from a report of the executive director of social services from July 2006. It reports the positive experience of recruiting trainee social workers. Vacancy rates are reported to have varied between 2005 and 2006 from between 18 and 8 per cent. The overall shortfall of children's social workers including vacancies, long term sickness, maternity leave and excluding posts covered by agency staff, was calculated to be between 5 and 13 FTE (6 per cent - 15 per cent). Concerns are raised that agency staff are not as committed to the employer, with an example of one agency worker leaving 'overnight'. Further concerns are reported that agency social workers are paid more than publicly employed social workers. Finally, six trainee social workers due to qualify over the next two years are cited as being a crucial element of the long term recruitment strategy.

A vacancy rate of 23.2 per cent for all fieldwork staff is calculated as follows, and excludes administrative staff:

27.4 vacancies = 0.232 x 100 = 23.2 per cent
117.9 posts

A vacancy rate of 28.7 per cent for all fieldwork staff from social worker grade to team manager grade is calculated as follows:

23.8 vacancies = 0.287 x 100 = 28.7 per cent
82.9 posts

When long term sickness is factored the following 'real time' rate of 33.5 is calculated as follows:

23.8 vacancies + 4 long term sickness (= 27.8) = 0.335 x 100 = 33.5 per cent
               82.9 posts

When covering agency staff are factored the following adjusted 'real time' rate of 19.3 per cent is calculated as follows:

23.8 vacancies + 4 long term sickness – 11.8 (= 16) = 0.193 x 100 = 19.3 percent
               82.9 posts

Table 6.37 Staffing of Fieldwork teams at 31st May 2006 for a neighbouring local authority

Title	Establishment	Vacant	Long term sickness	Agency	Current shortfall
Team Manager (TM)	11	1	1	0	2
Assistant TM	8	1.2	2	0	2.2
Senior SW	26.8	7.3	0	4	3.3
SW	37.1	14.3	1	11.4	3.9
SW and above totals	82.9	23.8	4	11.8	11.4
Trainee SW/others	9	1	0.4	0	1
Family Support	26	2.6	1	4	-0.4
Admin	25	1.5	3	1.7	2.8
Grand totals	142.9	28.9	8.4	21.1	14.8

6.6   Interviewee turnover 2007

A subsequent review of the employment status of the interviewees for this study in September 2007 revealed the following information, from which an indicative interviewee turnover rate of 29.4 per cent was calculated. 3 of the 5 interviewees who left child protection work (2 social workers and 1 team manager) remained employed by the local authority. 2 workers (an agency social worker and a support worker) left the service altogether. The ex-North City employee remained in his job with young people.

Table 6.38 Interviewee turnover at September 2007

Grade	Total by Grade	Retained	Turnover
SupW	1	0	1
TrSW	2	2	0
AgSW	1	0	1
SW	7	5	2
SP	3	3	0
TM	3	2	1
Total	**17**	**12**	**5**

<u>5 interviewees turnover</u>   =   interviewee turnover of 29.4 per cent
17 established posts

6.7   Concluding comments

This chapter is the first of three that presents research findings from this study. The desktop review enabled access to documents and reports rarely made available outside of employing organisations. These papers are not always consistent and lack clarity in how data is gathered. They do, however provide insightful data that sits behind the publicly available audits and government returns, and offers deeper understanding of anecdotally reported difficulties within social work teams, for example, the 'real time' rate, which allows for long term sickness and can be adapted to account for posts covered or not covered by agency staff.

Whilst it is acknowledged that whilst posts affected by long term sickness are not considered for permanent cover (so the person can return to post once recovered) the 'real time' rate can at least provide greater insight into the effective gap, as experienced by front line social workers. Although it is not considered for the 'real time' rate within this study, the neighbouring authority included statistics on maternity leave. This chapter demonstrates the significantly higher resultant rate. In Chapter 8, I argue for the inclusion of maternity leave and long term sickness statistics in order to provide the 'real time' rate to sit alongside vacancy rates in order to empower social work managers to better express the reality of the problems experienced by social workers.

In summary, this chapter has presented statistics demonstrating vacancy and turnover rates that are higher than the national averages. It is from within this context that the findings presented within the next two findings chapters can be considered. The next chapter presents thematic findings from qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Chapter 7 - Interview and Observational Findings

7.1 Introduction

'Social work is something you *are* rather than something you *do'* (Roy INT).

Chapter 6 presented desktop review findings that provided a local context to reported problems with recruitment and retention where higher than national average vacancy and turnover rates were established. Vacancy rates were considered with long term sickness and a new 'real time' rate was calculated, that I argue, more closer reflects the experience of front line workers.

This chapter presents combined findings from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 18 front-line children's workers across grades ranging from trainee social worker up to team manager (see Table 5.3 in section 5.2.2), resulting from iterative, thematic analysis. This includes one interview with an ex-children's social worker who left child protection work to work with young people within the same authority. Emerging topics and themes were carefully considered and are presented in order of resonance to the participants, and underpinned with examples of observational field notes and verbatim interview quotations. Whilst interviewee and observational data were not exclusively explicit about feelings of being undervalued, analysis identified this was a predominant theme alongside which the following themes were identified:

- Coping strategies
- Relationships
- Perception and communication
- Emotions and the emotive nature of child protection work

Feelings around value and undervalue coloured and infiltrated the working experience of participants and appeared to have the power to influence most other perceptions of experience. Illustrative data reflecting the inter-related nature of

these themes is therefore occasionally presented more than once. Table 7.1 in section 7.2 illustrates the key findings and their perceived weight following analysis. It is unlikely that social workers consciously consider themselves in the context of Bauman's (1997) ecology of decision making model. It was, however, a useful tool against which to conduct the data analysis. The presentation of data within this chapter does therefore frequently refer to case, individual, organisational, and external factors to help frame the findings. The next section presents data supporting the relevance of the study to interviewees.

7.1.1 Relevance of recruitment and retention to interviewees

A fundamental concern throughout this study was whether the central issues of recruitment and retention were relevant to the local workforce. This was confirmed at an organisational level through initial management meetings but more significantly, because the head of service had been involved in ensuring the study was initiated from the outset. Individual perspectives were key to gaining insight into relationships between recruitment and retention, and the ecology of social work practice.

All 18 interviewees confirmed personal relevance of recruitment and retention. This view was expressed regardless of whether the interviewee's team was perceived as being affected by high vacancies and/or turnover at that time. Unanimous interviewee relevance was contrary to one senior manager's view before the data collection period began in 2003 who perceived that North City did not have a problem at that time. The manager subsequently acknowledged that recruitment and retention problems had previously occurred and would be a factor in the future.

Interviewee confirmation of relevance was both implicit and explicit. Where responses were not directly confirmed, further analysis was employed, which provided an implicit confirmation. For illustrative purposes, here follows an example of how analysis of data involving five interviewees (Carol, June Stephanie, Kate, Jane), contributed towards the universal affirmation of relevance to all interviewees, whether implicitly, or explicitly. The analysis of the combined

interview and observational data, within and across worksites enabled a holistic oversight confirming relevance of this study to interviewees.

Carol, an international social worker with 16 years of qualified experience, initially indicated her ten months of employment in North City did not qualify her to provide an opinion of relevance. She later implied personal relevance of recruitment and retention by explaining how new recruits needed stability within the Firthport based team:

> 'The moment you worry about stability you begin to think 'oh, is this the right place for me to be?' For me now, that's the issue…' Carol (INT).

Observational data provided deeper insight into Carol's insecurity: her team manager was on long-term sick leave; the part-time senior practitioner had also recently been on sick leave; and four vacancies existed within the team. This represented a team vacancy rate of 40 per cent and a 'real time' rate of 50 per cent when long-term sick leave was considered. An interview with June, from the same team provided additional context for Carol's concern. With three-and-a-half years of qualified experience, June described herself as the longest serving member of the team. Although instability was also a concern for June, she explained confidence instilled by experience had equipped her with an ability to cope. However, like many of her experienced colleagues, she sympathised with Carol and other new recruits, indicating the depth of concern:

> '[in three and a half years]…we've never been a stable team…people coming, people going …' June (INT).

June also confirmed the relevance of recruitment and retention as being of universal importance in the social work profession. She was also one of a few participants with a positive perception of a citywide relocation,

> 'I don't want to be the most experienced worker in the team three and a half years in…because I want to be learning as well' June (INT).

Stephanie, a social worker within the Wentworth area office, also confirmed the negative effect of high turnover. Like June, she identified herself as one of the most experienced members of her team, having been there for three years. Findings reflecting June and Stephanie's shared concern relating to inexperience, as a by-product of high turnover, are presented in section 7.4.6.

Interviewees offered both holistic and personal perspectives to demonstrate the personal relevance of recruitment and retention problems. Jane indicates a wider appreciation:

> '[Recruitment and retention are] obviously a problem for most local
> authorities in terms of staff shortages, which is why they use agency
> workers' Jane (INT).

A more personal perspective was offered by Kate, highlighting particular concerns about the relationship between the team manager and many of her colleagues, including herself. She additionally indicates her resilience, which is presented later within this chapter (section 6.4).

> 'The number of people I have seen come and go because…[of problems
> with a team manager]…and I am still here!' Kate (INT).

This section presents indicative examples of the universal relevance of recruitment and retention problems to interviewees, from personal and more holistic perspectives. The next section briefly introduces key themes in this study and provides insight into their construction, followed by the presentation of the findings associated with each theme, beginning with the dominant theme of an undervalued workforce.

7.2   Construction of Topics and Themes

Themes identified through grounded theory data analysis were not necessarily made explicit during the period of data collection. Deeper analysis was therefore necessary in order to elicit associated topics identified through observations and interviews, which were correlated in order to construct associated themes. Topics are introduced in Table 7.1 within their relative theme and are presented in more depth throughout this chapter. Whilst topics are presented within each theme in this chapter, they are not unique to themes and were found to interrelate across them, reflecting the complex nature of social work (see Chapter 9). To address the challenge of 'topic travel', or cross-theme relevance, it was necessary to employ a method of weighting in order to arrive at the eventual destination for presentational purposes. The method of weighting was also employed in order to establish a hierarchy of resonance to the study.

The following diagram presents the four identified themes in order of resonance surrounding the aforementioned dominant theme that children's services participants in North City feel undervalued. Participant feelings of undervalue was primarily associated with their employer (see 7.5.6) although not exclusively so.

During analysis each interview and set of observational notes was coded for the following:

- positivity and negativity
- case, individual, organisational and external factors
- attachment and detachment

The process of analysis described in Chapter 5.4 was then followed in order to elicit the findings presented in this chapter.

Table 7.39 Themes and topics

Themes	Topics
1) Valued or undervalued? The feelings of front line participants	Value, and valued by service users
	Value, and valued by team members
	Undervalued by employer/senior managers
	Undervalued by public and media
	Indicators for feeling undervalued
2) Coping strategies	Coping with challenges
	Student preparedness for front line practice
	Changing nature of front line practice
	The 'coping mask' of resilience
	Humour, banter and badinage
	Age, experience, and confidence
3) Relationships	Positive individual/case factor relationships
	Negative individual/case factor relationships
	Positive individual/individual factor relationships
	Negative individual/individual factor relationships
	Positive individual/organisational factor relationships
	Negative individual/organisational factor relationships
	Positive individual/external factor relationships
	Negative individual/external factor relationships
4) Perception	The 'emergency' meeting
	The 'thank you' lunch
	Perception of powerlessness
5) Emotions and the emotive nature of child protection work	Joy
	Pride
	Fear
	Guilt
	Sadness
	Anger

7.3   Valued or Undervalued? The feelings of front line participants

The dominant theme of this study is that front-line child protection participants generally feel undervalued; predominantly by their employer, but is also, to some extent by society, and on a more personal level, by service users. This served to undermine, and for some, ultimately relinquish employee attachment to the employer. In Chapter 9, I develop this theme and argue that feeling undervalued, especially by the employer, has a tangible impact on social workers' job satisfaction, morale, considerations to leave child protection work, and the subsequent actuality of turnover, and is therefore a significant contributory factor to recruitment and retention problems. This is theorised in Chapter 9 and presented within the framework of Baumann's (1997) Ecology model and in the literature review in Chapter 3.

Wide-ranging implicit and explicit references indicated the universality of feeling undervalued; observational notes recorded examples on each of the 36 days of direct observation across all four teams within the three worksites. All 18 interviewees also reflected this theme to some extent. This chapter provides analysis of indicative data to suggest the range of feelings is wide and that some participants feel less valued than others. Underpinning the dominant nature of this theme, examples of feeling undervalued are located within each key of the four additional themes presented in this chapter. This is demonstrated in the following tables (7.2 and 7.3) where explicit and implicit data, from interviewees and observed participants feeling undervalued across the four ecological factors, are presented. Explicit and implicit exceptions to feeling undervalued were also found; examples of participants feeling valued are presented in tables 7.4 and 7.5. This demonstrates complexities within the dominant theme and the need to investigate further in order to gain a greater understanding (see section 10.4). Findings indicate that whilst participants demonstrated feeling undervalued across one, some, or all ecological factors (case, individual, organisational, and external), these were frequently countered by feelings of being valued elsewhere within the ecological factor range.

Table 7.40 Feeling undervalued - explicit reference

Source	Data	Relative Factor
Kate (INT)	'My clients used to say they thought I was brilliant and lovely. They don't say that about me anymore'.	Case
Rachel (INT	"Social workers are not liked are they? Especially with child protection…My daughter came home from school and she said that, engraved on the desk was 'Social workers are the scum of the earth'…She said 'they really hate you don't they?".	Case
Kate (INT)	'All it takes is [team manager praise]…it's not too much to ask for is it?'	Individual
W, Day 6 (INT in OBS)	'Social workers never, ever get a pat on the back; a 'well done' from the manager or the media. It is your job and you are therefore expected to do it when you have done something well. There's no recognition, no cheers or positivity'.	Organisational
W, Day 16 (OBS)	'These perceptions all build and create an overall perception that SW s will not be given the appropriate resources and are therefore undervalued and underappreciated'.	Organisational
Chris (INT)	'…people have faced a lot of difficulties…and they have had to leave jobs because they were the only Black and other people did not speak to them properly…'	Organisational
W, Day 13 (OBS)	'She feels let down by her employer because she wanted to become a social worker, but since being here she has completely changed her mind'.	Organisational
Felicity	'They [the government] don't really want to see everything as it is [through inspections] because it's going to reflect back badly'	External
Jackie (INT)	'No-one says, 'well done' [to the social worker from within voluntary, training, education and employment agencies for making referrals].	External
Rachel (INT) [Repeated intentionally]	"Social workers are not liked are they? Especially in child protection…My daughter came home from school and she said that, engraved on the desk was 'Social workers are the scum of the earth'…She said 'they really hate you don't they?"	External

Table 7.41 Feeling undervalued - implicit reference

Source	Data	Relative Factor
Jackie (INT)	'…you can easily become quite despondent [in reflection of] clients…' '…you know it's quite a depressing job…'	Case
Avril (INT)	'…what you hear a lot from service users is *"we didn't have a social worker"* or *"we had too many social workers in that period of time"'*.	Case
W, Day 7 (OBS)	'Supervision is just about case management not about supervising staff'.	Individual
Kate (INT)	'Two years ago I went a full year without supervision!'	Individual
Kevin (INT)	'…a manager [in this authority] managing crossing wardens…gets the same [pay] as what a child protection manager gets…'	Organisational
W, Day 11 (OBS)	'Things are being noted as not being on the file [by Independent Reviewing Officers] when the Social workers argued they were'.	Organisational
F, Day 2 (OBS)	'In terms of recruitment and retention, have you had a look around this building? It's a fucking dump!'	Organisational
F, Day 3 (OBS)	'That's the problem with this department; lack of communication'.	Organisational
Stephanie (INT)	'…people sometimes still look at social workers as being the nice hippy…that goes out and bakes cakes…'	External

Table 7.42 Feeling valued - explicit reference

Source	Data	Relative Factor
Jackie (INT)	'…most of my clients like me…[they say] 'well you're a social worker but you're alright''.	Case
Jim (INT	'I actually more or less forced myself onto the duty team, who were ecstatic that a qualified social worker had just appeared from out of nowhere'. [laughs].	Individual
Kate (INT)	'People I work with keep me going'.	Individual
Daphne (INT)	'…the service manager did come up…and say 'well done with all the work…you have done, thank you; are you OK?'	Organisational
Rachel (INT)	'There are a lot of positives [in North City]…the training…'	Organisational

Table 7.43 Feeling valued – implicit reference

Source	Data	Relative Factor
Emma (INT)	'…people now are more likely to work with you than tell you to get lost…[they] actually come to us [for help] it's not always the other way around'.	Case
Avril (INT)	'the advantage that I have is that I have been at Firthport for a long time so I know all the experienced people who arrived before me'.	Individual
Daphne (INT)	'I'm in a very supportive team'.	Individual
Felicity (INT)	'…we've got friends who are other teams…'	Individual
(Kate INT)	'I am aware of times when the service manager has reported to the team manager that my statement was excellent. That's all it takes'.	Organisational
Jackie (INT)	'…these [the employer] are quite forward thinking…the people around you are given the freedom to try new things'.	Organisational

7.3.1 The context of interviewee perspective

Interviewees had a range of positive and negative perspectives about their social work practice, which were explicitly and implicitly expressed (see below). This reflected the complex nature of human relationships, and of social work, on which each personal story is based. Examples representing the broad range across the two extremes are illustrated below.

Positive perspectives:

> 'I'm absolutely loving this, doing the assessment and child protection stuff…I can't see me wanting to go anywhere at all really (Emma INT);

> 'I love my job' (June INT);

> '…you never stop learning in this job its so diverse' (Stephanie INT);

> 'I do enjoy just being able to assist…children who are in difficulties' (Carol INT).

Negative perspectives:

> 'I hated doing bits and pieces; do a bit here, do a bit there' (Jim INT);

> 'It's a Cinderella service with a low status…not perceived as important to anyone' (Peter INT);

> '…I'm not comfortable because I feel under the most pressure that I have ever been under…' (Kate INT).

Contradictions were apparent, within interviews, paragraphs, sentences, and also across the methods used, where an observation would appear contrary to what was suggested within an interview. Considering the range of opinion, in addition to apparent contradictions, thematic analysis of all data associated with each

interviewee (including observations) was weighted, and informed my eventual subjective judgement of either generally positive or negative interviewee perceptions. This cross-method thematic analysis increased the validity of the judgement made, although this was not possible for one participant (Jim), who had already left and could therefore not be observed in practice.

The establishment of a general stance of the interviewee in relation to their ecology of practice provided the context within which the data could be considered. Judgement of positive or negative stance was based on my perception of interviewee perception, and informed by the applied weighting of data. Individual interviewee context relating across the themes in this study is presented within the remaining tables in this section. Interviewee findings are mainly presented in order that interviews took place to enable consistent comparisons between data where possible.

Having established my rationale for judgements about interviewees, focus is now given to the indicative data. The first Table below (7.6) indicates 11 out of 18 interviewees were positive about their holistic social work experience, and 7 were generally negative.

Table 7.44 Interviewees perceived perspective of holistic social work experience

No.	Name	Positive	Negative
1	Jackie	√	
2	Rachel		√
3	Peter		√
4	Sarah		√
5	Carol	√	
6	Harriet	√	
7	Avril	√	
8	June	√	
9	Jim		√
10	Stephanie	√	
11	Emma	√	
12	Trudy	√	
13	Jane	√	
14	Felicity	√	
15	Chris	√	
16	Kate		√
17	Daphne		√
18	Kevin		√
Totals		11	7

The following Table (7.7) compares these positive and negative perspectives with external, organisational, individual, and case perspectives for each interviewee to demonstrate how analysis was conducted. Concepts of attachment and detachment are also introduced and associated with each interviewee, within each factor. Insight into the intellectual debate associated with this process is provided in Chapter 9.6.1. The developing picture of the personal context for interviewees' perspectives were underpinned further by their subsequent presentation in Tables 7.8, 7.9, 7.10 and 7.11 in association with each ecological factor, and their attachment or detachment relationship. The same subjective judgement process described above was adopted.

Table 7.45 Interviewee perspective compared to external, organisational, individual and case factors

No.	Name	Persepctive		External		Organisation		Individual		Case	
		Positive	Negative	Attached	Detached	Attached	Detached	Attached	Detached	Attached	Detached
1	Jackie	√		√			√	√		√	
2	Rachel		√	√		√		√		√	
3	Peter		√		√		√	√		√	
4	Sarah		√		√		√		√	√	
5	Carol	√		√		√		√		√	
6	Harriet	√		√		√		√		√	
7	Avril	√		√		√		√		√	
8	June	√		√			√	√		√	
9	Jim		√	√			√	√		√	
10	Stephanie	√		√		√		√		√	
11	Emma	√		√		√		√		√	
12	Trudy	√		√		√		√		√	
13	Jane	√		√		√		√		√	
14	Felicity	√		√			√	√		√	
15	Chris	√		√			√		√	√	
16	Kate		√	√			√		√	√	
17	Daphne		√		√		√		√		√
18	Kevin		√	√		√		√		√	
Totals		**11**	**7**	**15**	**3**	**9**	**9**	**14**	**4**	**17**	**1**

7.3.2 Case factors

Seventeen interviewees were attached with regard to case factors with the remaining one being detached. When compared to their perspectives, each interviewee was categorised as follows:

Table 7.46 Interviewee typology under case factors

Typology	Interviewees
Positive-attached	Jackie, Carol, Harriet, Avril, June, Stephanie, Emma, Trudy, Jane, Felicity, Chris
Positive-detached	
Negative-attached	Rachel, Sarah, Peter, Jim, Kate, Kevin
Negative-detached	Daphne

7.3.3 Individual factors

78 per cent (n=14) of interviewees were attached with regard to individual factors with the remaining 22 per cent (n=4) being detached. When compared to their perspectives, each interviewee was categorised as follows:

Table 7.47 Interviewee typology under individual factors

Typology	Interviewees
Positive-attached	Jackie, Carol, Harriet, Avril, June, Stephanie, Emma, Trudy, Jane, Felicity
Positive-detached	Chris
Negative-attached	Rachel, Peter, Jim, Kevin
Negative-detached	Sarah, Kate, Daphne

7.3.4 Organisational factors

Half (n=9) of the interviewees were attached with regard to organisational factors with the remaining half (n=9) being detached. When compared to their perspectives, each interviewee was categorised as follows:

Table 7.48 Interviewee typology under organisational factors

Typology	Interviewees
Positive-attached	Carol, Harriet, Avril, Stephanie, Emma, Trudy, Jane
Positive-detached	Jackie, June, Felicity, Chris
Negative-attached	Rachel, Kevin
Negative-detached	Sarah, Peter, Kate, Daphne, Jim

7.3.5 External factors

83 per cent (n=15) of interviewees were attached with regard to organisational factors with the remaining 17 per cent (n=3) being detached. When compared to their perspectives, each interviewee was categorised as follows:

Table 7.49 Interviewee typology under external factors

Typology	Interviewees
Positive-attached	Jackie, Carol, Harriet, Avril, June, Stephanie, Emma, Trudy, Jane, Felicity, Chris
Positive-detached	
Negative-attached	Rachel, Kate, Jim, Kevin
Negative-detached	Sarah, Peter, Daphne

7.3.6 Interviewee typology and subsequent employment status

The following table provides insight into interviewee typology compared to their employment status in September 2007 and is discussed fully in Chapter 9. It indicates that, of the six interviewees who left child protection work, four (two-thirds) shared negative perspectives of the ecology of practice (including Jim who had already left at the time of the interview) and two were positive. Two of the three interviewees who left child protection work, but remained working for the CSD, had negative perspectives. Of the two interviewees who left the service altogether, one was positive, and one negative.

