FROM TRANSMISSION TO TRANSFORMATION: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW COACHING IS EXPERIENCED BY SOCIAL WORKERS AND SERVICE USERS

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"Forging meaning is about changing yourself"

(Solomon, 2014)

"we aim in one direction, events pull us in the other,

and the line of our life is drawn along the middle"

(Brown, 2016, p. 58)

Dedications

I would like to dedicate this thesis to three people. Firstly, to my grandma Alice, who was always so proud of all my academic achievements and would put a notice in the Yorkshire Evening Post to mark each academic milestone. Secondly, to my inspirational secondary school English teacher Steve Williams, who saw and encouraged the academic potential in me when I didn't know I had any. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to someone I've never met: 91-year-old Auschwitz survivor Dr Edith Eiger, whose own world of meaning was disfigured and breached by the Nazis. Edith staunchly refuses to be held hostage by the wretchedness of her early circumstances and counters them with a passion for learning and a determination to joyfully high kick her way through life.

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Abstract

This 'real world' research aimed to explore children's social workers' experiences of delivering coaching to service users in a local authority family support and child protection service in the north of England, *and* service users' experiences of receiving coaching from them. Seven social workers (who had been trained as accredited coaches) and six service users (parents and young people) took part in the study, which had two elements: focus groups followed by semi-structured interviews. The social work participants took part in nine focus groups over a ten-month period whilst coaching was taking place, which captured how they used coaching in their practice over time. Both social workers and service users took part in individual semi-structured interviews when the coaching was completed. Significant themes that arose from both sets of participants were derived using thematic analysis.

Themes presented and evaluated include 'cultural blockers' to coaching within the social workers' turbulent local environment. The presence of and identification with a ubiquitous 'fix it' mindset and default social work practice habits based on 'transmitting' (advice giving, directing, telling people what to do) and agenda-led practice are prominent themes. The Infiltration of 'tick-box' social work processes into coaching delivery and the need to cede social power and control in order to coach others are also distinguished as themes. These are related to themes that reveal how social workers' professional identifies initially became compartmentalised and conflicted through using coaching, before becoming customised to include elements of coaching attitudes and behaviours. Perceiving movement and change in others through coaching, re-energising the social workers' desire to make a difference and reconnecting them with their vocational aspirations are strongly identified as themes that have the potential to reshape child protection practice.

Service user themes centre on the comparisons between the received experiences of social work and coaching. The separation of hostile associations towards social workers from the social work identity of their coach is a notable theme, which is linked to how service users recast social workers in the study as 'coaches'. Other key themes centre on coaching as a disrupter of stagnant patterns in service users' lives and its promotion of iterative steps towards small changes and transformation. The study proposes that coaching skills be integrated into future social work education and continuing professional development.

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Chapter One - Introduction

This research aimed to explore how coaching is experienced by social workers (delivering coaching) and by service users (receiving coaching). This chapter describes how coaching as a research subject was arrived at, the local context in which the research was undertaken and the conditions in which the social work participants were practising. Finally, it provides an overview of the thesis chapters.

1.1 Reflexive Account: The Origins of the Study

This study became possible as a result of a mosaic of experiences that have fundamentally shaped my core values, beliefs and self-knowledge. The professional choices and decisions I have made within a 25-year period of working in different roles in children's social care, and more recently within social work education, have informed how this research came into being. These experiences began when I became a children's social worker in 1995 and continued through a variety of different local authority development roles, where I was responsible for the practice improvement and training of children's social workers. Throughout these positions I have remained very 'practice near' and have maintained contact with service users through various groups I have become involved with or initiated. I have striven to ensure that a participatory and empowering ethos has been central to all the roles and projects I have been involved with, and this has been at the heart of this study also.

More recently, being a regional representative for the Government's Step Up Programme (a postgraduate, employment-based social work programme aimed at career changers) and

becoming a visiting social work lecturer and tutor have brought me into contact with social work students, with those embarking on their early social work careers and with the social work curriculum being taught. This has enabled me to see how the political ideologies informing government policy are translated into the practice of children's social workers employed in a local authority environment, and how they can affect the next generation of social workers learning their craft in academic institutions.