Table 7.50 Perspectives compared to organisational, individual, and case factors and employment status

No.	Name	Perspective		Organisation		Individual		Case		Position at Sept 2007
		Positive	Negative	Attached	Detached	Attached	Detached	Attached		
1	Jackie	√			√	√		√		Left Service
2	Rachel		√	√		√		√		In service
3	Peter		√	√		√		√		In service
4	Sarah		√		√		√	√		Left CP but in LA
5	Carol	√		√		√		√		Left CP but in LA
6	Harriet	√		√		√		√		In service
7	Avril	√		√		√		√		In service
8	June	√			√	√		√		In service
9	Jim		√		√	√		√		Ex CP but in LA
10	Stephanie	√		√		√		√		In service
11	Emma	√		√		√		√		In service
12	Trudy	√		√		√		√		In service
13	Jane	√		√		√		√		In service
14	Felicity	√			√	√		√		In service
15	Chris	√			√		√	√		In service
16	Kate		√		√		√	√		In service
17	Daphne		√		√		√		√	Left Service
18	Kevin		√	√		√		√		Left CP but in LA
Totals		**11**	**7**	**10**	**8**	**14**	**4**	**17**	**1**	

7.3.7 Value/undervalue indicators

Analysis was also conducted to elicit indicators for interviewees feeling undervalued, in order to better understand their reasons. The volume and variety of indicators involved were also considered. This data is presented in the following table (7.13). In all, I judged that 23 key indicators encapsulated the thoughts and feelings of participants in relation to feeling undervalued. Totals were calculated for the number of indicators for each interviewee, in addition to the frequency of reference to each indicator across the range. Sarah (n=23), Jim (n=21), and Rachel (n=20) had the broadest range of indicators. This correlates with each of their negative perspectives in relation to the ecology of social work as demonstrated in section 7.3.1. Jim's higher range may have been more expected because he had already left the child protection team because of his overall job dissatisfaction (see Chapter 5.2.2).

Further correlations were found as the remaining four interviewees (Peter, Kate, Daphne, and Kevin) with negative perceptions all had the next highest range of indicators. The interviewee with positive perceptions and the broadest range of indicators was June (n=13) who matched Daphne's range, followed by Jane (n=10), and Harriet (n=9). Emma had the lowest range of indicators with 2 followed by Carol with 4. The mean average number of indicators per interviewee was almost 11 ranging from 2 to 23. A total of 195 interviewee references to indicators were made with the highest scoring being 'pressure' (17), 'time' (15), 'stress' (14), and 'resources' (14) and the lowest being 'mobility', 'resentment', and 'oppression', each sharing 4.

Table 7.51 Interviewee indicators for feeling undervalued

Undervalue indicator	Jackie	Rachel	Peter	Sarah	Carol	Harriet	Avril	June	Jim	Steph	Emma	Trudy	Jane	Felicity	Chris	Kate	Daphne	Kevin	Total
Low morale		√	√	√					√	√						√	√		7
Instability		√	√	√	√			√	√							√			7
Stress		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√			√	√	√	√	√	√	14
Frustration		√	√	√			√	√	√						√		√	√	9
Vulnerable		√		√	√				√				√			√	√	√	8
Unsupported		√	√	√	√	√		√	√			√				√	√		10
Pressured	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	17
No time	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√			√	√	√		√	√	√	15
Distrusted		√	√						√			√				√		√	6
Unhappy		√	√						√					√	√			√	6
Resentment		√	√						√				√						4
-Supervision		√	√	√	√	√		√	√				√			√	√	√	11
-Mobility				√			√	√						√					4
Scrutinised		√		√					√				√			√		√	6
Oppressed				√					√						√	√			4
Ill health		√		√					√							√	√		5
Pay	√	√		√		√			√	√			√	√			√	√	10
Dictated to		√	√	√			√		√							√		√	7
Cynicism		√	√	√					√			√		√				√	7
Upset		√		√			√									√	√		5
Unprepared		√	√	√		√		√	√	√				√			√	√	10
Resources	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√			√	√	√		√	√	√	14
Environment	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√									√	9
Total	5	20	14	23	4	9	7	13	21	5	2	5	10	8	5	16	13	15	195

7.3.8 Concluding comments

This section has presented findings that indicate the dominant theme of participants feeling undervalued. Where necessary, supporting data was provided through observational data. In summary, interviewees generally have either positive or negative perceptions of the ecology of social work practice. The data also suggests interviewees are attached or detached to each of the range of factors within the ecology and that these vary, and are not necessarily dependent on positive or negative traits. Finally, a range of indicators is associated with feeling undervalued; of which being pressured and issues relating to time were cited by most interviewees. Presentation of findings now turns to the remaining four key themes, beginning with the most resonant of these: coping strategies.

7.4   Coping strategies

'Team manager to her social worker: "*Get back in there! You can't go to karaoke until you've finished your viability assessment!*" (W5 11 OBS).

The previous literature review chapters indicate national and local turnover rates are considered high, and there are not enough social workers within children's services to meet increasing demands (LGA 2009). This is compounded by problems with recruitment into the profession (LAWIG 2007; CWDC 2008). Conversely, high levels of social workers are motivated to work within children's services (GSCC 2007), and despite the challenges and reported crisis, many are also motivated to stay (Burns 2009) and report job satisfaction, and rewarding work. Research also suggests that workers report low job satisfaction, low morale, and feelings of wanting to leave, but still decide to be retained (Tham 2006). To reiterate the complexities involved, this can be compared to those workers who choose to leave, despite high job satisfaction, high self-esteem, and possible feelings of wanting to stay. Again, an active decision is being made, this time being one of turnover. Chapters 2 and 3 indicate many reasons exist for active retention and turnover decision-making.

The rationale behind active retention decisions despite, for example feeling undervalued by the employer, was a key consideration within this study. Interview responses and relevant observations were found to be wide-ranging and influences are considered within each factor of the social work ecology. Section 7.3 within this Chapter presented findings that provide insight into the personal experience of workers in front line children's services.

Analysis focussed on retention of participants, given the high level of undervalue perceived by interviewees, especially relating to organisational factors and the employer. I found the key underlying theme of resilience attributed towards retention of many who worked through the associated challenges of what appeared to be an often-negative work experience. Resiliency is reportedly understudied in social work. It is helpfully defined as "…an important concept and attribute related to an individual's ability to cope with stress and prevail" within a cross-cultural social work study (Amrani-Cohen 1998: 1). In a survey study involving 1100 Israeli and American participants, Amrani-Cohen (1998) found resiliency was associated with high levels of job mastery, low levels of role ambiguity, lower workloads, high levels of autonomy, and good emotional support from team colleagues. The work setting played a less significant part in social worker resilience. These international findings resonate with those in this study and indicate that good quality training, supervision and clarity, will contribute towards nurturing resilient practitioners.

This section now turns towards the theme of resilience in retained participant social workers and also in the one 'unretained' interviewee (having been previously retained). As noted, resilience is strongly associated with an ability to cope in the face of adversity, and is linked to positive learning experiences and good supervision and support (Garezy 1991; Rutter 1995). It is noted, however, that no one is invincible (Rutter 1995). Like the theme of feeling undervalued, resilience was also found to be universally associated (in varying degrees) with interviewees. Observations also highlighted numerous instances in either real time, or reflected by participants, that demanded the ability to cope with consistently complex challenges. These finding suggest that if Horwitz's (1998) resilience in social work

is about survival, then social workers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge by educational institutions, and further developed and protected within their working environments by their employers. The need for nurturing resilience is essential given the significance of stress and the emotive nature of the work.

As stated, challenges to resilience are associated with feeling undervalued, but not exclusively so. Other related issues are also apparent and key challenges identified within the rich description available are presented in Tables 7.14; 7.15; 7.16; 7.17 below, as an indicative sample from interviews and observations. These are related to the range of examples given for feeling undervalued in section 7.3, and in the main, reflect many of those within the literature highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3:

Table 7.52 Challenges to social work resilience – case factors

Challenges	Example of challenge
Working with loss	'One very recent case to come through the duty team involves a 14 year old child who witnessed his dad being stabbed last weekend. His mother has been arrested. Issues include trauma, where is he living, chief witness to stabbing, undercurrent of mental health problems…' (Team meeting R5 12 OBS).
Violence and abuse	'…it's a difficult job in itself isn't it, that you are out there dealing with very, very difficult cases and you've seen a lot of abuse' (June INT)
Threatened by service users	'They talk about a social worker who got attacked by a service user on a bus' (R 2 OBS).
Reluctant cases	"…in adoption work people are pleased to see you and want you there. [In child protection] they don't" (Emma W 5 OBS).

Table 7.53 Challenges to social work resilience – individual factors

Challenges	Examples
Emotions	'This week I've seen three separate people in this team crying their eyes out. What other job is there where that would have happened?' (Daphne INT).
Health concerns	'…my health as well has deteriorated quite a lot since I started this job. I'm living on paracetamol' (Daphne INT).
Family pressure and time	'She said how difficult it is for many female social workers who have children and are either single or are the main earner in the household and therefore have little choice but to work full time hours (W 5 10 OBS).
Ethnicity	'… as a black [practitioner] and I had a lot of issues that I raised as we went along' (Trudy INT).
Inexperience	'…teams are relatively inexperienced nowadays, because people have moved on' (Stephanie INT).
High workload	'They pile the child protection on, I know it's because they are short staffed, but that will make people leave (Rachel INT).
Lack of support and supervision	'I feel under so much pressure sometimes with such little support that I just think sometimes, is this worth risking your own health for?' (Kate INT).
Lack of recognition	'we're all being squeezed' and that [service manager] hasn't come to address us to say *I know this is crap at the moment but thanks for sticking with it*…' (Terry R5 13 OBS).

Table 7.54 Challenges to social work resilience – organisational factors

Challenges	Examples
Undervalued	'Things are being noted as not being on the file [by the independent reviewing officer] (IRO) when the social worker said they were. The IRO said this was not accepted (W5 12 OBS).
Unnecessary change	'Nobody wanted to come here [Firthport] and now they are here and have got settled, they don't want to go back' (Sarah INT).
Poor working environment	'In terms of recruitment and retention, have you had a look around this building? It's a fucking dump!' (F 1 OBS).
Lack of resources	'A problem arose as neither the social worker or the policewoman had child seats' (R 2 OBS).
Pressure	'…you can end up getting absolutely nowhere… you've got to be really strong and say, no I'm not racing off to do that' (June INT).
Top down hierarchy	'…nobody's resistant to change; we all know things have to change, but [the recently announced 'collocation'] doesn't make sense to me (Rachel INT).
Poor pay	'What could your employer have done to retain you? …They could have given me more money…(Jim INT).
Audit	'I detect a tangible sense of fear associated with the Joint Appraisal Review (JAR)…involving much speculation about what the inspectors will do, where they will go, and what they will say' (W5 13 OBS).

Table 7.55 Challenges to social work resilience – external factors

Challenges	Examples
Biased media portrayal	'The media always portray social workers negatively – removing kids but never to visit an old lady who has fallen down the stairs' (Sally W5 14 OBS).
Negative public perception	"One woman I worked with thought social workers were on commission for how many children they removed" (Sally W5 14 OBS).
Devalued by other professions	'…we… are…able to recognise things like risk and child abuse and development and so on…its almost like 'anyone can do it', and that's the attitude I don't like (Jane INT).
Politics	Amy discussed government disinterest, a lack of resources and promoting of social workers and a lack of strong voice (Amy W2 16 OBS).

7.4.1 Coping with challenges

All 18 interviewees demonstrated tendencies towards resilience in describing examples of their work related challenges. For some, this was a conscious awareness of personal strength; for others, more subtly implied. Three interviewees (Jim, Stephanie and Felicity) particularly associated resilience with professional expectation in that it 'goes with the territory' of social work and was associated with ability to either do the job, or not. Students and newly qualified social workers (see below) were of particular concern to most interviewees (see sections 7.4.2 and 7.5). A common perception was that new entrants were either 'social work material', or soon realised if this was not case, once working within the child protection environment. However, provision of support was also widely recognised as essential and is discussed further within this chapter (7.4.2). Resilience and a good sense of humour (see section 7.4.5) were highlighted as two key personal qualities. Another generally accepted acknowledgement was that social work was not a job that everyone was capable of doing, despite some

'outsider' perceptions to the contrary, where opinion for some was acknowledged to be that common sense was all that was required to do social work (Jim INT).

Resilience, however, was said to be not exclusively innate and can be gained through experience, according to most social workers who discussed this aspect of coping. Half of all interviewees (Jackie, Rachel, Harriet, Avril, June, Jim, Stephanie, Trudy, and Felicity) reflected on their personal development where experience had increased confidence, and equipped them to better deal with challenge. Rachel, Felicity, and Jim each indicated that whilst an ability to cope in the first year of practice signalled an ability to cope with anything, inner qualities were additionally necessary for the successful navigation of front line challenge. Rachel and Jim reinforced this with insight into how they were (separately) faced with what many practitioners believe to be one of the most traumatic working experiences, as newly qualified social workers:

> 'I nearly left when I started in the July and in the October I was removing a baby at birth under an EPO… no newly qualified worker should have to do that…it wasn't healthy (Rachel INT).

> 'On my first day, I went on my own to remove a newborn child from his mum in hospital…I just couldn't believe it (Jim INT).

Both managed to work through their experience and many other examples discussed thanks to their resilience, reinforced by their personal life experiences, peer support, and social work training. Jim's description of his professional baptism, the lack of preparation of the employer, disorganisation, 'chaos', senior managerial disinterest, and lack of protection afforded staff, arguably framed his perception of ecology and strong detachment to organisational factors. Despite his initial resolve…

> 'I didn't let it get me down. I just thought 'well, crack on – it can't be this bad all the time [laughs]'…his eventual turnover was perhaps inevitable.

However, Jim's ability to downplay and make light of the negativity experienced, combined with a willingness to understand reasons behind the apparent organisational ineptitude reflected those of Daphne presented above in section 7.3.1, and was not uncommon:

> '[It was] just a set of really minor bits and pieces that seemed to stack up' (Jim INT).

This initial employment experience of recruitment is important in shaping organisational attachment (as indicated by Avril, Jane, and Harriet). Jim's following explanation for his ability appears representative of many participants within this study.

> 'I'm a social worker for God's sake; I'm trained to be empathic!' (Jim INT).

7.4.2 Student preparedness for front line practice

Returning to the above-mentioned concern for student and newly qualified social worker ability and welfare, educational establishments were occasionally criticised for not preparing students for the reality of front-line work. This perception was expressed by five interviewees, but was more notable during observational periods, and was additionally shared by some senior managers. Findings associated with senior managers within the Nominal Group Technique did not reflect this concern, as presented in the next Chapter 8.

During a presentational visit to one area office, I was asked directly by a service manager, due to my general association with University education, for insight into the increased volume of dyslexic students entering the profession. This was followed by wonder at achievement of qualification when 'poor grammar' and learning needs were so apparent. Support is discussed in the next section and includes the perspective of a worker with dyslexia that relates specifically to this managerial concern.

For some, concern for appropriate skills were the predominant concern, as indicated by Kevin:

> 'I don't particularly feel that the universities are equipping social workers with the right skills to come and join local authority children and families teams' (Kevin INT).

For others, life experience and student practice within statutory settings were not given the necessary priority:

> 'I think [resilience is] possibly - *and I might be controversial here* - in the process of being eroded; accepting students onto the new social work degree with little or no real experience of much, in terms of life, and social work practice in non-statutory sectors' (Jim INT).

Harriet reflects concern for the importance of personal confidence in new recruits:

> 'I don't know how they'd cope if they didn't have confidence' (Harriet INT).

A student perspective was provided during observations at each worksite, and two interviewees were trainee social workers. Each trainee shared more positive perspectives about their educational experience (within the same university) than Drew, the student on her third and final practice placement (in a different university). Drew acknowledged her social work degree course was 'useful' (F 1 OBS), but she and her peers found it disorganised and especially problematic in finding student placements. Drew's future plans were to work in a city many miles away from North City, and unlike Emma and Jane, she reflected a generally negative perspective of the ecology of practice. This was indicated by her comment that she had 'had enough of anti-oppressive practice', and that she was 'bored' and had 'nothing to do' on one occasion (F 1 OBS).

An additional challenge to the resilience of newly qualified social workers, long-serving practitioners, and managers, was reported by many participants to be the

effect of change in the level of service provision away from that of prevention, towards that of protection. One team manager shared particular concern for the preparedness of students, indicating apparent capability issues where targets were not being met and disciplinary proceedings being initiated. This, combined with understaffed teams was considered to be a particular 'struggle'. She indicated a wider problem in this respect as it was 'not just *new* social workers' (Georgina W2 2 OBS).

7.4.3 Changing nature of front line practice

It was widely acknowledged that the changing nature of children's services, with a shift towards high-end child protection and court work was problematic. No indication was given that the shift should not have taken place, and there existed a general reluctant acceptance that it was somehow inevitable. Participants often referred to preventative work fondly and welcomed the balance it gave to highly pressurised child protection work. This created a perceived void between what students were being trained, and educated to do, and what social workers were actually doing in front line practice. If such little preventative work was available (because it was allocated to family support teams), the dilemma in requiring newly qualified social workers to undertake child protection work existed; what Kevin referred to as 'hitting the ground running'.

While team managers, like Kevin, Harriet, and Trudy were responsible for dealing with the reality of the phenomenon, senior managers occasionally hinted towards their empathy, and frustration. Responsibility, it seemed, for this void lay with educational establishments according to most participant team managers, and senior managers.

Whilst team manager Kevin, doubted the efficacy of social work education for students in becoming social workers, he acknowledged the goalposts had been moved within children's services. He perceived the employer was 'chucking them' into assessment teams before being ready which inevitably led to 'burn out' (Kevin INT). This reflected a widely held view across all grades that newly qualified social workers needed, and had a right, to be nurtured, protected, and mentored. This

was believed to be of more significance within the recognised climate of competition of recruitment (Rachel, Sarah, Harriet, Avril, Stephanie, Felicity, Daphne, and Kevin). Both trainee social workers expressed appreciation that their employment status afforded them a degree of protection in this respect, although they were still required to work with cases involving child protection.

All three team managers interviewed expressed their particular recognition for the need of genuine and meaningful support of newly qualified social workers, from within individual and organisational factors. Mentoring was specifically noted for its strengths in developing professional practice, confidence, and efficacy. Each demonstrated value in the need for within and across team peer support and their personal dependence on senior practitioners and more experienced team members. Kevin also acknowledged the need for support of himself by senior managers, in addition to underpinning government policy, within this framework.

7.4.4 The 'coping mask' of resilience

In reflection of collective social commentary, analysis turned towards the need to cope, within contexts of male dominated organisational principles (Jones 2001), managerialist reconfiguration (Harlow 2004), patriarchy and heroism (Charles and Butler 2004) and reluctance in display of emotion (Munro 2009) (see Chapter 3.5.3). This is of particular relevance within the predominantly female workforce nationally (LGA 2009b) and locally (see Chapter 5.5.2).

As indicated above, resilience was a key theme within this study, enabling participants to cope within their profession. Resilience of interviewees was found to be mainly high and wide ranging. The following quotes represent the two extremes across the range of indicators for resilience; from the very high:

"I think that I can manage most things really" (Felicity),

to very low...:

"I don't know why I'm here actually because I am pissed off [cries]. It's just one big struggle, you've got enough working with people who are at risk without struggling" (Sarah).

Reasons for retention, and to be resilient were equally diverse, most often centring on a commitment to service users, the self and family, colleagues, and most predominantly, the team. Discussion around such commitment often elicited the most positive responses within the study findings. In most cases a clear distinction is made between the front-line, where camaraderie was apparent, and senior managers and/or the employer, for whom little allegiance was expressed. This reinforced the sense of attachment and detachment with associated ecology factors presented in section 7.3. (Also see discussion on this apparent divide in Chapter 9, and recommendations for resolution in Chapter 10).

In order to establish any effect of the above social commentary concerns, individual interviewee transcription data was compared to observational data where the interviewee's identity was clearly provided. Interview scratch notes, and subsequent expanded notes were also analysed for indications of personality traits within each scenario; the privacy and intimacy of the interview room and the far less discrete social arena of front line practice. Most interviewees were noted to reflect the same, or largely similar views regardless of the setting, but were, perhaps understandably less likely to exude negativity before team managers, and further less likely before senior managers during my observations. That is not to say negativity was not expressed openly to managers.

Within the 'open forum' of the team room, on rare occasions negativity was expressed to senior managers, the nature of expression was different and more restrained, more polite, and more jovial than during interviews. The reluctance towards free expression appeared to be connected to concepts of power and fear within organisational factors of practice ecology (Hafford-Letchfield 2009: 30).

An example of the reluctance for free expression of negative perceptions, and an apparent undermining of autonomy through hierarchical power and organisational

structure was at a senior management 'Emergency Meeting' about collocation where the general plan of team moves was explained to a large gathering representing half of the city-wide children's service (F 14 OBS). The meeting was identified by senior managers, not as a consultation, but an, 'opportunity to go public' about speculation associated with the relocation of the service teams. Many uncertainties about this were presented, including doubts about the future existence of Firthport as a worksite. Although staff despondency was sensed throughout, no one was prepared to question the presenting senior managers. However, once they left, the consensus of despondency became apparent. One worker commented afterwards that it was "unnecessarily churning up panic" (OBS Fir: 104) for senior managers to refer to the meeting as 'an emergency'. The two comments shouted out immediately after their departure were:

'I'm leaving!'

and

"I'm off to watch Little Britain [satirical TV comedy] tonight, and that'll make more sense!" (F 14 OBS).

People appeared anxious and were uncertain about their future with the news that major disruption would occur at some point within the next five months. Observational data collection captured elements of the relocation taking place nine months after this senior management presentation, lending support to the above social worker's concern about connotations of the word 'emergency'.

To return to the findings when comparisons of interview and observational data were made, a notable 'coping mask' was established relating to self-presentation within the team environment and how that 'slips' during the interview situation. This was found in three interviews (Rachel, Sarah and Avril) and was most apparent in the case of Sarah. Sarah presented as a comical misanthropist, and dominant character within the team room. She was the social worker who joked that the director of services had sent a spy into their camp (see sections 4.4.1 and

5.3.3). Her abruptness was charming and cheeky, as opposed to rude, when she *told* me to introduce myself on entering the team, without raising her eyes from her work on her desk (F 1 OBS).

Sarah (a self-proclaimed *'gob on legs'*) (F 1 OBS) was the key instigator of banter and badinage within her team, with dynamics changing and becoming less humorous when she was not present (F 4 OBS). She openly expressed her negativity across the team, whilst her *'new boy team manager'* (Sarah INT) was away, becoming more reserved in his presence. A strong, jovial, resilient, long-serving and healthily cynical social worker was presented and captured during the observational period. Although, a similar pattern was initially found during the interview, a more serious, considered, and knowledgeable woman was increasingly portrayed.

Further into the interview signs of vulnerability were noted with expressions of 'fear', 'guilt', and feeling 'unsafe'. It became apparent that she had endured some particularly negative experiences during her lengthy career within North City, including bullying, oppression, and sexism. These were associated with her reported previous period of poor physical health. After an hour of interviewing Sarah broke down and cried; in contrast to all previous observations, she appeared defeated. Following a short break, Sarah chose to continue, and at the end of the interview ten minutes later, Sarah was joking and resembling her more familiar self. Sarah did not need to be positive in order to demonstrate resilience; she favoured humour:

> 'I don't know, all I seem to do is moan; you know, not only about my neck! [both laughed]' (Sarah OBS).

This observed appearance of coping seemed related to top down hierarchical power but was also combined, in Sarah's case, with the need to cope before the team.

When resilience was analysed against staff grade, a notable reversal of suppression was found at team manager level, where it appeared to be deemed necessary to 'be positive' and 'be coping' than not. Harriet and Trudy were both able to express their more negative concerns about their experiences during interviews than was observed of their work. Both team managers had reputations for positivity and for being good to work for. One worker referred to Trudy as being 'lovely' saying, 'they're the team that don't bite' (W2 12 OBS) when I debated belatedly joining Trudy's team meeting. This reinforces Trudy's perception that she had developed a 'teamy' team (see 7.5.3). A senior practitioner within Trudy's team, with nearly 30 years qualified experience reinforced this the following day:

> 'I deputy for Trudy and we have clear expectations of each other, and we know what each other wants' (Mary R2 13 OBS).

Trudy acknowledged her strengths (of being a 'people's person', and an ability to not 'always follow the guidelines religiously') and appeared to have a high degree of self-efficacy ('I tend to mould things'), but peppered her interview language with numerous references to good 'luck' and 'fortune' in relation to team cohesion. She also explained that despite appearances:

> 'I think I can do better…because I haven't got the backup there, the cover. I feel I'm *constantly* having to be available' (Trudy INT),

and in relation to finishing supervision early because of work pressure:

> '…you go back and you think – '*this is actually appalling really'*. It's not good enough…I feel almost guilty' (Trudy INT).

A similar scenario was found for Harriet, who again, shared a positive perspective. Her language was interjected with similar references to being 'lucky' and 'landed on our feet' in respect of avoiding 'all sorts of trouble' team-wise; 'they just fit in'. Harriet also identified her strengths as being 'listening and honest' and 'non-

dictatorial, but challenging when necessary' (Harriet INT). With regard to her own practice Harriet said,

> 'It's all heavy-end…there are no easy decisions…I just haven't got time and have to make a quick decision, sometimes off the top of my head…big decisions…' (Harriet INT),

and in relation to her resilience compared to a newly qualified worker on the team,

> '…she was panicking……… Am I so far removed that it's only the *really* heavy-end [work] that I think about?' and '…you forget how daunting it can be' (Harriet INT).

As suggested, resilience and the ability to cope with the challenge of social work in North City is a key theme in this study. A powerful method employed in resilience is humour, as indicated by Sarah. Findings relating to humour, banter and badinage are now presented in the next section.

7.4.5 Humour, banter and badinage

> *'Friday 5pm. With a wry smile of her face, Felicity shouts sarcastically across the room to her remaining colleagues as she leaves, "Hope the JAR goes well for you!" She teases them knowing she will be on leave next week.*
> *Her colleagues are in hysterics as they joke about employing 'comedy actors' to take their places in meeting with the inspectors. They describe the faces of the inspectors whilst the chaos ensues. They descend into further hysterics' (W5 14 OBS).*

The literature suggests 'fun' and 'social work' are words rarely used within the same sentence. Personal experience however, equipped me with the knowledge that humour, banter, and badinage were likely to surface during the period of data

collection in this study. The previous sections within this Chapter indicate high levels of negativity within North City and that a dominant sense of feeling undervalued prevails. Social workers generally appear to demonstrate resilience in enabling them to cope with the complex challenges faced within their work. This section presents findings that suggest the importance of humour within front line social work and how participants employ its use to reinforce their resilience.

An unexpected finding in this study was the frequency of laughter recorded during interviews and observations. The distinction was drawn that laughter was associated with humour rather than nervousness for the purpose of analysis. Laughter, included my own where it was in response to humour expressed by the interviewee. Analysis indicated a total of 226 separate laughs, providing an average of 12 per interview with a range of 3 (Carol) to 40 (Stephanie). Observational data supported this with frequent scenarios described and references to 'laughter', 'banter', and 'humour'. My personal judgement on humour was irrelevant for the purpose of the analysis and whilst I inevitably found many of these occurrences funny, comical, or humorous, this was not always the case; they were recorded as being so for the participants in order to gain a holistic appreciation of the phenomenon. My involvement in some of the humour is acknowledged, although this was purposefully minimal, but balanced with my need to build and maintain trust, and rapport with participants.

Many participants discussed the concept of humour, valued it significantly, and acknowledged the necessity for its employment in order to cope with their work. In this respect, humour was revered and recognised by some as being somehow different:

> 'We got by on our dark sense of humour' (Jim INT);

and

> ''…they've all got a mad sense of humour, the lot of them' (Felicity INT).

Context is also considered important in order to gain an understanding of what could be misinterpreted or misunderstood, especially outside of the profession. This reflects the wider world where the sensitivities and complexities of humour are

noted. The following two quotes from separate worksites encapsulate observed social work humour reflecting exchanges between workers in relation to case factors:

> 'Daisy: *"How tough can a 6 year old girl be?"*
>
> Felicity: *"Well her mum has got a gun and a knife; remember, so she probably is quite hard!"'* (W5 4 OBS);

and,

> 'Poor little baby, he's got a crap name *and* he's got a heroin addiction' (F 13 OBS).

When analysed for social worker grade, the adoption of humour was found across all levels of front line services. Team managers used humour to reinforce camaraderie and team unity, although this not observed in all teams or described by all interviewees. A relationship was noted between those managers who were generally highly regarded and approachable and their ability to use humour in maintaining a sense of being 'in it together'. These managers were observed as successfully integrating the serious issues of child protection with humility and the ability to communicate with their staff at a level that is perceived as appreciated, welcomed, and important. The following observation captures such positive interaction between Carla, a duty and assessment team manager, and her team where use of sarcasm is employed:

> 'Monday 12.10pm: Carla receives a new referral by email. She prints it out and reads it to Daisy and Brent (support worker). She describes a case involving domestic violence at a child's birthday party where the male and female had an argument and caused damage to property. The female's mother was also involved. The male involved decided to walk down the road in the path of oncoming traffic.

> The team begin to gather around and make light-hearted comparisons to
> their own families and trouble caused at their family get-togethers and
> weddings. Humour is never far away.
> Carla says jokingly, and with a big smile, "*Thanks for your help on this one;
> I'm pleased you're taking this one seriously*'" (W5 14 OBS).

The following quote from Felicity, a duty and assessment senior practitioner
underpins her belief that humour is a form of self-protection that significantly
contributes to her retention, and the ability of many to remain working in child
protection. Citing 'pure luck' as being responsible, Felicity claimed that every team
she has worked in used humour, and had high levels of morale throughout her
lengthy social work career. She captures the functional aspect of the theme of
humour within this study:

> 'OK people are joking but you have to realise some of the dreadful things
> that people are working with really' (Felicity INT).

To summarise, numerous examples were found were humour was either discussed
or directly employed. It is widely recognised to be a key ingredient in social worker
resilience, as an effective tool for team bonding, and for negating grade barriers.
The next section presents findings that support the relationship between age,
experience, and confidence, and resilience.

7.4.6 Age, experience, and confidence

Experienced social workers are highly valued within the profession, as reflected in
the literature review chapters. They are more important wherever recruitment and
retention problems exist. Team managers shared a frustration that the distribution
of newly qualified staff was beyond their control; senior management told them
when a new recruit would be joining their team. This reinforces the element of luck
associated with successful teams reported by each, but especially Harriet and
Trudy. Kevin was 'unlucky' in that he reported receiving a young newly qualified
worker into his team with no statutory placement experience, and no grounding in
child protection practice. Within his previously quoted concern that universities had

ill-prepared students Jim acknowledged employing agency responsibilities in their role for providing adequate student placements.

Whilst he reported his concerns in this respect, Kevin also noted a trend in newly qualified social workers that contradicts, in part, his argument of the lack of preparedness. They appear to be making informed choices about their professional career paths:

> 'They [student social workers] go to university because they want to do *something*…they don't think it's a profession that's some kind of woolly set up. I think younger people now who come into the profession…22-23 years of age…realise it's not fantastic money…' (Kevin INT).

For all three team managers the pressure of time to support newly qualified social workers was a serious problem, compounded by the previously reported predominance of 'heavy-end' child protection work. They each wanted to ensure full induction was provided, utilising their own strengths but also those within the team, with the support of senior practitioners to provide mentoring in upholding the wellbeing and protection of new employees. This nurturing of social workers was strongly believed to be linked to retention and was related to from positive experiences from Harriet and Trudy, and from frustratingly negative experiences from Kevin, whose team was 'turned totally upside down' by through turnover (Kevin INT). The pressure of time reported by team managers to provide the necessary environment for new social workers was exemplified during observations but also during the research interviews for this study. All three team manager interviews were interrupted by a member of their team, needing their urgent attention, despite being conducted in private rooms away from teams.

Some social workers shared negative perspectives about newly qualified social workers (see Jim's comment in section 6.4.2) relating to an erosion of resilience created by an influx of new and inexperienced students becoming newly qualified social workers. To reinforce the above team manager concerns of the need for support not all social workers are perceived to have the qualities that enable them

to cope under the intense pressure they regularly face. In such cases the new social worker will either leave relatively quickly, or persevere through determination and resilience. For Felicity this concept was clear but ignores issues around support, although subsequently provided insight suggesting supportive measures can enable those that initially feel inadequate to become effective practitioners:

> '…my view is that you can either do [it or you can't]…people find out very early if they can't do social work and I think they find that in the first year or so' (Felicity INT).

Here, Felicity recalls experience within previous employment with a more supportive organisation:

> '[they] were excellent for newly qualified workers…they had a lot of very experienced staff. Because of that…students…didn't actually do any child protection or care proceedings until [they] were level 2 or level 3. You'd share a case with a more experienced social worker, so you are much more protected…' (Felicity INT).

In support of less favourable perspectives of students, and newly qualified social workers, age was occasionally cited as problematic; perhaps reflecting anxiety at the time around the reduced age limit for entry into social work education when the degree was introduced in 2003 (GSCC 2010). This view appeared to be shared only by interviewees who had been qualified for many years (Sarah, Jim, Felicity), but not exclusively so (Stephanie), and was universally related to the age of the participant; they were all over 40 years old.

The concern for age and inexperience is epitomized by Sarah who assessed the student on final placement within her team to be a:

> 'very green 21 year old from a well off family with no life-skills or experience to take out there' (Sarah INT).

This concern is perhaps better understood within the context of her previous experience where:

> '…a young girl, just qualified, she came for about 3 weeks…she just said "*I don't even want to have anything to do with it so I'm going back to teaching*" - I don't think they realise how crap it is until they come into it' (Sarah INT).

Sarah explains this contributes to young newly qualified social workers being fearful of making key decisions in peoples' lives; something she admits to having never got used to, despite being qualified for nearly 16 years.

The general view of new and inexperienced staff however, was positive. The opening year in the life of a newly qualified social worker was referred to on many occasions, usually being identified as a time to be nurtured, protected, and supported, until confidence and competence levels were sufficient. Positivity was also expressed by two newly qualified social workers in the process of transferring their agency contracts to statutory, one of whom Jess explained her decision as a matter of personal security, loving the work, appreciating her team support, and being comfortable in her surroundings (F 9 OBS). This corresponds with team manager perspectives of the need to nurture their staff, especially as Jess and her colleague worked within Harriet's team.

Older age, experience, or retention were not always perceived as being beneficial for practice. An anecdotal citywide perception was that one entire worksite (and especially one team) was inflexible and unwilling to accept change. Reasons for their apparent rigidity were associated with their individual ages, longevity, and their isolated geographical location. Two team managers shared particularly positive beliefs about their younger and newly qualified social workers: they were more flexible, and receptive to change. This had been particularly positive around the collocation of duty teams, generally perceived to be a major and unwelcome upheaval. Trudy supported this view and, whilst appreciating an age and skill mix within her team, was unique in her expression that turnover could be a positive concept.

> '…people see a move as a negative thing…I think it is quite productive and you can develop skills' (Trudy INT).

Trudy's view did, however, reflect the wider concern for the need for opportunities for within-service mobility, cited by many participants as a powerful retention policy (see Chapter 9).

7.4.7   Concluding comments

The previous sections identify concerns that being the most experienced social worker within a team after three years from qualification is particularly challenging. This is compounded where additional problems exist in the absence of more senior front line staff; namely senior practitioners and team managers. Whilst the remaining front line workers 'cope' with increasing workload, the pressure impacts on morale, job satisfaction, and ability to conduct the work required in protecting children. Problems are exacerbated by feelings of being undervalued by the employer, associated with inadequate resources, poor working environments, top-down hierarchical oppression and a lack of support. Participants have demonstrated resilience, underpinned by supportive inter-personal relationships within front line networks, camaraderie, and humour. Key findings relating to these relationships are presented within the next section and reflect the complexities involved in the fast-developing world of children's services.

7.5   Relationships

Participants frequently cited relationships, both directly and indirectly and indicated their fundamental and all-encompassing nature within social work. This section presents findings using the now familiar four factors associated with the ecology of practice (Baumann 1997). Analysis indicates the complexity and wide variety of social work relationships involving human relational dynamics across the societal spectrum. The following tables (7.18 and 7.19) present individual and external, and case and external factor relationships identified within this study:

Table 7.56 Individual and Organisational Factor Social Worker Relationships

Individual Factor Relationships		Organisational Factor Relationships	
Internal	**External**	**Internal**	**External**
Social Workers	Secure Unit workers	Senior Management Team	Independent Reviewing Officers
Managers	Residential Care Staff		Panel Teams
Family Support Workers	Practice Assessors		Inspectors
Business Support Workers			Trainers
Students			

Table 7.57 Case and External Factor Social Worker Relationships

Case Factor Relationships		External Factor Relationships		
The Child	**Extended**	**Services**	**Inter-disciplinary**	**Other**
Pre-born babies	Siblings	Volunteers	Counsellors	University lecturers/staff
New born babies	Parents	Advocates	Drug/Alcohol Workers	Journalists
Children	Grandparents	Community Support Staff	General Practitioners	Religious Representatives
Young People	Extended families	Shop Workers	Health Visitors	Court staff
Adolescents	Peers	Taxi Drivers	Midwives	Judges
Care Leavers	Local Communities		Nurses	Members of Parliament
	Foster Carers		Paediatricians	Councillors
	Adopters		Police Officers	Children's Guardians
			Solicitors	Psychologists
			Youth Offending Team Workers	Psychiatrists
			Youth Workers	

The subsequent sections within this chapter presents findings associated with the relationships highlighted within the above table from the perspective of participants. Whilst categorisation is challenging due to the complexities involved, these are grouped as positive or negative across the four factors of social work ecology and reiterated with illustrative quotations. Challenges mainly exist because of the very personal nature and understanding of human relationships. As previously indicated in this chapter (and in depth within Chapter 4), the triangulation of methods enabled the opportunity for cross-analysis of research data, especially using interviews and observations. This front line participant perspective informed the assessment of relationships as positive or negative as presented in the following Table 7.20 where an indicative rationale is also given. Examples are however provided from both perspectives within each relationship factor to illustrate the complexities and occasional contradictions within, and to present a holistic overview of the relationship theme.

Table 7.58 Assessment and rationale for participant relationship across ecological factors

Nature of relationship	Assessment of relationship	Individual perspective of predominant rationale
Individual/case factor	Positive	Making a difference Doing social work Rewarding
Individual/individual factor	Positive	Teamwork Support Banter
Individual/organisational factor	Negative	Undervalued Scrutinised Restricted
Individual/external factor	Negative	Undervalued Misunderstood Misrepresented

7.5.1 Positive individual/case factor relationships

Many social workers expressed dedication and satisfaction in their ability to help service users through direct work, actively making a positive difference in their lives. As indicated in the previous section (7.4) findings identify the relationship between resilience and the ability to do social work, and in turn make a positive difference in the lives of their service users, resulting in personal feelings of reward and job satisfaction. This section of Adam's conversation with me encapsulates this positive feeling:

> 'I love my job; it's so rewarding. Like that one I was telling you about – the boy getting adopted and the meeting I'd arranged for the foster-carer to meet the adoptive parent. We were all sobbing and feeling so emotional; it was just great…I'm just off to another meeting now for a different case, where the adoptive mum will meet Danielle, the 5 year old child, for the first time. I'll be crying when I get back to the office!' (Adam F 4 OBS).

Section 7.4 indicates the significance of humour used by participants as a coping mechanism. Some of this humour could lead to possible interpretations of disrespect and insensitivity towards service users. However, because this is adopted within the privacy of professional boundaries, and is balanced by a universal commitment to service users, the findings suggest high levels of sensitivity, empathy and understanding.

Narrative accounts were shared of emotional distress at removing babies at birth from their mothers (see section 7.8), provision of life-changing support in order to enable families to remain together, and of personal disappointment and upset where parents failed to turn up to contact meetings with their estranged children, of tenacity in gaining resources and occasional 'bending of rules' in order to ensure client wellbeing, and of bravery in working with service users whom representatives of other professional organisations had refused to work with, of being verbally and physically threatened by abusive parents, of working through annual leave and unpaid overtime in order to keep up with what was perceived as the relentless and increasing pressure to help protect children, of travelling across the country at

personal cost because no essential car user allowance was paid, and being too busy to claim back mileage, and of working with daily reports and occurrences of the abuse of children and young people.

These accounts and observations represented many of the reasons social workers initially joined the profession and are perceived as being of great value. However, a further general perception existed that the direct role with service users was threatened by increasing organisational demand for accountability and meeting of targets, using time-consuming methods and resources that impeded this process. Many additional concerns were raised that family support workers were increasingly conducting direct work. Kate summarises this dilemma:

> 'We just go in at a bad point in relation to child protection, just picking up the pieces and always fighting. We don't have time to engage with and befriend them' (Kate INT).

7.5.2 Negative individual/case factor relationships

Negativity was also expressed about the working relationship with service users outside of the bounds of humour. As indicated, threats to social workers were occasionally reported. A rare reference to weapons was recorded:

> *"In an earlier related incident, the mother had a gun to her head when the children were in the house two weeks ago"* (W 2 OBS).

Frustration and disappointment were also expressed at not successfully engaging with service users in order to achieve desired goals. This was said to be increasingly prevalent in child protection work, where service users were reportedly less likely to engage.

7.5.3 Positive individual/individual factor relationships

Numerous references have been presented so far within this chapter to the positive perception of participant relationships across front line social work. These include the appreciation of peer, and team manager support, the element of teamwork, and

being 'teamy', as well as the value of banter and badinage. The positive individual/individual factor relationship, involving front line workers was identified as the key source for social workers feeling positively valued. The team manager was observed, and reported to play a pivotal role in the perception of positivity or negativity associated with the individual factor, although, where the social worker/team manager relationship was negative, the team invariably fulfilled this central role. This phenomenon of replacement peer support was demonstrated by Kate, an apparent victim of bullying, dependent on the mood of her team manager:

'We all get on really well and look after each other in the team…' (Kate INT).

Reflecting on the poor relationship with her manager, Kate implies that she is aware of what she is missing:

'I think if you've got a good team manager, you can get through anything' (Kate INT).

With around 20 years of experience, Kimberley believed the team manager protected her team from senior management in cushioning it from downward pressure:

"I think the team manager probably feels [pressure] more than we do because they are in-between; they are a buffer for us really…" (Felicity INT).

In this sense, social workers generally portrayed a sense of appreciation and protectiveness over their positively regarded team managers. For example, June implied empathy over concerns about workload and allocation, with a sense of resigned acceptance of little sign of abatement:

"I know for a fact that the team managers don't want us all carry these caseloads but there's little choice really" (June INT).

As suggested, peer support and the reciprocal nature of valuing each other amongst social workers and support workers was frequently expressed and linked to retention. This aspect of retention, despite negative perceptions, was best exemplified by Jim who explained his perseverance prior to his eventual turnover:

> "I stayed because of the team. We were really close and remained unchanged for a long time. We were tight as a team and although the previous team manager was useless, it got so much better when [the new team manager] joined us. The team was mutually supportive and we all knew each other's cases and personal issues. We all got on well and were able to say what we needed to say" (Jim INT).

7.5.4 Negative individual/individual factor relationships

Participants very rarely expressed criticism of each other, within grade, during the fieldwork, although anecdotal references to examples of poor practice were sometimes made. One worker, Bill, was observed shouting expletives within a busy team room. He was angry at being covertly allocated a case without consultation. His team colleagues appeared unhappy at his outburst, yet even here, light was made:

> 'Sarah: "*I don't think there's any need for your foul mouth*"
>
> Bill: "*I've got social worker Tourettes!*" (F 11 OBS).