Beyond these experiences, the most significant, which led me to this study, was becoming a professional coach in June 2015 and beginning to coach professionals working in children's statutory social care and child protection services. This, for me, was an unexpectedly unnerving process. At the time I was providing training to all children's social care staff in a local authority in group supervision and on improving the quality of one-to-one reflective supervision. I soon realised, through my coaching training, that the skills I thought I had in abundance were more lacking in my own practice than I had cared to consciously admit. Coaching training involved me being observed coaching others, receiving detailed feedback from peers and coaching trainers and developing and honing skills absent from my social work training and professional development. I recognised that in order to really attend to what coachees were saying, I needed to suspend my desire to give advice and direction or to share my story of a similar circumstance. I needed to listen at a much deeper level, to stop waiting to speak and be *present* in order to help people differently.

After this realisation my capacity to focus on my coachees for long periods of time (sessions of up to two hours) increased exponentially and I became much more consciously aware of

the non-verbal communication that was being transmitted from moment to moment in the encounter. This was revelatory; intellectually and rationally I had known and could talk about the importance of listening, use of self, body language and attuned attention but, looking back, my experience of achieving these in encounters had been partial. Similar limitations were revealed in a seminar group of social work students I was teaching during my coaching training period. I asked students to listen to another student for 5 minutes, mirror their posture, paraphrase what they had said and relay what they had noticed from non-verbal behaviours and tone of voice. They found it a very difficult challenge and wanted to immediately transmit advice, demonstrate knowledge and propose future tasks and action based on the content of what had been said, rather than stay in the moment and play back what they had observed, heard and experienced. This seemed to be preventing the students from really connecting with the communication of the person opposite and understanding that people would rather be: "felt with, not dealt with" (Perry, 2019, p. 68). I began to consider if this could be the same for qualified, experienced social workers and wondered what the benefits would be of introducing a coaching approach, not only to social workers but to service users as well.

Around this time I began to coach three experienced children's social workers as part of the coaching practice hours I needed to become a qualified, accredited coach. This was the first time any social workers had received coaching in the local authority, and I was encouraged to see that their experiences of being coached were similar to my own – they felt challenged, really listened to and very quickly began to think about their issues in new ways that translated into tangible behaviour change. The idea of introducing coaching into social work

now began to really take root and grow. In my office environment I was surrounded by a close team of development and training staff who had also undertaken the same training route as me. With them I became part of a hundred-strong, authority-wide, internal group of coaches who could be called upon for coaching assignments with anyone in the local authority from any service, regardless of status. I felt supported by a burgeoning and positive coaching culture, whilst being very aware that, within the local authority, I was now part of a privileged microcosm which had so far been unable to breach the disinterested and reputationally 'hardnosed' mindset of the children's social work teams.

Fortuitously, and thanks to the egalitarian nature of coaching, on one grey, wet afternoon in 2015 I found myself coaching an assistant director (also a coach). Afterwards I approached her about the prospect of training a group of children's social workers (as children's social work was where all my professional knowledge, experience and relationships were founded) to become accredited coaches, with a view to them coaching service users. To my surprise she agreed to fund the coaching training on the spot, the pivotal turning point that led to the conditions necessary for this study. Whilst serendipity played its part, becoming a coach increased my confidence in my personal and social power (a theme I shall return to in this thesis). I believe this resulted in me having a different *presence* and enabled me to present a bolder and more compelling argument when I went on to persuade other managers in the social and organisational hierarchy to release staff for the study.

Unlike the business environment and that of private enterprise, the pitching of ideas for research purposes is not a common feature within the culture of social services; in my career

up to that point it had been unheard of, and the backdrop of biting austerity cuts still makes me marvel at the leap of faith taken by the local authority at that time. Further synchronicity produced the offer of a fee-waivered PhD from my local university, which meant that I could leave my years of employment in a local authority, to proudly and falteringly pursue an academic path that I had deviated from 25 years before.

In retrospect I can discern that the consistent theme throughout this personal account is that of transformation; my own potential being transformed through coaching, to bravely try something new, and my desire for others to have the same *experience* (rather than just acquiring theoretical or intellectual knowledge) of transformation in their own lives. Becoming a coach has thus been personally and epistemically transformational and has triggered significant changes in my life, which create a felt sense of exhilaration when I recount them. It has therefore been unavoidable that my interests have shaped this enquiry. I have tried to limit any self-fulfilling tendencies from my own interests by employing what Mason (2002) terms as critically 'reflexive acts' of self-scrutiny and introspection, to help think myself into the research process and neutralise my position somewhat as a coaching enthusiast. I have done this through discussions with my thesis supervisors, through debriefing sessions after each focus group with the local authority coaching supervisor and through self-questioning of my thoughts, actions and decisions in a 'free form' research journal. I have striven to be actively and systematically reflexive, critically questioning what I am doing and what my motivations are for doing so. Researcher-researched subjectivity and influence (Yardley, 2000) is thus acknowledged throughout this study. This autobiographical account is relevant to this enquiry as it articulates my own transformative journey leading up