I subsequently learned that another colleague had confronted Bill about the incident because she was on the telephone to a service user at the time.

Criticism was, however, expressed about a lack of team manager support and oppressive managerial practice. The above incident was one of only three where an explosion of rage occurred. Two of these were caused by covert allocation of casework by the team manager where they appear on the computer system without prior consultation with the social worker (W5 13 OBS). Such inappropriate practice of allocation was reported to be dangerous in the public inquiry into the

death of Maria Colwell published in 1974 (Secretary of State for Social Services 1974). Three interviewee participants also highlighted the problem. Kate noted the consequence of this experience within a separate worksite:

> 'It makes you look stupid if another professional [outside social work] tells you you're the allocated worker because it's on the computer system and your manager hasn't even told you' (Kate INT).

Team manager inexperience was also cited as unappreciated as previously highlighted by Sarah (see section 7.4.4) where she refers to her manager with three years of experience as a 'new boy'. She was particularly displeased with his insistence that his team would not benefit from the nine-day fortnight, despite this being initiated two years previously within recruitment and retention policy (see Chapter 6.2).

In contrast to positively reported supervisory experiences, a final concern within this negative relationship was that of formal supervision, reinforcing the pivotal role presented in the previous section. Previous references to dissatisfaction have already been presented but of most concern was the following exceptional reference by Kate:

> 'Before I joined this team two year ago, I went a full year without supervision. I eventually confronted the team manager about it, and he said I was 50 per cent to blame' (Kate INT).

Additional criticism of team managers and supervision was the of lack pre-booked meetings, the lack of adherence to these when they are booked, and the lack of organisational structure within the context of formal supervision. A common perception was that an increasing focus was afforded to case management and allocation, at the cost of subordinate welfare, personal development, and the advancement of professional practice.

7.5.5 Positive individual/organisational factor relationships

It is widely reported in this chapter that negativity in the individual/organisational factor relationship far outweighs positivity. However, positive examples were found, as also previously indicated, and are presented in this section. Five separate findings reflect a noted historical improvement in the operation of children's services in North City. Agency worker Jackie, with apparent intentions to remain detached but positive about her employer reported a view shared by a few, particularly with reference to support for training:

> '[North City] was a failing council across the board, especially in social
> services and it was quite a dire place to work for I've been lead to believe
> and over the last 5 years it is quite a proactive, forward thinking council; and
> it is' (Jackie INT).

Harriet provided a somewhat indirectly positive team manager perspective, where she explained that each team manager within Firthport shared her negative view of the imminent relocation/collocation of teams. She acknowledged the logic of such a move however, and that it was the result of senior management actively listening to team manager requests for collocation because of staffing problems and duty cover. The collective negativity was, as she saw it, centred on workers having established comfort and familiarity with their previously disliked working environment.

Two senior managers were separately observed, providing what appeared to be covert support to front line workers. On each occasion, telephone calls were made to senior managers away from the teams involved, and across professions (education, and the police), where resource implications were clarified in order to protect the subject of the call. Each was heard to defend the social worker's assessment and the need for recommendations to be followed. It is not known if this support was conveyed to the individual workers involved. One interviewee,

however, appreciated the value of such direct support, when it was perceived to be given sincerely:

> 'I am aware of times when the service manager has reported to the team manager that my statement was excellent. That's all it takes' (Kate INT).

By contrast, the next section briefly presents what signifies the arena for the relationship of the dominant theme in this study, feeling undervalued.

7.5.6 Negative individual/organisational factor relationships

Key indicators for this relationship are those of social workers feeling undervalued, scrutinised, and restricted by their employer. As stated, many references are made to this core feature of the findings of this study.

During the observational period it was noted that in the previous year (2004) the degree of dissatisfaction amongst front line social workers was such that a collective 'Level One' grievance was made to the operations manager. This highlighted sickness, long term absence, low morale, lack of equity, health and safety issues, covert allocations and blame culture as major factors in dissatisfaction. The recruitment policy presented in Chapter 6.2 is referred to and the issue of staffing was perceived as a not being addressed. Here follows an excerpt from that grievance:

> "The measures introduced last year to promote recruitment and retention of Social Work staff has failed. We believe that there has been no proactive programme to halt the drain of skilled workers leaving the department. Newly qualified workers feel overwhelmed and unable to develop their practice in a positive way. We are angry that cases continue to be allocated with no regards to staffing levels, capacity and experience of workers or the floor as a whole" (North City Memorandum, 2004: 1).

This method taken to address concern was exceptional and whilst many concerns were raised throughout the data collection, participants appeared universally reluctant to address them upwards through the hierarchical managerial structure, the previous example at the emergency meeting being a good example of this. The following statements appear to explain this general reluctance to challenge senior management, implying a fear of being negatively labelled followed by possible insight into why the situation has not been improved:

> "My head was often above the parapet as far as the management were concerned" (Rebecca W5 11 OBS);

> "He was a very oppressive [senior manager] and because I rubbed him up the wrong way, because I just kept challenging…until he made it quite clear that he didn't want me in his service" (Sarah INT);

> "…people don't want to stick their necks out so nothing changes" (Francis W2 6 OBS).

For some workers the changing nature of the work was problematic and hindered their ability to fulfil their professional responsibility. Dan, a social worker with over 20 years of experience, left his team during the period of observation, to work within a family placement team. His reasons for turnover were health related with a need for a less stressful environment. In his leaving speech to colleagues and managers (including one senior manager) he said he had had enough. He also added that children and family social work had changed in a way he no longer felt related to the reason he became a social worker in the first place. He explained the shift from preventative, direct work, including child protection, had become more about "case managing" (W5 11 OBS). Dan later that afternoon cited the emphasis on targets, performance indicators and allocation at the cost of workers spending time getting to know the families they work with. He felt particular respect for one senior manager (who also left the department during this study) because she worked her way up through grades and therefore maintained an

apparent sense of social work values relating to people as opposed to cases (W5 11 OBS).

7.5.7   Positive individual/external factor relationships

Very few positive references were provided within the collected data relating to the individual/external factor relationship. One report made by a Black African social worker indicated an overwhelmingly positive experience since arriving in Britain in 2002. She expressed how welcomed into the country she had been and reported how pleased she was at not having experienced any racism at all. This was unexpected because research suggested the reverse for some Zimbabwean social workers having generally poor experiences when they left their country of origin to join the Rotherham local authority (Sale 2002). Anecdotal evidence suggests many were not subsequently retained.

The challenge of modern inter-disciplinary working when compared to previous models of working was of concern to some participants. Reflecting a sense that the relationship had deteriorated, from what was once more positive, Sarah provided the following insight:

> "I am a big believer in working on 'patch'…it felt safer because you established better relationships through everyone on your patch; through schools, health visitors, and that has been lost again because [duty work] has gone up to a huge access team. We are not having that initial contact anymore. Like Mary in our team was the person who took the calls so she knew everything that had come through…it just felt safer" (Sarah INT).

7.5.8   Negative individual/external factor relationships

Following up on Sarah's above perception of the deterioration of inter-professional relationships, from what used to be a positive community-based approach, she provides further insight into a perception commonly shared with fellow participants, that other professionals do not appear to recognise the professional status of social workers:

"I think as a profession it is not seen by other professionals as equal…we battle in court and nobody takes your word for anything anymore…[we] are supposed to be working together but you are battling with…health visitors, doctors...we have a hell of a time in court; Guardians are at you…nobody seems to value you as a profession…The theory of 'Working Together' [policy guidance] is great, but in practice I think it's a long way from being there (Sarah INT).

Observations of practice within and around the court setting concurred with the thrust of Sarah's concern, where during a meeting, a solicitor for a parent of a contested case continually aimed communication towards the solicitors for the child's Guardian, and the child, rather than the two social workers also present, even when they were better placed to provide the necessary answers to questions asked (W2 15 OBS).

Negatively perceived relationships at societal level were widely recognised by participants and were summarised by Jackie:

"…no-one likes a social worker...we're on the same par as the police and traffic wardens" (Jackie INT).

Reflecting a more positive appreciation of the inter-professional relationship within the external factor, Jackie indicates that societal image of social workers provides a barrier to practice that needs to be broken through positive communication. Jackie reflects the frequently expressed view, often with an apparent resigned acceptance that, despite building rapport and having many positive relationships in a combination of supporting and protecting roles, the general public and media perception of social workers is predominantly negative. It seems that although negativity originates from misunderstandings of social work within the external factor relationship, it somehow goes with the job. This expands further on the quote presented in Table 7.4 (in section 7.3).

'There is a need for our role…the best way to get past that negative…image that we've got to be nice to people, and treat them with respect…I would say - hand on heart - most of my clients…may not like what I say to them from time to time but they like me as a person…I'm straight with them…I'm fair. And I actually quite like most of my clients…But even people that don't like social workers would look at you and say 'well you're a social worker, but you're alright'…it's one of those jobs where you're damned if you do…you're damned if you don't' (Jackie INT).

Finally, the following exchange demonstrates how the team manager enhances the positive internal/internal relationship by using humour to defuse a negative internal/external perception of front line workers:

'Georgina: "Do you want to go on 'Total Respect' Training?"

Rebecca: "Yes definitely!"

Georgina: "It's OK as long as you don't mind being told that social
              workers are crap" (W2 10 OBS).

7.5.9 Concluding comments

This section has presented findings associated with the complex relational aspects of social work practice and how positively, and negatively perceived relationships within each ecological factor relate to the previously highlighted themes of feeling undervalued and resilience.

The next section briefly presents findings allied to the theme of perception and the significance of its relationship with communication. A subsequent section of illustrative findings on the emotive nature of social work follows this. These are discussed further in Chapter 9.

7.6 Perception and communication

Previous sections have introduced findings that include reference to the power of perception within each ecological factor: being valued or undervalued; being resilient, or aiming to be perceived as being resilient; or relationships. As stated, this section highlights the theme of perception and the significance of its relationship with communication within the case study context. It is argued that the findings presented in this chapter are all based on perception: researcher perception, as the instrument of data collection, and participants' perception of their experiences within their ecological environment of social work; framed by the interpretation of case study research design.

However, the focus of this section is that of the specific, and sometimes contradictory perceptions that influence the predominantly negative front line/senior management relationship. Central to this are two separate, but related events instigated by senior managers that, in turn centre on the relocation of teams across North City. Findings demonstrate how negative front line perception prevails, despite the positive intentions of the senior managers, and how perception can change, contrary to expectation. Chapter 9 develops this theme and argues the need for a reframing of ideas for both parties in order to enhance the working relationship: for senior managers to give sensitive and thorough consideration of front line perception in their communication, and be receptive to constructive challenge, and for front line workers to consider methods of constructive communication of concern and be receptive to effort to improve made by senior managers.

7.6.1 The 'emergency' meeting

The previous section 7.4.4 introduced the scenario of the emergency senior management meeting where front line workers were informed of the need to relocate at some point in the future. It demonstrated the reluctance of the audience to openly challenge the presenters, despite universal anxiety, concern and in some cases, upset. Additionally noted was the apparent reluctance of the two senior manager presenters to be challenged by the audience, despite their

being a strong sense of collective concern whilst they were present. It is also argued that high levels of anxiety might be a reasonable expectation in such circumstances.

In the aftermath of this meeting that lasted, for some, around nine months, participants universally reported their general dissatisfaction about the senior management handling of the relocation, whether they agreed with the need to move or not. Particular focus was given to the list of uncertainties expressed within the presentation, including one of not knowing the eventual location of one area office site due to leasing problems, the lack of empathy expressed throughout, the language used, including terms 'emergency' and 'meeting' that appeared to be contrary to proceedings. Examples of the perceptions of some participants relating to the relocation follow.

Reflecting the quotation cited in Table 7.15 (section 7.4), Terry expressed particular disappointment that the service manager had not addressed the affected teams in acknowledgment of the anxiety and concern around a recent inspection and imminent relocation. She perceived her senior manager to be uncaring and lacking the insight to understand the anxiety within the team. She appeared upset and commented how staff would have welcomed a show of empathy and appreciation:

> "we're all being squeezed' and that [service manager] hasn't come to address us to say, *I know this is crap at the moment but thanks for sticking with it…*" (Terry R5 13 OBS).

Sarah was particularly cynical after having seen previous team relocations without positive effect, only to be reversed at a later date in what is perceived to be a cyclical phenomenon:

> 'North City sometimes they just seem to change things for the hell of it and as soon as you get to a level where everybody is singing off the same hymn sheet it will all change again, or they will move areas, move teams, mix

teams up, move them onto new premises and it pulls you back down again. Since I have been here [5 years] they mixed up teams in this building on 2 or 3 occasions…now we're under threat again…it's just full circle' (Sarah INT).

For some workers, the new working arrangements were too much to cope with:

'Relocation has had an unsettling effect on us all. I never thought I would be looking for another job but I am. I can't shake it off this time' (Mary R4 OBS).

This was the same senior practitioner with 27 years of experience who had informed me three months earlier:

'I sometimes feel guilty when I'm in the lift and people are moaning about how stressed they are and then ask me how I am, and I say, "yeah, I'm busy but fine…the volume of work is shit but the senior prac role is a lovely job and I feel privileged to be doing it' (Mary W2 13 OBS).

Mary's preceding quote is repeated here, now within the context of her reasoning behind intentions to leave:

'Relocation has had an unsettling effect on us all. I never thought I would be looking for another job but I am. I can't shake it off this time. We don't get the same business support as we used to. Things like - the photocopier doesn't work. The fax machine is not working properly. We had a fax through relating to an incident where a child was seriously injured during a fight between his mum and dad. We didn't get the fax until 36 hours later because it didn't work properly. We don't get typing back for three days so what I've been doing is photocopying the handwritten form for the worker to take out and we have to use that. I then have to go over the ink because it is such a poor copy. I was also told that they don't do filing until a Friday' (Mary R4 OBS).

7.6.2 The 'thank you' lunch

Following the delayed relocation of teams across the city and a Joint Appraisal Review (JAR), a lunch was provided by a senior manager in one of the area worksites. This was to demonstrate appreciation for the affected teams, within that area office, in contrast to the lack of empathy reported by Terry in the above section (7.7.1). It appeared well attended and was presented as a show of the service manager's appreciation for staff from two worksites for working through the disruption and unsettling period of the recent JAR. A speech was made by the senior manager to express gratitude, although no mention of the recent relocation was made.

Views on the lunch were elicited from five attending participants, who shared the perception that it was tokenistic and disingenuous, and did not allow them the opportunity to share disappointment about the negative way the JAR was conducted by inspectors (they did not ask workers for their opinions). Additionally, no evidence was found of a similar appreciative approach being adopted by other senior managers, specifically for their own teams within the other two collocated area office, although an email was sent across all services entitled 'Invitation to post JAR stress relieving drink!' (R2 OBS). The following day the following was recorded during observations following discussion with three participants:

> 'They were each negative about the invite; one saying: "*Why would I want to go to something like that? What was in it for me? They don't really give a damn about us*" (R3 OBS).

7.6.3 Perceptions of powerlessness

Previously presented findings within this chapter provide examples that demonstrate a perceived sense of powerlessness. This was shared, in part, across grades and levels of the service. For two senior managers, this was associated with the merge between Department for Education Services, and Children's Services. Whilst this was perceived to be less significant with front line workers, a senior manager explained it was only a matter of time for the negative impact of

the merge to filter down. Discordant professional paradigms between Education, and Social Work were cited as underlying this perception.

Front line participants' perception of powerlessness related to organisational detachment and was associated with feeling devalued by the employer. Whilst some acknowledgement existed of feeling empowered within the professional social worker status, frustration existed in being bound by bureaucracy with little, or no, hope of this changing. The perception of powerlessness and detachment within the individual/organisational relationship was summarised by Liz, a senior practitioner with over 18 years of experience:

'We are being heard, but not listened to' (F14 OBS).

Liz left the service 6 months later.

7.7 Emotions and the emotive nature of child protection work

The literature presented in Chapter 3, highlights the emotive nature of front line social work (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008; Frost and Parton 2009; Lymbery and Butler 2004; Munro 2009). It is apparent that a high level of Goleman's (1995) interpretation of 'emotional intelligence' is essential to successful performance in practice. Thematic analysis using those identified in Plutchik's (1980) Wheel of Emotions established the expression of distinct emotions by social workers during interviews and whilst being observed. It is noted that Plutchik (1980) excluded guilt and pride from his 'basic emotion' category. These findings concur with the literature and are presented below.

The emotions presented below (namely joy, pride, fear, guilt, sadness and anger) were identified as being key because of the frequency and context of reference against their assessed weight across the range of data. It is important to note that other emotions were expressed that are not considered to be as significant to recruitment and retention issues, and are therefore excluded from the subsequent

analysis across the range of ecological factors. These excluded emotions were trust, surprise, and anticipation.

Emotions were separated into two groups. These were 'positive' which included joy and pride, and 'negative' which included fear, guilt, and sadness anger. These are presented from sections 7.7.1 and 7.7.6 and are followed by a brief conclusive summary.

7.7.1 Joy

Joy is defined as "a feeling of great happiness" (Oxford Dictionary 2009) and is therefore perceived as more intense than being pleased, happy or satisfied. Very few indications of joy were found within the data; only one within the interviews, despite the general positivity associated with team, team colleagues and rewarding direct work with clients. However, observational data captured some insight into more intense feelings of pleasure, predominantly displayed through banter and badinage within teams.

The lack of joy found within interviews appears to contradict the regular frequency of laughter during interviews and observations. However, whilst jokes, light-heartedness, and positivity were regular features, they were not assessed to be relevant to the theme of joy elicited through content analysis.

Previous sections (particularly in 7.4.5) cite numerous accounts of banter within and across social work teams. These represent the key source of joy expressed within the data, and are not unnecessarily repeated here. One interviewee (Chris) was delighted at being listened to, and heard by his employer in allowing him to remain in his office location, rather than move with the team during the relocation. The wording is used intentionally to highlight the contradiction with a subsequent observation made by Liz (see 7.7.4). Perhaps sharing Liz's resolve, Chris added that he would have left the employer if his request were turned down, because the impact of increased travel on his private life would have been too overwhelming.

Adam's previously quoted (see 7.5.1) example of the pleasure associated with protecting children from abuse and neglect captures his feelings of elation. In contrast to the earlier reported sadness and fear, Adam predicted his joyous response:

> "I'll be crying when I get back to the office!" (Adam F 4 OBS).

7.7.2 Pride

Two team managers (Harriet; Trudy) expressed pride in their own ability to manage their teams. For Harriet, here sense of her approachability, assertiveness, and ability to co-work with another team manager were identified sources. Trudy gained pride in her responsibility for retention within the team and ability to instil value and a sense of loyalty in her staff:

> 'People say it's me; it has to be me because I have done it with another team' (Trudy INT).

For three interviewees (Jackie; Jane; Jim), being a professional social worker made them proud. For Jackie, it was her ability to build rapport with clients to the extent that most of them liked her. Jane expressed her need to feel pride in working for a progressive organisation; as a trainee, she hoped this pride would be realised in her future qualified employment. Jim, the only interviewee who had left the employer at the time of interview, was proud of his ability to make a difference in the lives of his service users. When this became unachievable, he left. He subsequently regained his pride in another North City department working with young people. Social work for Jim was a vocation leading to his proud conclusion that,

'Social work is something you *are* rather than something you *do*' (Roy INT).

7.7.3 Fear

The most frequently cited emotion within the data was that of fear, again across the range of ecological factors. Interviewees (Jackie; Rachel; Sarah; Emma) reflected

on how they were 'scared' and 'frightened' when they began their careers, or how they observed this in others. As a social work trainee, Emma's reflected on her earlier working experiences. This fear related to being overwhelmed and unconfident, and, of making mistakes, and a consciousness of the weight of newly acquired professional responsibility:

> 'Some are scared by making those decisions and…messing with people's lives' (Sarah INT).

Rachel noted that at case factor level, fear of 'letting something drop' through pressure of child protection work and subsequent need to prioritise, meant less experienced social workers were unable to drop anything, thereby contributed towards their 'burnout' (Rachel INT). Sarah also reflected this concern.

Other sources of fear were: being tied to the organisation with an employment contract (Daphne INT); the risk and danger associated with being overworked and stressed (Sarah INT); the wrath of a bullying team manager (Kate INT; Lesley W2 6 OBS); challenging senior managers (see 7.5.6); violence from a service user (W5 14 OBS); and being inspected, and scrutinised (W2 13 OBS). One senior practitioner cited her practice experience across various employers as protection from fear of change (Felicity INT).

7.7.4 Guilt

Personal expressions of feeling guilty were expressed by four interviewees (June; Trudy; Daphne; Sarah; Peter) and additionally expressed once within the period of observation (Mary). This was overwhelmingly associated within the individual/individual relationship.

Guilt was cited as an inhibitor for taking annual leave (Daphne), sick leave (Peter) and time off in lieu (Daphne; June) because of the additional pressure their absence places on colleagues. This also appears to be related to frequent participant references to working overtime but not subsequently a claim on which to be paid. Pressure of time may play a part here too though. In a previously cited

statement where it was less clear which relationship was being referred to, Daphne articulated frustration about her guilt associated with her focus on a lack of accomplishments, rather than accomplishments:

> '…you are always feeling guilty about the things you haven't done, instead of feeling glad about the things that you have done' (Daphne INT).

One interviewee (June) also perceived that time pressure dictated her inability to complete a time sheet, in order to prove time to claim back. Sarah felt guilty at her lack of enthusiasm about her work, compared to the senior practitioner (see 7.3.7), and conversely in a different site, Mary felt guilty about feeling positive about her work, when her colleagues did not (see 7.7.1). One team manager (Trudy) also expressed guilt about her occasional inability to fully commit to supervision of her staff (see 7.4.4).

7.7.5 Sadness

The range of ecological factors was associated with participants' sadness as an observed, expressed and reflected upon emotion. To two social workers (Stephanie; Daphne) seeing social workers crying as a result of their work was a frequent occurrence. In Stephanie's case, this was the result of hitting a metaphorical wall of reality for newly qualified social workers in child protection:

> '…every single social worker who has joined has broken down and cried at the six-month point because of the realisation of the stress and anxiety' (Stephanie W2 7 OBS).

Stephanie qualified this within her interview saying that case complexity is often a trigger for stress, anxiety, and upset.

Bullying and oppression were contributory factors for two social workers (Sarah; Kate) within both individual and organisational factors. Kate reported to having been persecuted by a team manager; similarly, Sarah, by a senior manager. Kate also expressed upset at taking a particularly challenging route into the social work

profession. Observational data also provides evidence of sadness associated with turnover (Dave W5 11 OBS) and losing colleagues to other worksites as the result of the relocation (W2 14 OBS).

7.7.6 Anger

Whilst no explicit reference was made to anger by interviewees, analysis of observational data provided four specific references, and additional passing comment to anger being aimed at social workers by service users. At the organisational factor level, two social workers in separate area offices were both observed displaying outrage at receiving covertly allocated cases without consultation (Bill F 11 OBS; Natalie W5 13 OBS) (see 7.5.4). At the organisational level one worker was observed violently hitting a printer because it was not working (W5 14 OBS). The additional reference was at case level where a social worker needed my help in her search for a website about anger to inform her work with a specific service user.

7.7.7 Concluding comments

This section presented findings relating to the emotive nature of social work, indicating the existence of positively and negatively perceived emotions within case, individual, organisational, and external factors; namely: anger, fear, guilt, sadness, joy, and pride. Many of these emotive findings relate to themes previously presented in this chapter, reflecting the complex and inter-relatedness of emotions and social work.

Chapter 8 - Nominal Group Technique Data

8.1   Introduction

The previous chapter presented findings from analysed data obtained through (n=18) semi-structured interview, and participant observational methods with social work practitioners, support workers, and team managers, across 4 area office teams within 3 locations. It is noted that some senior management practice was also captured within observations. Key themes of coping, relationships, perception, and emotions, inter-relate, and signify a dominant theme of an undervalued front line social work workforce in North City.

This brief chapter presents primary data attained through the nominal group technique (NGT) conducted on 12th October 2006, and resulting in a list of prioritised themes of facilitators to the recruitment and retention problem. As indicated in Chapter 4, NGT participants represented all managerial grades from team manager (n=2) through to senior management, including the head of service within the North City directorate (n=26) providing a total sample headcount of 28. The method achieved the aim of arriving at a group consensus of the top ten facilitators to recruitment and retention problems for North City. These conclusive findings followed my brief presentation of findings from my research up to that point, and included ideas collected through the literature review. Two individual participant votes were conducted within the process, and are presented in this chapter to demonstrate the path towards the ultimate achievement of group consensus (Table 8.4).

Chapter 4 described the NGT method, including the achievement of 'results' through analysis during the data collection event. In Chapter 3 I argued for the unique nature of this method as the only one identified in the search of social research literature to employ its use within the social work profession in the UK, and one of only two international studies. The findings also represent insight gained from one of few qualitative academic studies involving senior management within children's services. Analysis of the NGT data is discussed and theorised in

the following Chapter 9, alongside data from the desktop review in Chapters 6, interviews, and participant observation in Chapter 7.

As highlighted in Chapter 4 the stages of the NGT process were as follows:

- my presentation of barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention to participants
- individual groupwork to brainstorm related ideas that facilitate recruitment and retention
- my collation, and grouping ideas from groups, and subsequent presentation of these back to participants
- smaller groupwork discussion about results
- 1st individual participant vote of top ten facilitators
- my collation of results and presentation back to participants
- smaller groupwork discussion about results
- 2nd (final) individual participant vote of top ten facilitators
- my collation of results and presentation of findings back to participants

The next section presents a summary of the indicators for barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention that I presented to participants.

8.2   Barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention, presented by researcher to participants

The initial stage of this process involved my brief presentation of perceived recruitment and retention barriers and facilitators to the 28 senior manager participants. At that stage these had been achieved through a combination of the literature review, and analysis of my initial primary data from interview and observational methods attained up to that date

Table 8.59 Barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention, presented by researcher to participants

Barriers	Facilitators
Poor public image	Local Authority perceived as being 'good' to work for
Change	
Undervalued	Effective advertising
Under resourced	Dedication towards profession – commitment to client wellbeing
Relatively low pay	
Predominance of CP work	One to one work with clients
Little preventative work	Banter between staff
Stress and burnout	Team dynamics and peer support
Poor supervision	Valuing, involving, nurturing, training, progression
Students readiness for practice	
Not feeling valued	Good business support and resources
	Supportive manager
	Good quality, regular supervision
	Better pay
	Strong voice for the profession in public domain

8.3 Groupwork – perceived barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention

The following table presents barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention achieved through participant groupwork following random allocation of 6 groups (4 groups of 5 participants, and 2 groups of 4 participants). The following data was presented back to participants, on which the subsequent first vote was based.

Table 8.60 Groupwork – perceived barriers and facilitators to recruitment and retention

Identified barriers	Identified facilitators
Caseload weighting/management	Work life balance
New workers having to 'hit ground running'	Consistent policies/procedures
Lack of continuity in manager	Flexible working
Lack of flexible/mobile working	Employee support
Quality sacrificed for process	Professional development
Lack of job satisfaction	Mobility
Lack of robust recruitment induction	Development days
Review Sheffield's annual leave policy	Grow your own
Terms and conditions	Different rates of pay for 'specialist work
Reputation	Time to do social work training
Quality of staff	Good quality training
Allowances	Business support
Information Technology/Integrated Children's System	Balanced team profile
Lack of opportunity – all same work	Support for team manager to free up time to spend quality time with staff
Police work is advertised	
Allowances	Supportive teams and structures
Service conditions (pensions)	Team ownership and participation in planning
Leave entitlements	
Culture of organisation – "all fur coat and no knickers"	Committed staff
People leaving	To do less but to do it better
Poor induction	Different models for recruitment
Profile of senior management team	Transparent plans for future improvements
Time delay of CRB checks	Recognition
Lack of 'real' flexible working	Good role models in senior management
Culture of organisation – role models	

Lack of 'magic'	Mentoring/Buddy system
Local feelings of being undervalued	Team supervision
Low morale	
Lack of incentives and rewards	
Poor systems – ICT, process/paperwork, quantity not quality	
Commitment of time to RandR	
No clear/systematic exit interview process	
No systematic review of posts	
Poor HR and personnel and financial support	
Poor adverts	
Lack of mentors for Level 1 workers	

8.4 Facilitators to recruitment and retention problems - first and final votes

The above results were collated and grouped and presented back to all participants. They were then invited to select their personal top ten facilitators. This was therefore an individual vote. Here follows the table (8.3) of results from the first vote. This is followed by results from the final vote in Table 8.4.

Table 8.61 Facilitators to recruitment and retention problems - first vote

	Priority List - First Vote
1	Pay and Conditions
2	Service Configuration
3	Career Development
4	Resources
5	Grow your Own
6	Work Life Balance
7	HR Support/Infrastructure
8	Modelling
9	Consistency and Equity
10	Retrench – Back to Basics
11	Celebrating Success
12	Reducing Bureaucracy
13	Identity

The above results were presented back to the larger group of participants where they were given ten minutes to discuss them within their smaller groups. A final individual vote was then conducted and provided the following group consensus of facilitators for recruitment and retention problems, as perceived by senior management participants.

Table 8.62 Facilitators to recruitment and retention problems - final vote

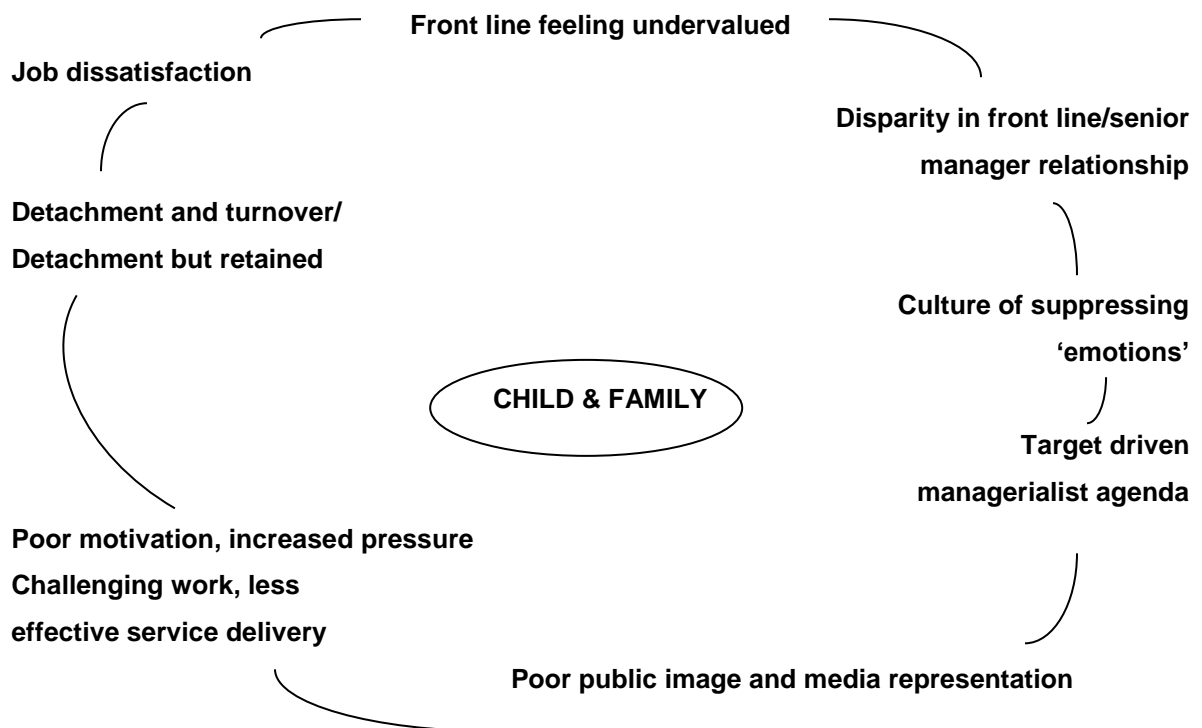|	**Priority List - Final Vote**
1	Pay and Conditions
2	Service Configuration
3	Career Development
4	Grow Your Own
5	Resources
6	Retrench – Back to Basics
7	Work Life Balance
8	Modelling
9	HR Support/Infrastructure
=10	Celebrating Success
=10	Consistency and Equity
12	Reducing Bureaucracy
13	Identity

The resultant consensus of top ten facilitators was subsequently emailed to each participant via the personal assistant for the head of children's services, with an invite to discuss them with me if they wished (see appendix O). No participant contact was subsequently received about the NGT findings, although I did discuss them in person during case study supervision with a senior manager, who was also a NGT participant.

8.5   Concluding comments

This chapter presented NGT findings obtained from senior management participants which represent a consensus of senior managers' top ten facilitators to recruitment and retention problems within their employer, following the structured approach within the method. These relate to the interview and observational findings presented in Chapter 7, which are all provided in the context of findings presented in Chapter 6.

The combined findings from these three chapters build a picture that illustrates the first element of the research question in explaining recruitment and retention problems. This model (see Figure 8.1) should be considered when seeking to understand the complexities involved and the inter-relational nature of their existence.

Figure 8.11 Model of explanation: the cycle of the recruitment and retention problem in North City CSD

Front line feeling undervalued

Job dissatisfaction

Disparity in front line/senior manager relationship

Detachment and turnover/
Detachment but retained

Culture of suppressing 'emotions'

CHILD & FAMILY

Target driven managerialist agenda

Poor motivation, increased pressure
Challenging work, less
effective service delivery

Poor public image and media representation

THEMES
Relationships
Coping strategies
Perception
Emotions

ECOLOGY OF PRACTICE FACTORS
Case, worker, organisational, external

This concludes the three findings chapters within this study; the implications of which will be discussed in Chapter 9, and will include a demonstration of how the theoretical underpinning for this study informed the presentation of data.

Chapter 9   Discussion

9.1   Introduction

This chapter presents discussion based on the findings in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 and the connectedness of the findings with what is already known within current literature (in Chapters 2 and 3). Here the centrality of my interpretation of Baumann et al.'s (1997) 'ecology of practice' (adapted by Hollows 2003), the context, and relevance of factors in influencing employee decisions about their recruitment and retention are considered. Discussion is provided on the weighting of findings presented in Chapter 7, relating to each of the key dimensions of case, worker, organisation and external and their impact on recruitment and retention. Influential mechanisms, processes, patterns, and trends within each dimension are also discussed.

Section 9.2 reinforces the value of the social work profession to society and demonstrates how within this context, the findings can be used to break the evident cycle of local recruitment and retention problems. I discuss the idea that however dire the situation in regard to children and family social work may seem, many positives can, and always will be found. Whilst the profession is widely considered to be in crisis (see Chapters 2 and 3) front line social workers remain dedicated to meeting the needs of their service users, and maintaining the protection and welfare of children.

This study provides clarity about what recruitment and retention problems were in North City, indeed how complex they were, and how they could best be tackled. This is underpinned by conflicting local data and nationally adopted measures for vacancies that do not reflect the front-line experience. For example, Chapter 6 presented the local 'real time' vacancy rate of 32.9 per cent in 2005 (reduced to 25.2 per cent in 2006), and a five-year average turnover rate of 17.3 per cent, indicating the weight of the local problems. Section 9.3 argues that these findings suggest the need to consider my 'real-time' vacancy rate as a more realistic

snapshot of organisational recruitment and retention. This would enable employers to see more effectively the reality experienced by front line workers by inclusion of maternity and long-term sickness. Current national and local practice of omitting these significant factors serves to impede senior manager/front line relationships, and risk the perception of attempting to mask recruitment and retention problems.

Despite high real-time vacancy rates, evidence also indicates some high levels of job satisfaction and retention were maintained. Sections 9.3 to 9.6 consider the weighting of these factors in their relationship with job satisfaction and retention.

The literature chapters also suggested little is known nationally from a senior management perspective. This chapter provides insight about the nature of the problems associated with recruitment and retention, and considers measures that will help address them. Nominal group data presented in Chapter 8 provided rare and valuable insight into this senior manager perspective where hope is offered to front line workers as their working experience (most notably pay and conditions) was at the forefront of senior managers' collectively agreed priorities in addressing recruitment and retention problems. Whilst problems were apparent, mostly in the disparity between parties (see section 9.4.3), unexpected parallels can be drawn between this senior manager perspective and that of front line workers, that indicate realistic opportunities for positive outcomes to identified problems. This is reflected, to an extent, in measures adopted by North City since the data collection was completed (see Chapter 10); for example the adoption of the Newly Qualified Social Worker posts.

This study suggests many senior managers also remain dedicated to service provision and the welfare of social workers, despite front line perception contrary to this. Senior management detachment to front line activity, and managerialist/non-social work agenda contributes toward negative perceptions, whilst seemingly opposed paradigms belie a universal aim of protecting children. I believe increased senior management awareness of front line work; receptive approaches

to communication and more sincere recognition of value are needed. This cultural shift will contribute towards tackling recruitment and retention problems, and will negate the social work crisis. Suggestions on how this can be done are also presented in the final chapter (10).

The audience to whom this study will have relevance is diverse, ranging from service users, social workers, senior managers, local and national government. Other state organisations that have encountered similar recruitment and retention problems such as Health, Education, and the Police will also learn from the findings. The methodological factors in this study also imply relevance to the wider research community, and social work and other professional academics.

9.2   The ecology of practice and its impact on recruitment and retention

> *"…social workers make sure everything is going to be ok…"*
>
> *In a letter from 9 year old passed to me following an interview with a proud social worker.*

The above mentioned nine-year-old boy's letter was treasured by the social worker Stephanie (INT 10), serving as a reminder of the valuable job she provided to individuals and to society. Visibly moved as she re-read the letter to me, Stephanie explained her pride in contributing to something seemingly so basic; namely a boy feeling that everything was 'OK'. The letter, especially the above quote, and Stephanie's emotional response encapsulated the imperative societal role, the human relational aspects, and the emotive nature of social work. The moment also captured the sense of immense pride demonstrated by participants in this study, despite the adverse multi-dimensional experiences in their working lives.

It is important I acknowledge that the ecology of practice, as a concept is unlikely to be an explicit concern for social workers, in the scheme of daily work. It does, however, provide a powerful model with which the recruitment and subsequent retention of social workers can be explained. In this sense it provides a useful reflective framework with which workers can assess their feelings of positivity/negativity, attachment and detachment at work. Chapters 2 and 3 identified contextual evidence and significant influences relevant to becoming a social work employee, job dissatisfaction, and turnover including stay-or-go, and push-or-pull factors (Gibbs 2001; Audit Commission 2002; ADSS 2005; Burns 2009). This knowledge should therefore be used with social workers in order to help them identify and share their feelings, ideally within the supervisory relationship, but also with peers.

The important consideration here is what action is taken once reflection identifies explicit concerns. Inaction would surely serve to further compound worker/employer disparity and problems in turnover and 'real-time' vacancy rates. Positive action is therefore essential and dependant on both worker and employee commitment and trust. This is particularly significant in light of the Audit Commission's (2002: 4) observation that most public sector employers know little about why their staff leave despite reasons often being 'push', not pull factors (see Chapter 2 section 2.3.3). Organisations also reportedly fail to address push factors within their control, where turnover is considered to be avoidable (Burns 2009; Caringi et al. 2007). This is explored further in section 9.5 and Chapter 10.

Findings in this study indicate the centrality of the organisational dimension in addressing job dissatisfaction, recruitment, retention, and most specifically the employer/employee relationship. The model presented in Figure 9.1 developed from the research findings, illustrates how these problems might be resolved. Good employer reputation maintained through positive verbal report among employees and potential recruits would subsequently encourage high quality new

recruits into the profession. There is arguably no more effective advertisement for an employer than the positive voice of personal employee experience. Success requires clear recognition of the reciprocal and interdependent aims senior managers and front line workers share.

Analysis of interview and observational data of social workers against NGT data from the 'group interview' with senior managers (Chapters 6 and 7) indicated surprising evidence of shared goals and additionally ideas about countering problems in recruitment and retention. These touch on each dimension with the ecology of practice but appear most notable within organisational factors (see section 9.5), where similarities and shared goals/perspectives that counter the perceived disparity between front line and senior managers are discussed. Ultimately, a universal aim of the wellbeing of children and their families provides the key to progression. Connectedness to, and agreement on, this mutual goal therefore provides a foundation on which recruitment and retention problems can be tackled.

Figure 9.12 Model of resolution - addressing the themes and breaking the cycle

<u>ECOLOGY OF PRACTICE FACTORS:</u> Case, worker, organisational, external
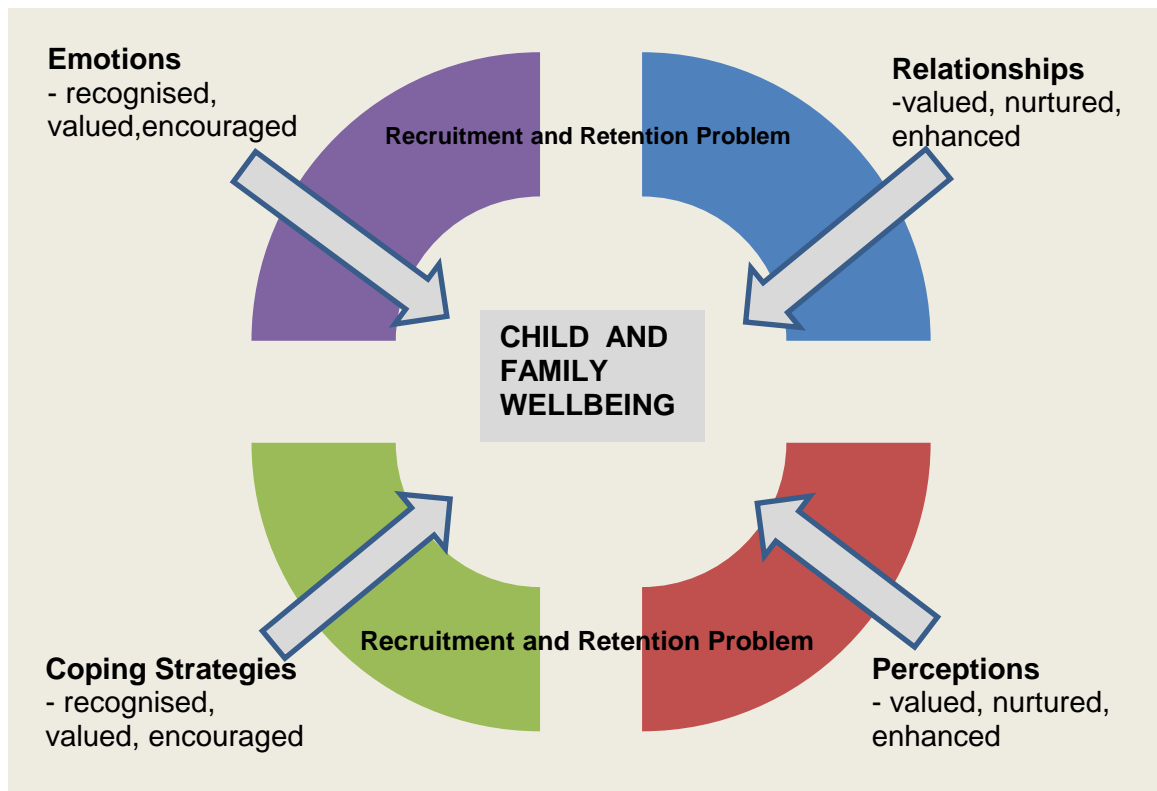
This study is framed by the significant deaths of two children, Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Baby P) nearly 8 years apart, and completed against the backdrop of the Social Work Taskforce report (2009) with the promise of the Munro Enquiry to come in April 2011. The concept of 'change' in social work will continue.

Common themes in serious case reviews following child deaths and serious injuries where worker, and organisational factors are concerned include criticism of a lack of effective inter-disciplinary communication, unsupported workers, overwhelmed practitioners and managers, threshold disputes, and professional uncertainty (Brandon et al. 2009; Brandon et al. 2008). In this context it is concerning that vilification of social workers and the profession could compound the historical downturn in people choosing to become social workers and those actively deciding to leave (see Chapter 2, section 2.3.5). The long-term effect of

seemingly relentless negativity must be of concern to recruitment and retention. Participants in this study generally reported their awareness of this negativity and that whilst morale and job satisfaction were affected, it did little to impede their original desire to become practitioners. This reinforces the notion of resilience as an essential trait for anyone practising in social work (Baumann et al. 1997; Horwitz 1998).

Evidence overwhelmingly suggests deepening problems in the working lives of social workers exemplified in 'real time' vacancy rates and higher than National average turnover rates (see Chapter 6), and connectedness to the widely reported national crisis in recruitment, and retention (Jones 2001; Douglas 2002; Lymbery 2004; Asquith et al. 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hogue 2006; Skills for Care and Development 2009). Attempts from within the profession to address concerns have done little to counter criticism, with state social work departments frequently associated with anecdotal claims of being guarded, opaque, defensive, and voiceless (DCSF 2008).

The findings chapters indicated certain pivotal factors to social workers' ability to weather the storm of practice, including high levels of resilience, as indicated in Table 9.1 below.

Table 9.63 Social worker indicative factors relating to resilience

Case level	A seemingly unswerving commitment to service users.
Individual level	Positive relationships with team colleagues; strong empathetic team managers, and their ability to command respect of their team; and a sense of belonging to, and being valued by, the employing organisation. Team colleagues were most frequently cited as the most effective support for coping.
Organisational level	Provision of effective resources, positive communication, inherent trust, and clear representation of value in front line workers.
External level	Sense of understanding about social work; its societal value.

Factors at an individual level were of most importance to resilience, with those at an external level being least. It is, however, the combined effort at individual and organisational levels that is fundamental to creating the necessary environment through effective communication, with not only the front line workers, but essentially the politicians and budget holders. Furthermore, increased public understanding strengthens individual and organisational argument for necessary improvements. Whilst always inevitably challenging, social work need not forever be a storm to weather.

The following sections discuss the findings within each of the identified four dimensions of the ecology of practice (case, worker, organisational, and external) and their impact on recruitment and retention. Focus is initially given to case factors and their influence on recruitment and retention.

9.3　The influences of the cases

> *'I don't know why I'm here actually because I am pissed off, [cries]. It's just one big struggle. You've got enough working with people who are at risk without struggling. People said they don't like working with clients… but it's the best part of the job' (Sarah INT).*

Practical implications in the study, including social worker reluctance to be observed within this intimate and often sensitive professional relationship, resulted in service users not featuring as prominently as originally intended. However, as indicated above by Sarah, a strong level of commitment to service users was evident. All except one interview participant expressed attachment to service users regardless of the level of attachment to their employer (see Table 7.12 and section 7.3). Daphne, the lone worker detached from service users expressed deep concern about the employer's ability to effectively serve the needs of local children and felt detached at each level of practice and implied she was at the point where she felt helpless. Detachment helped her cope with her inability to make a difference. Daphne subsequently left North City as a social work assistant to work in a completely different sphere.

Findings suggested the service user/social worker relationship was important to social workers and the desire to contribute towards making positive change in their lives was fundamental to job satisfaction (see section 3.4.1) reflecting national literature (Audit Commission 2002; Furness (2007). Service users should be at least reassured by social worker commitment in the face of great adversity. They play an albeit indirect role in addressing recruitment and retention problems in that they represent the predominant reason for attracting people into the social work profession in the first place. Further reassurance should be gained from findings presented in section 7.4 highlighting high levels of resilience in social workers coping with increasingly complex challenges (see tables 7.14; 7.15; 7.16; 7.17).

Whilst assurances are predicted by the findings, concern will also be inevitable. Somewhat alarming 'real time' vacancy rates of 32.9 per cent across the four observed worksites were discovered in the desktop review (see Chapter 6.1 and section 9.4 below). Confirmation of these problems will do little to instil confidence in a service that is already publicly questioned within the national arena. As a measure to counter this, an intention of this study was that it contributes towards positive action in North City in terms of practice and policy, and within the academic community in highlighting the need for further research (see section 10.4).

What is apparent is the need to reflect the front line reality when collating meaningful vacancy and turnover rates. The inclusion of long term sickness and maternity leave for vacancy rates will undoubtedly contribute towards this. Social workers and service users merit the use of 'real time' rates, and as Sarah indicates, in the face of much adversity the acknowledgement is that social work is important to society,

> "…somebody has to do the job you know, and try to do it as good as they can" (Sarah INT),

…and despite being as challenging as it is, this study concurs with the literature that suggests social work is rewarding enough to ensure that people want to do it. Rewards in helping people, however, are not enough alone to secure the stability of the profession. More realistic statistics provide a basis for argument for more accurate allocation of scant resources in order to address problems that result from a lack of workers.

9.4   Worker experience and characteristics

Somewhat unexpectedly the language used by participants repeatedly used military metaphors, suggesting that being a social worker can be paralleled with being a soldier in battle where risks are associated with putting your head "above the parapet*"* (Rebecca W5 11 OBS). This closely relates to what nurtures the phenomenon of practitioners who adopt an 'accommodating' persona of keeping your head down and getting on with it (Lymbery and Butler 2004). Parallels also exist here with Burns (2009) who found military and prison metaphors were frequently adopted by social workers, and where children and family work was perceived as a 'proving ground' for newly qualified practitioners.

Sarah and Harriet demonstrated their perception in seeking to gain employee rights for what should be freely available.

> "So I have had to *fight* and everyone in the team has now got extra days leave. The point is it just always seems to be like a *battle*…to get them [senior managers] to address the retention policy that [aims] to keep you…just seems so tedious" (Sarah INT).

> "I would just *battle* to take my TOIL back" (Harriet INT).

Jim captured the universal sense of powerlessness and social worker defeat in the metaphorical employee/employer war.

> "I always felt I was *fighting* a constant losing *battle*. Like drinking a reservoir. You know it's doable if you've got enough time but [laughs]…"

Jackie's battle included that of the practical implications of the imposed relocation of teams across the city, not only was her daily commute extended but she then had to…

> "find parking and get *fighting* with traffic in the city centre" (Jackie INT).

For Sarah this fight was not reserved only for the employer but also for external professional arenas,

> "…we *battle* in court and nobody takes your word for anything anymore" (Sarah INT).

The prevalence of 'negative' and 'detached' employees was identified, reinforcing Tham's (2006) notion of social workers remaining in the 'borderland' of job dissatisfaction and intention to leave whilst remaining in the job. An example where this was most apparent was for Sarah who despite remaining in post, scored in each of my 23 indicators for feeling undervalued (see table 7.13 in Chapter 7), was generally negative about her experience, and was 'detached' in three of the four dimensions in the ecology of practice (see section 7.3.7).

This is particularly concerning given the reportedly negative impact this has on service delivery (Balfour and Neff 1993). The findings however, refute this with demonstrably high levels of commitment to service users despite evidential disenfranchisement to the employer. A service users' perspective was beyond the study objectives so this could not be corroborated. Sarah was assessed as being attached only to service users, with this commitment influencing her decision to stay (Sarah INT). But the depth of her negative experiences eventually won over with her leaving the team after 5 years in the same area office for North City CSD.

> "I don't know why I'm here…it's just one big struggle".

As reported, Sarah's coping mask of resilience slipped from her usual jovial self as she broke down and cried during the interview, questioning why she put up with her dire situation (see Chapter 7.4.4).

On leaving after the fieldwork was completed Sarah was reportedly enjoying her work within another North City department involved in working with children outside the realm of protection.

9.4.1 Perception of retention

Chapter 6 indicates the need for managerial transparency in acknowledging the reality of not having enough staff to cover the job. I argue that an effective method to achieve this is through the explicit use of the 'real-time' vacancy rate alongside the historically used vacancy rate. Maternity leave and long term sickness are included in a real-time calculation and therefore increase the rate where these are relevant. This was best exemplified by the vacancy rate in 2005 of 15.7 per cent for the four area offices in this case study (already 3.9 per cent higher than the national average), which in real-time terms was a vacancy rate of 32.9 per cent. No doubt the national vacancy rates of 11.8 per cent in 2005, and 9.5 per cent on 2006 (CWDC 2008: 53) would be far higher when 'real-time' factors are built in (see Chapter 2.3.3).

It could be countered the real-time vacancy rate is only of use if staff existed to cover the seemingly increasing gaps. I acknowledge the problems associated in gap covering but believe this transparency to be a productive measure in valuing those workers struggling within realities behind these rates. Additionally, removing the 'coping mask' at an organisational level strengthens arguments for further resources to tackle these realities. This would represent clearer organisational acknowledgement that more part-time, short-term, and agency staff could perhaps address staff feeling under-valued, over worked, the vicious cycle of staff frustration and increasing pressure (Eborall and Garmeson 2001), and stress and burnout (Evans et al 2004; Huxley et al 2005; Knud and Walker 2002, and Newall 2003).

Analysis indicated that turnover affected some teams in North City more than others. Two teams were well known in the area as being 'extremely stable'. Additional shared characteristics were that staff within those teams felt valued and protected by their team managers, and were recognised as hard workers doing a good job for their service users and employer. Interestingly, one of these teams was perceived by social workers outside of these teams as being a great team to work within, whilst the other was not. The former was based in Wentworth 2 and

managed by Trudy. The latter was based in Ridgeways and was not directly observed as originally intended because of relocation during the observational period. Here were two teams conducting the same task of duty and assessment work with similarly successful retention rates, invoking opposite perceptions about their status. Examination of direct observational data of the positively perceived team and analysis of discussion relating to the non-observed team provided invaluable insight into the mechanics of each phenomenon. Perception appeared central to status.

Findings were considered with Eborall and Garmeson's (2001: 17) 'costs and benefits of staff turnover' (see table 2.4 in section 2.3.3) and the perceived differences between teams proved key to gaining understanding of perception and 'what works' for workers. Characteristics associated with the less favoured team were that the team had remained in its steady state, including location for around 20 years; this perception was longer for some external workers, and for others it was shorter. Members therefore reportedly represented the older social work employees in North City, had extensive local knowledge, and had survived intact through several organisational restructures.

These traits related closely to Eborall and Garmeson's (2001) benefits to low turnover, of 'stable workforce' and 'retention expertise'. It was, however, the negatives associated with these characteristics that most closely resonated with worker perceptions; notably, 'stagnation', and especially 'difficult to implement change' reflecting their apparent collective resistance to challenges to their ways of doing things. Only on reflection is it apparent, that this implied a sense of power held by the team in that they were somehow 'untouchable' and left by senior managers to get on with the job. Perhaps underlying the negative connotations associated with the team were feelings of jealousy or resentment, although these were never explicitly expressed.

Indicating the pivotal role of team managers in social work, Trudy's team were widely reported by external members to be dedicated, motivated, flexible, and well

managed; "…they're the team that don't bite" (OBS 12 Wen). Internal members shared these views, citing their general ability to stay as being valued, well led, and protected by their strong team manager. The team recognised their enviable status and again reflected Eborall and Garmeson's (2001) identified benefits of 'stable workforce', 'retention expertise', but also their considered 'better continuity of care'. The senior practitioner considered the success of the team down to "good leadership and good team players" (OBS 12 Wen). She recognised the value of the team manager role, despite not wishing to have the post herself. This was not down to reluctance for responsibility as the senior practitioner post carried great weight, and she occasionally deputised for Trudy anyway. For her it was the need to remain in touch with clients; made increasingly difficult in the team manager role. As she explained during one observation,

> "The volume of work is shit but the Senior Practitioner role is a lovely job and I feel privileged to be doing it. It's ideal because it suits me, as I don't want to be a manager at all. Oh no, I'd never want to be a manager. I get to use my practice *and* management skills" (OBS 12 Wen).

The central role played by Trudy as team manager was underpinned by her belief that some degree of turnover was healthy. Whilst the perception of her team was that of no turnover, Trudy reported staff members periodically leaving to progress in their career, and a replacement filling the gap (Trudy INT). She cited Eborall and Garmeson's 'new blood' and 'opportunities for promotion' as benefits to turnover. Importantly, no perceived costs associated with low staff turnover were expressed in relation to Trudy's team. It follows that a balance of 'healthy' turnover and stability within a well-managed team counters the concerns of instability and its cyclical relationship with high turnover as expressed by Carol and June in Chapter 7.1.1.

It is acknowledged that the data associated with these teams was sourced differently (observed, and non-observed), although verbal report from external members through participant observation was used for each. Whilst the

opportunity did not arise, it would have been useful to know the perception of those within the negatively perceived 'steady' team. Insider perception of the team manager role and the influence on the team would be of particular interest.

During Sarah's interview, she describes her colleague, Rachel, as 'still really enthusiastic' in her senior practitioner role, expressing guilt that she did not feel as positive. However, Rachel's broad range of undervalue indicators and negative practice ecology perspective appears to conflict with Sarah's understanding of her experience. It could be that Sarah felt so despondent that in comparison to her own negativity and lack of motivation, Rachel appeared in a positive light. Conversely, it may indicate Rachel's adoption of an appearance of positivity in order to cope with her work.

Key findings with implications for front line workers include attachment/detachment and retention, disparity in the front line/senior management relationship, and how coping strategies are employed in the face of adversity. I argue that social workers are ideally placed to become more reflective in action (Lymbery and Butler 2004) and agents of positive change. These findings are discussed in the following section.

9.4.2 Attachment/detachment and retention

The findings in Table 7.10 (see section 7.3.4) demonstrating perceived typology of interviewees in relation to employer provided some particularly interesting and somewhat unexpected results. The higher than expected level of perceived positivity and attached towards the employer based on statements made during interviews, led me back to question the accuracy of the emerging overarching theme of feeling undervalued. It seemed a contradiction that employees could feel undervalued but still feel positive about the employer. Further analysis demonstrated additional factors influenced the feelings of undervalue that were not considered within this table; namely, case, individual, and external factors. Feeling undervalued was also heavily underpinned by a wealth of rich observational insight. Whilst positive-attached interviewees were still able to express views

about feeling undervalued by their employer, these concerns were not apparently strong enough to influence their overall 'attached' stance. This warranted further exploration.

Data was analysed for positive and negative comments made about the employer and senior management, within an organisational frame. Comments about team colleagues and team managers were therefore excluded as these represented individual factors. This clear distinction is heavily supported by the data, particularly as perceived by front line workers, and is best symbolised by the phrase 'us and them'.

During the collection of observational data I experienced the taste of devalue as a North City employee that feeds the sense of detachment. Whilst reading locally produced literature I noted photographs of people were used on the cover of a publication relating to paedophilia. Suspecting these were stock photos I was interested to know if the 'models' were aware of the context of their use. As an, albeit honorary, employee I subsequently emailed a senior manager linked with the publication to explain my thoughts. I was surprised at the negative response that appeared unappreciative, defensive, rude, and dismissive. I argue that it is albeit minor instances like this that are well remembered by staff who care and wish to partake in the active progression of the organisation. This might involve discussion, suggestion, debate or other systems and by-products of communication. Stepping-stones towards disenfranchisement that lead to steps towards turnover are easily built within organisations that devalue frontline workers.

Participants generally made a distinction between attachment to the employer and to the social work profession or clients/service users. Further analysis to assess for attachment to profession provided insight into why some negative-detached workers are retained. Common threads between these traits were lack of choice, and perceived age. The distinction between age and perceived age is intentional because some workers implied their older status limited choice whereas some older workers did not share this view. For example, Peter referred to his age, lack

of choice and commitment to his team as reasons for his retention, despite reflecting on predominantly negative experiences within his current employment; views shared by Sarah.

It is argued that attachment to case factors is a key influence in the retention of social workers, when detachment to organisational and individual factors is diminished. As discussed in sections 7.3.2, 7.5.1, and 9.3, worker/case attachment is fundamental to social work and is often perceived to be strong. There is concern in such circumstances that the employer 'plays' on this attachment, takes it for granted, or perhaps misinterprets 'case attachment' as 'organisational attachment'. This is at odds with a more accurate understanding of the employer/employee relationship, and feeds organisational detachment. Here, the employer, rather than facilitating social work practice, is perceived as being obstructive, restrictive, and misrepresentative of professional values. This signifies the need for senior managers to be receptive to, and better understand attachment/detachment relationships, and also the need for social workers to more openly communicate these to employers.

Attachment was not necessarily a defining issue for interviewee retention. Attachment to case factors was in Jim's situation a key reason for turnover. He left the employer because the restriction on his ability to make a positive difference in case factors and the lives of his service users. He moved to another team outside of child protection work where this ability to 'be a social worker' was resumed.

Case detachment was associated with only one interviewee, Daphne. In her case this made turnover more tangible. Daphne's long-term plans were to remain a CSD employee but within youth offending rather than child protection. This plan to remain within the sector, working with cases, indicates longer-term case attachment. When interviewed 8 months after beginning her support worker post, Daphne had already decided that in the short-term, she wanted a complete change of job (sports instructor) and that child protection within her current team, even if

qualified was 'the last thing' she would want to do. Daphne had not only detached herself from organisational factors because:

'…it's just so intense that it just grinds you down so much',

and individual factors as:

'it becomes a thankless job…because you are always feeling guilty about the things you haven't done, instead of feeling glad about the things…you have'

but also from case factors because :

'it's always going to be thankless from the families you work with…' (Daphne INT).

This cannot, however, be described as total detachment because she eventually planned to return to casework, and whilst negative-detachment best describes Daphne's general perception, in each factor a contrary example could be found within the interview. For example, Daphne describes the 'buzz' in being actively involved in the protection of a child and seeing them develop positively as a result of her personal intervention:

'…that's the only thing that keeps you going in the job…' (Daphne INT).

This somewhat contradictory stance is perhaps best summarised in her reflection, 'I am enjoying what I am doing; the *principles* of what I am doing. It's just because it's far too pressured that makes me *not* enjoy it' (Daphne INT). Perhaps Daphne represents how complex the issues can be when considering a career in social work.

9.4.3 Disparity in the front line/senior management relationship

Findings reinforced Munro's (2009) suggestion that the two sides are presented as a 'stark dichotomy' – woolly brained front line workers, or emotionally stunted senior managers. A so called 'us and them' culture, arguably fed cynicism that appeared to be a contributory factor to worker/organisational detachment (see sections 7.5.6 and 7.6). One team manager associated her positivity with naivety and imagined other participants as far more realistically negative. She explored this further saying how she believed everything the senior management told her because it meant she could cope, thereby negating the need for 'constant battles' with them. She appeared resigned in her acceptance that senior management 'deliver on some [promises] and not on others' (Harriet INT). This apparently feigned naivety could of course be perceived as an effective coping strategy, in that she did not have to address issues that failed to meet expectations.

Charles and Wilton's (2004) model (see Figure 9.2) is adapted below to illustrate the conflicting needs associated with social workers in this study and the basis for disparity in the worker/senior manager relationship.

Figure 9.2   The Tug of War of conflicting need
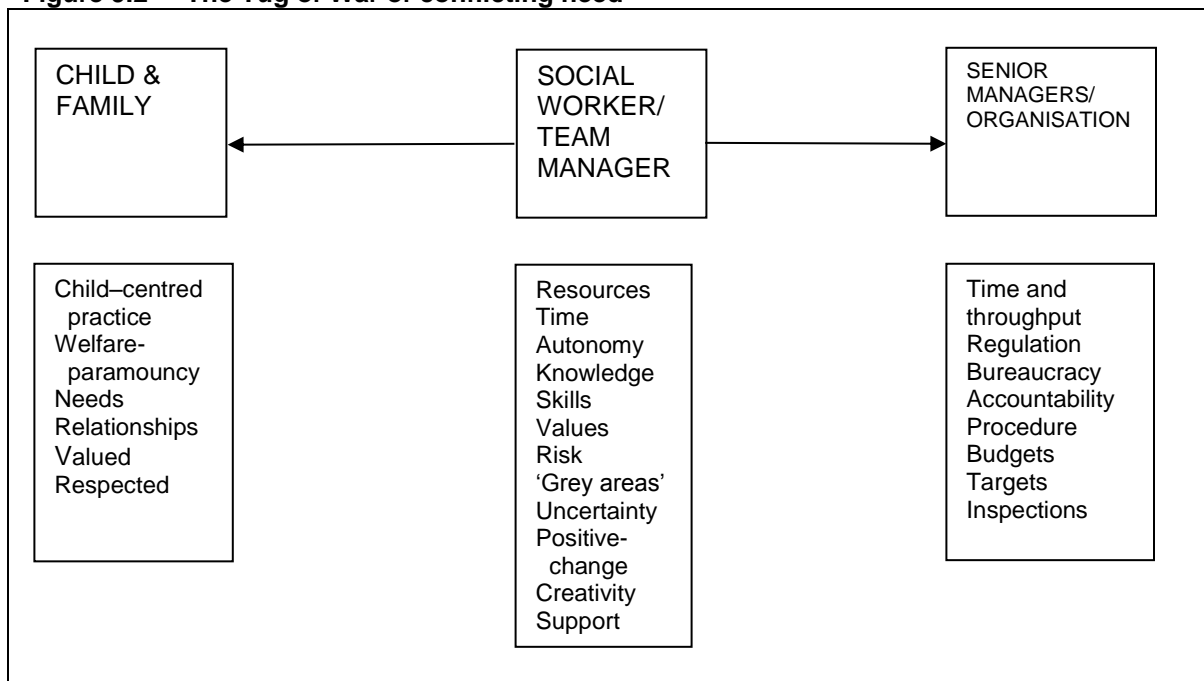
(Adapted from Charles and Wilton 2004)

Social workers reported the escalating demand on targets, and the need for increasing levels of accountability led to feelings of low self-esteem, low autonomy and perception of mistrust. Within this climate, recognition of mutual aims becomes stretched, and siege mentality, although sometimes beneficial for service users, does little to bridge the divide. Interestingly, team managers reported their frustration at being isolated in the 'middle ground' as a result of the demands placed upon them by senior management and their social workers.

Inspired by Lymbery and Butler (2004) my analysis further demonstrated disparity as a concept. In addition to front line and senior manager disparity, enlightening gaps were found in less experienced social workers' ideals, expectations, and perceived realities of social work practice. These were identified as follows:

Table 9.64 Ideal and expectations versus perceived reality

Ideals and expectations	Perceived reality
Direct work	Commissioning
Making a difference	Meeting a target
Time to do the job and reflect	Time restriction and Integrated Computer System
Culture of evaluating progress and reflection	Culture of audit
Preventative work	Child protection work
Resource provision	Administrative work and Integrated Computer System

These particular findings are not claimed to be definitive but relate to the hopes and aspirations of student, and trainee social workers. These should be used by senior managers to generate further insight in order to manage expectations, in preparation for dealing with practice realities. This constructive communication

could serve to instil a sense of value, and address disparity at the earliest opportunity with new workers and form the basis for improved relationships.

9.4.4 Coping strategies

Observational data (see section 7.4) highlighted how participants framed dissatisfaction and negativity with humour, which was frequently employed as an effective coping strategy; to mask the struggle. Whilst enabling social workers the opportunity to dissipate anxiety and stress, humour did not necessarily dilute the reality of underlying issues. This is exemplified in my following observational fieldnote relating to being undervalued (indeed threatened) by a service user:

> *'Jamie is talking about a female client who has previously made threats to kill her. She jokes about having to hire a bullet-proof car. She decides that getting a bus is not a good idea, as she does not feel safe… "Have you got bullet-proof clothes?" asks a colleague from across the desk' (W 14 OBS).*

Interviewees sometimes used the one-to-one environment to counter their negativity with a considered rationale, which perhaps served to weaken the sense of negativity perceived. Many examples were provided where clear expressions of dissatisfaction were made, followed by an empathic understanding behind the cause for negative perceptions, or acceptance of personal influence. A support worker for example, expressed concern about her lack of support, direction, and supervision by her team manager but followed this with a sense of reason; 'I need to take some responsibility as well' (Daphne INT).

The adoption of a coping mask at an individual level was most apparent during the frequently referred to interview with Sarah. Sarah's usual sarcastic but humorous, and quite hard demeanour gradually flaked away to reveal a resilient but vulnerable, hurt and emotionally broken woman. I found this shocking at the time

as of all my interviewees and observed participants, Sarah was the least likely person I would have expected to react in this way. Clearly, Sarah's coping mask had slipped, albeit temporarily, but it revealed insight into how her use of banter and sometimes caustic humour most effectively disguised he feelings of utter despair.

Incidentally, this particular experience has had a lasting effect on me and served as a motivational force during times of need following the data collection. I was feeling guilty at being responsible for Sarah's mask slipping; honoured that she was able to share her inner feelings with me in my role as a researcher; angry at how poorly she had been treated; determined to somehow contribute towards a reduction in social workers like Sarah feeling so undervalued; and mindful of the need to acknowledge my personal bias and the need for an open mind in my research.

Another less unexpected observation was that of senior managers being more jovial and seemingly relaxed when not in the presence of their subordinates. No doubt encouraged by the 'away day' event, this was frequently observed during the NGT data collection, and reminded me of the banter and camaraderie shared between front line workers. Additionally, one senior manager offered insight in her admission that an air of authority was required in order to help her achieve effective leadership within the CSD. She acknowledged challenges involved being managed by someone who had little understanding of social workers and their profession, and the importance of ensuring such frustration did not impede her ability to manage and lead. This significant aspect in this study of coping masks is explored further in section 9.5.

9.4.5 Social workers as change agents

Daphne's comments above (in section 9.4.4) reflect the view that social workers must accept their individual responsibilities and conduct themselves as true professionals (Butler 2004; ADSS Cymru 2005).

It is my belief that the cycle of recruitment and retention problems needs to be broken not only from within the profession, but by social workers themselves as active change agents. The challenge of this study influencing such change is acknowledged. Within constructivist ontology Clouder (2003) warns,

> "The imperative of regulation and control within a profession cannot be underestimated. There can be no mistaking that ultimately 'the game' is prescribed by the profession, and those that wish to join that profession need to adapt accordingly to gain membership" (2003: 220).

Clouder (2003) acknowledged the complexity of professional/organisational socialisation in health and social care, whilst concluding that contrary to the few empirical studies, and 50-60 year old theory, individual agency is underestimated. However, it seems likely that individual influence within organisational barriers is at least partially dependent on the self-efficacy of the worker, rather than just the organisational obstacles. Some professional health and social care workers will believe they are constrained by such boundaries, whilst others will flourish.

Butler (in Lymbery and Butler) (2004: 64) refers to these workers in practical terms as being either 'accommodating' (suppressing their feelings) or 'reflective'. Reflective social workers see themselves as initiators rather than victims of organisational change (Schon, 1987, 1991; Fuller and Petch, 1995). It was important to attempt to access the feelings (whether suppressed or reflective) of social workers in order to elicit possible answers to the research question.

We need to be perceived as the critical friend of our employer rather than as 'antagonistic whingers' or simply not heard at all. We have a duty to assert ourselves positively, and without being overly defensive in order to redress the balance.

Chapter 9 – Discussion

Perhaps one indicative measure of the workforce moving away from 'accommodation' towards 'reflection in action' is the return rate of workforce surveys. These do, however, need to be designed with social workers in mind and an appreciation of the challenge of lack of time. There is no such thing as perfect research or the perfect tool to gather data, but participant involvement in design will decrease attrition and increase participation in the fieldwork (Greenwood and Levin 2003). An empowered, less cynical, inclusive workforce should have a sense of ownership, responsibility in, and acceptance of, key decisions towards progression.

*"Change your thoughts and you change your world" (*Peale 1952)

The need for reframing does not end with social workers. The current societal climate perhaps encourages senior managers to be defensive, closed and mistrusting in their perception of the workforce. As stated in section 9.2 and 9.4.3, I argue for strong, supportive leadership, that values worker autonomy, based on an inherent trust of their front line workers. Measures need to be in place to address those times when this is not the case. They should have an inclusive stance on change and development and provide appropriate resources that enhance their ability to empower service users.

Chapter 7.8 presents findings that concur with the literature in that emotions play a key role in the range social work practice, and define the social work relationship (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Charles and Butler (2004: 61) and Charles and Wilton (2004) shared concerns that "emotional elements of social work practice are devalued or denied in environments dominated by managerialism and bureaucracy" (Charles and Butler 2004: 179). The changes I wish to encourage would facilitate the demonstration of value in emotions. Social workers inherently employ person-centred models of assessment and intervention, and I argue that senior managers wishing to address high vacancy and turnover rates should employ more person-centred models of employment and management, such as task centred supervision (Doel and Marsh 2005) and people-centred management (Arnold and Plas).

9.5   The impact of the organisation

The previous section argued that social workers employ coping strategies that mask the struggle with stressful situations. The findings also suggest great frustration at what could be considered a coping mask at an organisational level. For example, reports of cynicism associated with the immense pressure to present near perfect case files for pre-notified inspections and Joint Appraisal Reviews. The findings imply that implications of adherence to patriarchal and managerialist paradigms will, in the long term deepen the problems of recruitment and retention.

The argument for positivity and maintaining morale with strong leadership needs to be balanced with transparency about the challenges faced, and the realistic ability to cope with limited resources. Social workers, team managers, service managers, operational managers, heads of services perpetuate the coping mask of resilience, in presenting cases files ready for inspection after hours, sometimes days, of preparation. This was observed as being conducted by social workers frustrated at the absurdity of the cost to one to one work with service users. Such perpetuation effectively weakens any internal claim to budget holders that 'all is not well' because politicians appear to be receiving mixed messages about children's services performance and ability to cope.

The commonly held idea that inspectors - representing the eyes of politicians and ears of the British public - do not inspect the reality of front line social work was best exemplified by a long standing employee who had just returned to North City as an agency worker.

> *"Well strictly speaking [the Inspectors] should just come…and see everything as it is. But they won't do that because they don't really want to see everything as it is because it's going to reflect badly. It's obvious that they should just come [unannounced] and pick out the [case] files because that's the true picture"*
> (OBS Wen 2)

Local Authorities therefore perpetuate the culture of the coping mask by targeting resources at 'spit and polish' tasks, whilst workers know they really ought to be 'out there knocking on doors'. If the reality of practice was explicit, the elephant in the room of the problems associated within the cyclical relationship represented in Figure 9.1, that cultivates recruitment and retention problems would imply action was inevitable. It takes courageous directors of services and local councillors to adopt such an open approach within the current framework of accepted norms. This is especially true where masculine principles discourage vulnerability by equating it to helplessness and weakness (Charles and Butler 2004). It therefore takes an even more courageous worker to demonstrate an ability to break free of the 'cognitive traps' (Morgan 1997) encouraged within such cultures where a "sense of entrapment occurs in response to the paradoxical injunction that emotional expression is 'unprofessional' while maintenance of a dishonest position is 'coping'" (Charles and Butler 2004: 63).

9.5.1 Worker perception of organisation factors

It is argued that a consistent and constructive approach in the expression of the reality of social work practice, combined with a transparent system of measurement and performance will be more effective in having resonance with politicians who govern the social work profession.

The 'thank you' lunch reported in Chapter 7.7.2 highlighted how what I perceived to be well-intended actions of senior management could be met with cynicism and perceived negatively. Apparently superficial to front line workers, gestures were undermined by significant negative factors experienced by workers. A further example of this was the district management team (DMT) reaching out to all children and family staff as reflected in my following observation,

> "Just seen an email from DMT inviting staff for drinks on 15-09-06. Entitled - Invitation to post JAR stress relieving drink!" (OBS Rid: 4). .

Scepticism was apparent when I discussed this invitation separately with three social workers in the Ridgeways Area Office. Each stated they never had any intention of attending. One protested,

> "Why would I want to go to something like that? What was in it for me? They [senior managers] don't really give a damn about us" (OBS Rid: 10).

This apparent 'missing of the mark' by senior managers highlights the challenge in changing negativity in order to encourage perceptions that are strived for. It seems that if workforce perception is one of being undervalued, senior management attempts to demonstrate value in staff can feed, rather than address cynicism.

On this emerging theme of disparity, further illustration of the relevance of worker perception relates directly to a previous local recruitment and retention campaign identified in Chapter 6.2. Again, senior management perceptions of a method of improving the situation for front line staff was very different from this social worker Jim, who subsequently left the department to work in a youth offending team,

> *"We had a consultation session with the person doing the review and he came up with the concept of 'team of the month'. It was insulting. Social work teams were given pizza vouchers for this honour! Social work is not about targets. Don't talk to me about team of the month" (*INT Jim: 18*).*

Reflecting how disparity feeds cynicism, Munro (2008: 2) highlights the widespread increase in empirical research on improving practice and subsequent increase in procedures, guidelines, checklists, and risk assessment instruments. Front-line workers are however, sceptical of their effectiveness and use them 'half-heartedly'. Crucially, these 'formal aids' are perceived as devices "…protecting management

from outside criticism rather than for protecting children from abuse" (Munro 2008: 2). On one side the child's risk assessment is conducted using empirically tested set questions, and is scored mathematically and rigorously to determine the level of risk to the child. On the other side, risk to the child is assessed intuitively through talking with the family, using previous experience to determine dynamics and functioning and making a decision based on emotional response, feelings, imagination and knowledge, because it "feels right", Munro 2008: 3); one being deliberative and analytical, the other, mainly unconscious and intuitive; neither being an ideal paradigm.

This suggests a need for great effort to address cynicism and negative perceptions, if genuinely well-intended actions are to serve their intended purpose. Munro (2008) presents what I believe to be a constructive way forward. Using the work of Hammond (1996) these two polarised standpoints can be seen as each end of a continuum, "with purely formal, analytic methods at one end and blind intuition on the other" (Munro 2008: 3). This continuum reflects child protection workers who use both heart and head, reason and intuition, providing, "…a more accurate representation of the formal methods that are being introduced, few of which can be used without some intuitive skills" (Munro 2008: 3). This represents a call for more compassion and mutual respect, and the recognition that whilst difference understandably exists between front workers and senior management, the aim of child protection is mutual.

The findings suggest the following opportunities exist within organisational factor level for agencies recruiting social workers and are discussed further in the next conclusive chapter:

- further research

- care ambassadors and 'grow your own'

- value and nurture students

- build on relationships with universities

- celebrate success sincerely and effectively

- feedback - students and newly qualified social workers

- staff feedback including exit interviews

- 'back to the floor' policy for managers

- address senior management/front-line 'disparity'

- focus on mutuality of goals

- value emotions/objectivity

- value autonomy/accountability

- effect of change/stagnation

- need for change/consolidation

- mobility and secondment opportunities

- team manager role and effective supervision

9.6   The impact of external factors: general public, society, media, comparator professions, and politicians

> *"Image is something that social work as a profession has definitely struggled with…it does affect whether people want to become social workers or not…"* (Jackie INT*)*

The sense of societal devaluation of social workers (see section 7.5.8) along with their negative public image was a major concern for participants. They appear to deal with this through determination and desire to make positive changes in people's lives. Interestingly, not one interview participant entered the profession believing they would be publicly appreciated. There was, however, in the main, an expectation that their employer would value and in turn protect them to varying

degrees. The absence of positive social work role models in addition to media misrepresentation of the role, whether in news or soap operas, contributed to the familiar protestation that workers are 'damned if they do and damned if they don't' (see section 3.4). This suggests the need for improved public relations, and ability to communicate effectively and build relationships across the external factors of the public, media, and politicians. Celebrating success and specific communications training were strong suggestions here. This study, informed by the data, the literature, and my personal experiences, leads me to appreciate the necessary challenge in addressing societal devalue of social workers because it is linked to societal devalue of those we work with and for, namely, service users.

9.6.1   Attachment and detachment

The decision to include 'attachment and detachment' in relation to external factors was cause for some internal intellectual debate. Analysis was conducted as indicated in Chapter 7.3.1, but findings were omitted from the originally drafted presentation because they did not add useful meaning to explaining why considerations of attachment and detachment are important. Explicit and implicit examples of feeling undervalued in relation to external factors are presented in section 7.3.5 indicating these were far from neglected within the study. The original omission was based on my perception that social workers could not 'leave' external factors in the same way they could leave the employer. They are part of society and in that respect they are implicitly attached to it. The limitations of this argument, however, became apparent, as social workers were of course capable of leaving the social work profession and therefore the political, and media and public scrutiny. Attachment and detachment to external factors were therefore revisited and included in the findings of this study.

Consideration was therefore not only necessary as to whether interviewees were attached or detached to the social work profession, overarching values, and principles, but also to politics and the political agenda underpinning the profession. As with the other ecological factors, social workers expressed conflicting views within factors indicating complexities in influences on personal perspectives.

Whilst interviewees expressed thoughts about external factors these were less frequent than other factors. Importantly, more positivity was associated with the social work profession itself than with any political agenda driving it.

Reassuringly though, I found most interviewees were attached to external ecological factors of social work in the holistic sense that included law and policy, and the ability to use professional power to effect positive change. However, many also indicated their concern about media misrepresentation and public perception and misunderstanding of the profession and social workers (as highlighted above). This attachment could not be assumed, as indicated when the organisational factors are analysed: just because employees were employed by the organisation did not necessarily indicate an attachment to organisational factors (see Sections 7.3.4, 7.5.5, and 7.5.6).

Only three interviewees were detached to external factors. One worker (Sarah) was detached because of a series of negative experiences that led to her to conclude that the direct work with children and families is the only positive issue about being a social worker. The inhibitive pressure to experience this one redeeming aspect eventually contributes to her declaration, 'I don't know why I'm here…it's just one big struggle'. So emotive was the subject that Sarah cried at this point in the interview. This is of particular interest in terms of the aforementioned 'coping mask'.

To some interviewees social work was a vocation or a 'calling' that could not be fully explained. Jim summarised his perspective that 'social work was something that you *are*, rather than what you *do'*. In that sense, he *'just is'* a social worker. He justified leaving child protection as a way of preserving his existence in this capacity, and his ability to continue to do 'proper social work', where you are 'actively engaged with young people and families in a meaningful way' (Jim INT). This restriction instigated by the employer led to Jim's detachment to organisational factors.

My analysis suggests more action is required by reflective and confident social workers to address public perception. Winning hearts and minds of the English public will instil a greater sense of balance in the collective understanding of what social workers do. External factors such as media portrayal and public perception have historically fed into the negative image of social work.

I argue that with the public, 'on side' we have more opportunity to:

- Recruit appropriately skilled and motivated people into the profession
- Retain well motivated and valued social workers
- Influence government policy for necessary resources
- Influence senior management in developing more respect and mutual understanding
- Gain appreciation of the fundamental relational aspects that underpin social work and the value of feelings and emotions

I do not believe it is about reclaiming the social work profession – it belongs to social workers; we are 'it'. Rather it is to gain trust and respect where the public are assured social workers are doing the right thing. Social work frequently involves the need to stand up and be counted when faced with distorted representation. As Parton (1998) declares, social work is '*what we do*'.

The following compilation of contextual considerations of external factors provides a basis on which to build a positive change agenda for the recruitment and retention of social workers. These include: the political context; policy context; and societal context.

9.7   The potential for positive action

"Every organisation is an emotional place because it is a human
intervention, serves human purposes and is dependent on human beings to
function", Reynolds and Vince (2004: 447).

The findings reinforce the national literature in indicating the significance of societal
recognition in the value of protecting and maintaining the wellbeing children,
although, disappointingly not valuing those specifically employed for this function.
In this respect, service users are the key to unlocking in-house disparity in North
City.

The opening quote indicates the challenge to senior managers in the need to
acknowledge the emotive reality of practice. I argue the need for such issues to be
raised and discussed openly and safely. This requires a non-defensive and
receptive senior management team, as well as a constructive and less cynical
'front-line' where reality and perception issues can be discussed without fear of
reprisals. The challenge of this is acknowledged and such issues are likely to take
time and arguably a 'leap of faith' by both parties will be necessary. Four
underlying factors are crucial to the process; firstly, that front-line staff and senior
managers share the same overarching aim of protecting and improving wellbeing
of children; secondly, that mutual understanding for what lies behind disparity will
lead to positive outcomes for children; thirdly, that the relationship involves an
imbalance of power; and finally, that both are mutually dependent within the State
sector.

Success depends not only on the commitment to the process of positive
communication but also on the ability of senior managers to communicate the
social work agenda upwards to commissioners and politicians. Whilst I highlight
the need for political engagement I am mindful of the warning that…

"Without a major effort to detach social work from political agendas and recover a professional identity, social work in the UK will continue to disintegrate, and a code of ethics will not only be of little use but irrelevant" (Petrie 2009).

A balance is therefore necessary between: recognizing and upholding professional integrity through necessary engagement with State employers; and maintaining independence with the professional social work identity intact. It is necessary to be mindful of the outcomes of The Garthwaite Report, Social work: A Profession to Value (2005) (see Chapter 2.3.6). Despite an extensive review of recruitment and retention policy, only pockets of improvements were made. This reflects the complex nature of these problems and the need to maintain long-term aims and objectives.

SWOT analysis of the concept of removing the coping mask in social work at individual and organisational levels highlight the following interesting factors.

Figure 9.3   SWOT analysis of removing coping mask at individual and organisational levels

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Transparent and explicit reflection. Demonstration of honesty. Strength and conviction.	Reality is negative Profession vulnerable to further criticism Reduced protection
Opportunities	**Threats**
Long-term building of public confidence. Implies more resources are essential. Underpins argument for value by society and senior managers.	Short-term reduction in public confidence. Deepening negative media portrayal. Further reduction in morale.

The implications of this are that considerations of dealing with recruitment and retention in social work need to include a more explicit and transparent approach to self-representation. The balance between transparency in relation to inadequacy and internal and external confidence in the profession is complex. Any moves to more openly reflect the deep problems associated with not having enough social workers to do the job effectively needs to be balanced with positive messages about the strengths in skills, knowledge and capability within the profession, and the inextricable value to society. This value is underpinned by the range of literature in Chapters 2 and 3 and is implied by the volume of referrals made to services (see DfE 2010 in postscript to thesis). It is additionally underpinned by anecdotal evidence of UK social workers, and no doubt those around the world, who know they save the lives and improve the wellbeing of children in their day-to-day work.

Social workers frequently deal with coping masks in their work with service users. Whether they are associated with parental pride in not asking for help, a child too scared to acknowledge they are being abused, or the façade portrayed by the abuser, they attempt to tackle such challenges by building rapport, instilling value, clarity in roles and responsibility, chameleon-like professional presentation, and using highly tuned knowledge and skills in human relations. Social workers also use their 'gut instinct' and their ability to perceive situational reality in their judgement making. They feel compromised when they are required by senior managers to cover up organisational inadequacies whilst effectively stifling opportunities for confronting resource issues. The managerial agenda in this instance detracts from the ability to function effectively, rather than underpinning it.

In sum the social work profession is essential to a positive society. It is however, dangerously under-resourced in terms of human capacity and services. Morale and the sense of value are low, which further impede effective delivery of public service. Concepts of both resource and value need to be addressed in order to break the negative cycle of recruitment and retention problems.

Thesis postscript for discussion chapter

Since the completion of data collection and writing of this thesis, significant local and national changes have occurred that have relevance to the study. This postscript identifies two key areas of development that expand the context in which the study is located. First, I describe the changes implemented locally by North City CSD to address their recruitment and retention problems. Second, I highlight the significant national developments, including the political impact of the elected coalition government. I conclude that the impact of cutbacks on public spending and social financial hardship provides challenges associated with the threat of reduced capacity at a time of increasing service user need.

North City has embraced a range of initiatives introduced while the Labour government was in power. These include: Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs), Consultant Social Workers, and Practice Developers. NQSWs enrolled on the scheme in North City benefit from:

- "ten per cent of their time set aside for training and development activity
- access, through their employer, to additional funds to support their development
- fortnightly supervision meetings
- guidance on what is expected by the end of their first year (or longer if they are working part time) of employment

<div align="right">(CWDC 2010)</div>

Anecdotally, the locally adopted three year pilot has been well received with NQSWs describing they feel supported and welcomed into the local authority and the world of professional practice. One, however, explained that despite signing up to the scheme, she had to wait 10 months to begin because of the limited posts available. Another also reported delays in supervision.

Each Consultant Social Worker post has reportedly been filled following a high level of interest. These provided a new career structure for retained social workers who did not wish to become managers. This followed the recognition that one person could not achieve the multifaceted team manager role alone because demands were so great. It is not yet clear how effective the measures have been but some team managers have expressed their dissatisfaction at consultants being paid the same rate as them despite having fewer responsibilities. Consultants are, however, identified as providing key support to other practitioners through their range of knowledge, skills and experience, in addition to freeing up time for team managers.

Evidence informed practice (EIP) provides a long standing underpinning ethos in North City that encouraged the founding of this study in the outset. This research therefore feeds into what was an ongoing commitment to EIP. Monthly lunchtime research seminars are held by and for practitioners that, provide a vehicle for dissemination of findings across the workforce. These are well attended, embedded and appear to be gathering momentum.

North City social workers also continue to benefit from three paid study days a year. Although some social workers have reported they struggle to find the time to take these days, this does not appear to be a commonly held belief. They are generally appreciated and provide an opportunity for reading, reflection and research.

It remains to be seen how these local initiatives can be sustained in light of the bigger picture to which I now turn. What is apparent is the significance of social workers feeling valued and confident in their role as essential if they are to articulate for and defend their role in safeguarding and improving the lives of children.

A hung parliament following the UK general election on 6th May 2010 resulted in a new coalition government formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat

parties. In June the Secretary of State for Education, the Right Honourable Michael Gove MP asked Professor Eileen Munro to conduct an independent review of child protection in England (DfE 2010). The aim of the review "…is a legacy where the system is better equipped to continuously learn and improve" (Community Care 2010: 4).

Munro's initial report (Munro 2010) appears to have been well received within the social work profession and indicates a clear opportunity for the development of the child protection system. It provides valuable preliminary observations into the social work profession through systems analysis. I believe social worker participants in my study will share my view that Munro's observations have resonance with many of my key findings. These points are identified below in full because of their significance to social work and to provide further contemporary contextual insight for this study.

Key observations are:
"Early intervention and prevention:
- Universal services, for example children's centres, do not currently offer comprehensive early specialist support to vulnerable children, young people and families because the professional and specialist family support capacity and expertise has not been developed in those services;
- There is evidence of inconsistency and uncertainty among professionals in respect of managing and responding to contacts and referrals about vulnerable children and young people.

Frontline practice:
- Compliance with regulation and rules often drives professional practice more than sound judgment drawn from the professional relationship and interaction with a child, young person and family;
- The assessment framework and process is inefficient and does not easily facilitate professional judgment about risk and safe next steps for a child, young person and their family; and

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- ICT systems are experienced as unhelpful in two ways:
  - o Social workers are required to spend too much time completing documentation; and
  - o The Integrated Children's System (ICS) does not help enough in the creation of chronologies and the child's story.

Transparency and accountability:

- The performance and inspection systems in place do not adequately examine the quality of direct work with children and young people or its impact;
- A lot of data is collected (some required nationally and some developed locally) which is said to describe performance, but in many cases it does not describe what matters and it consumes a disproportionate amount of time and resource;
- Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) have not fostered a learning culture which supports improved practice; and
- Social workers are frequently blamed when children are harmed"

(DfE 2010: 8 - 9).

The Social Work Task Force has made further national developments in July 2010 with Maurice Bates and Corinne May-Chahal being appointed as joint interim chairs of the new Social Work College. The purpose of which is to provide a stronger national voice for social workers and promote the profession (www.collegeofsocialwork.org). A development group has been established and in is anticipated The College will be fully functioning as an independent organisation from April 2011. This signals a sense of optimism within the social work profession that has been somewhat clouded by a surprising and significant government announcement as part of its spending review.

Major public spending cuts will inevitably rebound on social work, health and education services. Evidence of this occurred in July 2010 it was announced that the regulatory body for the social work profession, General Social Care Council (GSCC) would be abolished under the coalition government's Department of

Health review of 'arm's-length bodies'. This will result in the GSCC functions being transferred to the Health and Professions Council by April 2012 and is said to contribute towards savings of up to £180m by 2014-15 (DoH 2010). This forms part of wider reforms proposed in the health White Paper, Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS also published in July 2010. The coalition government paradigm carries an implied commitment to increased societal role with implicit implications /threat to scale and focus of children and families social work workforce.

"Children receiving social care support are described as 'children in need' and numbered 382,300 in 2009/10 (up 25 percent from 304,400 in 2008/09) according to provisional figures from the latest Children in Need census published by the Department for Education on 30 September 2010" (Munro 2010: 6 - 7). Munro's report, reinforced by government data, suggests an increasing need in child protection services. It follows that a reduction in the capacity of social workers will impinge on their ability to protect those that need it most. The aforementioned abolition alone reinforces my argument as to where the power lies, and the need for clear messages from the front line to be heard by politicians (see Chapters 9 and 10). Whether The Social Work College will provide this voice, and whether the eventual Munro enquiry report will be acted upon remains to be seen. It has never seemed more important for social work practitioners to assert themselves and be heard.

Chapter 10 - Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter presents implications of the findings for social work policy and practice. It reflects on the research process and journey experienced throughout the course of the case study and implications for theory and the research community. The limitations of this study are considered and acknowledged and areas for further research are presented. The final section identifies key recommendations for North City CSD. Reference is made throughout this chapter to the various audiences for whom this study is written within disciplinary, methodological, and public categories.

As noted, this study considered the research question: 'How can problems of recruiting and retaining children and family social workers in North City children's services be explained, and what evidence is there for resolution of the problem?' The study objectives were to:

- Critically examine and describe the problem of recruitment and retention in child and family social work in North City.
- Identify key patterns, features, and influences on the problem.
- Document and evaluate the efforts made by North City social services to recruit and retain children and families social workers.
- Analyse and theorise findings within the context of the North City case study, making national and international comparisons.
- Make specific recommendations for good practice in employing agencies and in academic providers of social work education.

10.2 Reflection on the research process: implications for theory and the research community

> "…in their experiential and contextual accounts, case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge" (Stake 2003: 146 in Denzin and Lincoln).

This research used a case study strategy to examine the recruitment and retention problems in North City. Chapter 4 provides justification for the qualitative methodological approach within a social constructivist ontology and interpretive epistemology, and rejection of positivism and qualitative methodology. Having conducted the study I believe the most appropriate approach was adopted, especially as triangulation enabled opportunities for checking themes from differing perspectives, and increased validity. I remain mindful that other approaches could have been adopted and this journey has been one in which I have learnt a great deal, from issues around grammar to grappling with complex, contested and sometimes contradictory theory.

Whilst the focus of this study was predetermined, I believe I have taken ownership and applied methods of collecting data to address the two-part research question that concord the methodological paradigm of social constructivism. The literature review indicates many ways of tackling questions relating to the problems in recruiting and retaining social workers. As indicated in Chapter 4.3.1, survey methods could have been employed to provide insight and would have enabled a wider scope in terms of participants and opportunities for generalisation. However, I do not believe I would have achieved the insight and understanding into how newly qualified social workers embark on their careers with commitment, aspiration and enthusiasm, and somehow lose this along the way.

Guba and Lincoln (1994: 105) support the idea of combining qualitative and quantitative methods as they "…may be used appropriately within any research paradigm". They more recently accepted the notion of blending paradigms in order

to represent the best of both worldviews, if applied cautiously (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Schwandt (2006: 210) questioned the need for, and indeed the meaning of, the distinction between qualitative and quantitative inquiry in "…helping us understand the purpose and means of human inquiry". Johnson et al. (2007: 117) agree that lines between paradigms are 'fuzzy' and that wars between factions are unproductive. They argue for "…*pragmatism of the middle* as an especially useful philosophy for mixed methods" Johnson et al. (2007: 125). Although I remain committed to my interpretive epistemological stance, these are convincing arguments about fundamental concepts of knowledge acquisition and research that I wish to explore further.

Baumann's (1997) much mentioned ecology of practice model proved a valuable framework with which to collect and analyse the data, fitting neatly with the research approach. I believe the four dimensions help demonstrate the interplay and complexity involved in and across, not only recruitment and retention issues, but also in social work per se. The case study approach allowed the necessary flexibility in research of a government agency with many practical issues to deal with, including access. The research question indicated the necessity to gather a rich detailed picture of the situation through the voice of the workers within that could not have been gained using survey methods alone. Each story contained in this study is important and contributes to filling the gap in knowledge about identified problems within North City that will have resonance to the wider audience, as discussed.

Key to the study was ability to consult with participants in the research design. This involved a consultative approach to the introductory phase that provided a clear opportunity to build rapport with those I would be studying. I was well aware of the fact I was being judged and the need to 'perform' well was very clear to me. This introductory phase was highly enjoyable and generated a necessary degree of impetus in preparation of conducting each observational period.

It is noteworthy that every single front line worker within the CSD, who was asked, agreed to be interviewed. Those that were selected at random who participated in the interviews demonstrated they were especially motivated to discuss their social work experiences. The relevance of recruitment and retention concepts to participants served to legitimise this study, and as an acceptance of the need for my presence in their working lives during the data collection period.

One issue I have needed to reconcile was one of detachment from, and association with the organisation. In my quest to maintain a degree of objectivity I purposefully avoided creating professional relationships that might jeopardise the findings. This was influenced by, and in turn possibly influenced the spy/saviour concept presented (section 10.4). On reflection, I remain convinced that I was neither but appreciate why this enlightening concept emerged, as elements of each necessarily infiltrated my social worker as researcher status.

I anticipated the methods employed for data collection would generate a large volume of data that would form the rich 'insider stories' eventually provided. However, I underestimated this somewhat, despite Kvale's (1996) warning of feeling overwhelmed by such data. This is quantified as follows:
Interviews and observational field notes created a total of 214,068 words across 668.7 typed pages of A4 with an Arial font size 12. Interviews produced 132,240 words in 463.5 pages, an average of 7347 words and 25.75 pages per interview. Observations produced 81,828 words in 205.2 pages, an average of 2273 words in 5.7 pages per day. The challenge of analysis was as immense and overwhelming as it was (eventually) rewarding.

The necessary labelling of participants was a particular challenge within this study; not only because of the volume of data, and the complexity of human interaction, but because it was not a process that I found natural. The process generally conflicted with my professional social values of humanistic principles of individualism and respecting autonomy. This presented an inner-battle to preserve strength and meaning within the findings. My reading of social research had not

prepared me for the reality of the personal challenge in this task. However, further reading and academic supervision encouraged me to 'get over it' and appreciate the need to meet the challenge.

10.3 Limitations of this study

Capture of the ecology of social work practice in a universal sense was beyond the aims of this study. However, I believe a realistic within case 'snapshot' of social work within North City has been achieved, similar to the wide scope panoramic picture made from a montage of smaller photos taken in quick succession, as the lens sweeps across a practice horizon. The boundaries of the thesis required editing and much of the mundane activity of the every-day life of office worker (that would occasionally remind me of watching the television satirical comedy series 'The Office' (2001)) is merely alluded to. The thesis necessarily denies the full range of senses by neglecting to report the many of the sounds, smells, tastes, in addition to the many sights experienced during the fieldwork.

10.3.1 Identification and weighting of the themes

Routine activities, especially that of typing up case records on computers, were countered by regular episodes of upheaval. Anecdotally, social workers reported an appeal of the child protection role as that of the challenges in the uncertain and unpredictable nature of human relational work. The limitations of this study are associated in part, with the unpredictability and complexity of child protection work. Emergent topics and themes were rarely immediately apparent during interviews and particularly observations because of the wealth and range of data. Observations were frequently unique to the situation, never to be repeated. However, grounded theory analysis and reflection identified patterns in the data that concur with, enhance, and sometimes conflict with those of other academic studies, government reports, grey literature, and anecdotal evidence.

The predominant themes across the collected observational and interview data were not necessarily explicit as stated in Chapter 7; the words symbolising the themes were not always directly used. Thematic analysis however, enabled the

emergence of themes, established through the collection of associated topics that were linked across factors (see section 7.2). Some themes were found to varying degrees across factors. A dominant theme of feeling undervalued was established by applying the same analytical process across factors to the predominant themes. The negative connotations of this theme are acknowledged and it is noted that many positive insights, thoughts, and feelings were also provided. These were again noted within the associated themes presented in Chapter 7.

Positive comments were, however, usually connected with service users, team colleagues and the team, and the ability to intervene and make a positive difference in people's lives. These fall within case and individual factors of the ecology of practice model. Positivity was less frequently expressed in relation to the organisational and external factors but that is not to say it did not exist.

Arriving at, and especially weighting the eventual findings, especially in consideration of interview and observational data was problematic and particularly time consuming. I was often able to elicit examples of contrary evidence to general emergent themes (however scant and tenuous) by digging deep enough into the rich data source during analysis. These are often demonstrated and add balance and strength to this study. This reminded me of my personal and professional trait to value the need to see both sides of an argument. Perhaps inevitably, my ability to make professional judgements prevailed, and thematic analysis enabled me to navigate the chosen path demonstrated in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Munro (2009) refers to success in front line practice as requiring a healthy balance of caring and empathy, and the need for managerial qualities in making decisions. This knowledge reinforced my confidence in transferring social work skills to the research task, reinforcing my belief that good social workers have skills that are conducive to social research (Shaw and Gould 2001).

10.3.2 Bias

As a lone researcher, it has been particularly necessary for me to reflect on my personal stance in relation to recruitment and retention and the themes, and factors relating to these concepts.

I remained conscious of my bias as a social worker researching social work, although admittedly this stance inevitably changed as the research progressed. It is my belief this 'stance' was directly related to my personal employment. This was best exemplified in relation to the topic of social work education and how my perspective of this changed as my career and personal situation developed. A collection of thoughts questioning the preparedness of newly qualified social workers triggered my reflection. This enabled me to assess that whilst revisiting the data, the topic provoked a defensive personal response. I believe this was because, as a social work academic I was associated with the educational institution, the focus of possible criticism. I recalled the same topic provided a more emphatic personal response when it was previously analysed whilst I was a voluntary agency social worker.

This served as a welcome personal reminder about, on one hand the inevitability of bias, and on the other, the need for a mindful and receptive approach to my data collection and analysis. This required a conscious reframing of the data as my analysis developed which involved me questioning the extent of my personal bias in relation to the findings. I found this both challenging and useful.

10.3.3 Currency

The study has taken a great deal of time to complete with extensive gaps between data collection (predominantly 2005-2006), the presentation of findings to North City (2009), and eventual submission of the thesis (2010). This arguably limits the currency of the findings with the CSD in respect of them being of practical use. Silverman (2010: 419) notes that time lag can understandably influence shift in the 'customer's' interests.

One senior manager within the case reportedly argued that the presentation of my findings should not be conducted because of the potentially damaging effects of rekindling previously addressed themes. Indeed, during one 'presentation of findings' event another senior manager with responsibility for recruitment and retention policy clarified that whilst my understanding was accurate for when the data was collected, the shape of the workforce, policy, and the problems had changed. The recruitment and retention problems had improved to some extent. Interestingly, some front line practitioners also discretely acknowledged that whilst changes had been made, problems in recruitment and retention remained and that the key themes identified (in especially in Chapters 7) were still strongly felt. This was supported by the formal (written) and informal (verbal) feedback provided by attendees (see appendix Q).

On reflection, the supervisory researcher/case relationship ended when the senior manager left the service in 2006, coinciding with the conclusion of data collection, and was not rekindled. Whilst contact was maintained, as above, both parties have acknowledged more could have been done to formalise this arrangement. My relationship with North City CSD senior managers and front line workers remains strong and keen interest identified at the outset of the study in the research has generally been maintained despite the time span involved. Further work relating to recruitment and retention issues is being considered and I will continue to provide occasional research focussed presentations as part of the North City's commitment to evidence based practice and practitioner-as-researcher activity.

10.3.4 Dissemination

This study does not stop once the thesis has been 'out of the door' as Becker says (1986 in Silverman 2010). Whilst it does represent the end of a personal journey, it marks the beginning of another, equipped with a license to research independently. Given my argument for currency of the findings I plan to share them in more depth with North City and as indicated below, longitudinal work may be possible. Social Work Now, Professional Social Work and Community Care Magazines provide an

ideal platform to engage with the national recruitment and retention debate and will each be targeted for dissemination.

The national JSWEC conference in June 2011 should also be an opportunity to share the methodological approach and study findings. I have identified at least two journals where I aim to publish from this thesis. Again these will be related to findings, as well as the methodological approach. An additional personal aim is to engage in the consultation process surrounding both the Social Work Task Force, including work on the Social Work College, and the Munro report. Despite concerns noted in the postscript to this thesis, I see these as opportunities to at least ensure social workers are heard. Government service providers, for example, should be interested in my 'real time' vacancy rate and should consider how this idea could be applied to other professions. On this note, further research in the area of recruitment and retention of social workers is needed. This includes exploration of the role of politicians in social work, workforce data collection, research commissioning, and extent/nature of dissemination of research findings. I remain optimistic about the future of social work, but am well aware of the surrounding threats to the profession.

10.4 Areas for future research

This study provides detailed insight into recruitment and retention problems in North City CSD, within local, national, and international contexts. However, gaps in knowledge exist and further questions are required in order to address the apparent crisis associated with vacancy and turnover rates, especially in child protection work. Further research should address aspects that fell beyond the aims and objectives of this study.

As highlighted in Chapter 3 some researchers (for example Abbasi and Hollman 2000; Galvin 2004; Willis 2003) note concern that the pervasive nature of high turnover leads to the best and brightest employees leaving the service. Without a clear definition of social work performance I struggled to place this concept within my analysis, although I was keen to test whether this was an area for further

exploration. In my personal judgement, I believe this is a somewhat unfair assumption to make because of the negative connotations towards retained employees; the issue of retention and turnover is a more complex one. In the main, the social worker participants within the case study were hard working and dedicated to their service users, often working long hours and sometimes putting needs of others before their own – working late, having to rearrange personal appointments to fit around clients. My findings did not concur with the above concern. This is an area for further research because retaining the best and brightest, however these terms are defined, is clearly a necessity for any social work employer.

Additional research is also needed to develop a deeper understanding of senior management perspectives in recruitment and retention problems. The literature review chapters in this study identify a dearth in such research. The NGT findings in Chapter 8 provide useful and rare insight that should inform further investigations; in this case, demonstrating that senior managers share many concerns held by front line workers as well as ideas for making improvements. NGT is a recommended consensus method with which to collect data from this particular group due to the practical issues of time and expense. Further work using this approach with fewer senior managers would be more manageable and allow for comparisons to be made in developments in ideas around the problems faced.

During the fieldwork I was generally accepted as a relatively unknown interested colleague, which rendered me an 'outsider' (see section 5.3.3). This involved me occasionally being referred to as a spy; someone who is motivated by a wish to adhere to a managerialist agenda and report back on identified shortcomings. Whilst this was not of great significance, and did not impede the fieldwork, it inevitably generated initial suspicion about my motives and outputs. Conversely, some participants, across the range of grades, implied I was saviour-like and could rectify the problematic recruitment and retention situation in North City. This added weight to my personal perception of my stance as a researcher and my

responsibility to somehow do justice to the data and people who allowed me into their working lives. I believe this will not be a unique researcher experience, but the spy versus saviour concept is not one I have previously encountered in social research literature. I believe more insight can be gained that will help new researchers prepare for their work, especially where striking balances between managing expectations, rapport building and professional distance, bias and values are concerned.

Opportunities also exist within the bounds of this study, for longitudinal research with North City. Involving the same participants where possible, in order to update the study and make comparisons across the data. This would provide evaluative insight into the effectiveness of initiatives employed by the CSD to address recruitment and retention problems. Exit interview data would be of significant value in this case. It is anticipated this information would be more readily available.

Chapter 7.3 demonstrates complexities within the identified dominant theme of front line workers feeling undervalued. Further research into indicators for feeling valued and undervalued in practice is needed to help employers and employees further develop understanding of these important issues. Although participant use of diary methods was not possible in this study, I aim to consider feasibility and pursue this further. The knowledge gained from this method would enhance our understanding of day-to-day social work and enable me to consider findings against those in this study. Analysis of service user case notes completed by social workers (as discussed in Chapter 4) would offer further insight and more rounded approach to the data.

Likewise, shadowing social workers on home visits and contact supervision outside the office environment, as well as individual worker supervision are methods worthy of further exploration. Ethical issues would need careful consideration but the experience gained in this study has provided me with confidence to perceive these as realistic approaches in the further generation of knowledge of children and families social work practice. I would of course prefer the relevance of

recruitment and retention issues to fade as improvements are made; however, I anticipate the debate will be necessary for the foreseeable future.

10.5 Key Recommendations

"In a field as complex as ours, a learning network must by its very nature be protean and energetic",

(Atherton 2004: 2).

A summary of the key recommendations arising from this study with reference to the original research question are presented as follows:

Senior managers should:

- Consider ways to demonstrate value in front-line practice.
- Consider effective communication within the workforce.

Frontline workers should:

- Engage in the recruitment and retention debate.
- Improve self-confidence and self-efficacy.
- Become active agents in ensuring core social work principle and values are upheld.

Senior manager and front line workers should:

- Be less defensive/less cynical in communication.
- Acknowledge that issues around communication will take time.
- Acknowledge potential of shared underlying principle in the protection and upholding welfare of children.
- Build on positive change

These recommendations represent a challenge in the understanding of paradigms and meeting of minds. I identify four underlying principles that are key to this process.

Firstly, front line staff and senior management share the same overarching aim of protecting and improving the wellbeing of children. Secondly, a mutual understanding for what lies behind disparity will lead to the achievement of the aim

and to positive outcomes for children. Thirdly, the front line/senior management relationship involves an imbalance of power and mutual dependency counters power issues to some extent. Finally, that both senior managers and front line workers are mutually dependent within the State sector service provision.

Key agency questions for consideration are therefore:

- How do you deal with the imbalance of power?
- How can you harness mutual dependency in a beneficial way?

In sum, successful resolution of recruitment and retention issues in North City depends on the commitment to the process of positive and effective communication. This provides the necessary impetus for senior managers and front line social workers to communicate the social work agenda upwards to commissioners and politicians, at local and national levels.

10.6 Conclusion

Social workers need to be media savvy and mindful of the need to balance a need to attract talent to children's social care services with celebrating the talent that already exists within. Celebrating success and offering a recognition of the work done in the face of extreme adversity, and what often feels like it is against the odds, is both recognised by senior managers and front line workers as valuable. This should be informed by the individual need to reframe the working situation in order to find empowerment and personal wellbeing. Whilst I previously felt a natural aversion to discussing spiritual needs I have developed an appreciation of an almost selfish need to look after myself in order that I can look after the wellbeing of others. Spiritual wellbeing for me has nothing to do with religion, and everything to do with knowing that I am ok, proud to be a social worker, proud of the profession, compassionate and passionate about why social workers exist and steadfast in my resolve to do the right thing by my service users, to be a role model, a leader, a listener, a professional friend and shoulder to cry upon, a protector, an upholder of social justice and a voice for those who society turns.

Chapter 10 – Conclusion

The profession needs leaders who will stand up and not only defend a service under attack, but advance the social work cause with an unswerving eye on client need and the strong value base, whilst forging the path toward political and public value and professional longevity. Social workers provide services for people who are frequently marginalised and generally ignored or undervalued by society. Social workers (me included) are duty bound to challenge oppression including any expressed views that devalue people who need help. If society devalues marginalised and oppressed people, why would it value those workers who work with such people? If employing agencies do not value their social workers why should society? This arguably lies at the root of negative public perception of the social work profession and I believe feeds the devaluing of its front line workers.

Service users must retain our focus, whether children; adults; older people; people seeking asylum; carers, people with physical and mental disabilities, they are firmly at the centre of our work; if we lose sight of this, we lose worth and currency in the profession. Service users, social workers, and the social work profession are all far too important for that to ever happen.

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Appendices