to the research process. It indicates the values underpinning the study and the impetus for executing it. It has allowed me to acknowledge the luck and privilege afforded to me to dare to try something new in the field of children's social work as I try to enable others to have the same possibilities in their own professional lives.

1.2 Background to the Study

It is important at the outset of this thesis to set the scene for the current study and situate it in the local socio-political context in which it took place. The research process coincided with an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in the local authority children's services teams where the social work participants were based. Ofsted is a government department that monitors and inspects all services that provide care, education and training to children and young people in England. This includes local authority children's services departments, which are subject to unannounced and targeted inspections of safeguarding services in three to four year cycles and are judged with ratings of 'inadequate', 'requires improvement to be good', 'good' and 'outstanding' that are reported to Parliament (Ofsted, 2019). An Ofsted inspection is an intense 'focusing event' (Elliot, 2009) in which complex child protection systems and practice are independently scrutinised. A recent study by Hood, Nilsson & Habibi (2019), which analysed Ofsted inspections in children's social care from 2009 to 2016, found that recommendations on compliance with standards and process were those most commonly identified to drive quality and performance. Managing 'institutional risk' (Featherstone, White & Morris 2014), through local command and control policies concerning new timescales, thresholds for service access and performance-based accountability structures, is a common organisational response in those

local authorities found to be 'inadequate'. Indeed Jones, who has overseen the improvement journeys of a number of 'inadequate' local authorities, has accused Ofsted of being a "hit and run inspectorate" (Jones, 2017, p 11) as it fails to adequately consider the human context of social work and the challenges in realising cultural and behavioural change:

"social work is delivered by human beings, working with other human beings and it

is received by human beings" (Featherstone, White & Morris 2014, p.85)

In the local authority where this research took place the frenzied preparations for the inspection, followed by the public announcement of an 'inadequate' judgment of the service by inspectors shortly afterwards, ran in parallel with the planned start of the study. The inspection judgment and report produced a major organisational crisis that resulted in the near collapse of management infrastructure and oversight, radical organisational restructuring, job losses, threats of job losses and unprecedented change at all tiers of the service. High numbers of temporary agency staff were employed as the stable social work workforce fragmented. At times it resulted in a pervasive climate of mistrust, dread, anger, despair, hopelessness and overwhelming uncertainty within teams and between staff and management and many valuable interpersonal relationships were ruptured or lost.

The ramifications of the judgment and the continued negative effect on the study were unavoidable as already change-weary social workers scrabbled to absorb the impact within their roles. All the social workers manically incorporated new mandatory training into their practice whilst rapidly complying with new reporting and accountability regimes in radically

altered structures for service delivery and management oversight. The capacities of the social workers to take on coaching was therefore much reduced, as they were overwhelmed with new roles or different responsibilities that were related to re-structuring or improving the service as a result of inspection recommendations. Being part of the research thus placed an extra pressure on all the social workers, who felt torn between wanting to coach and needing to respond to the demands of the organisation. The inspection therefore postponed the start of coaching activity and individual coaching assignments with service users that had been due to begin in September 2016 were delayed and commenced in the period between December 2016 and March 2017. The details of how this affected research activities on the ground are described in Chapter Three (Methodology) and are a prism through which the research is considered.

1.2.1 The Coaching Training Project

All the social workers taking part in this study had undertaken a one-off, certified foundation level training course in coaching, which had taken approximately six months to complete. Only social workers not in their 'Assessed and Supported Year of Employment' (ASYE, the first year after qualifying as a social worker) were asked to take part in the training. It was reasoned that social workers who were in their ASYE year would have the burden of ongoing assessment to manage, still be establishing their social work identity and skills and would be experiencing their statutory responsibilities for the first time. It was theorised that asking them to get involved in coaching training could have felt overwhelming and a diversion from the primary social work task. By contrast, it was thought that social workers who had more experience in the role would have a more robust social work identity and would be more

professionally prepared to integrate coaching skills into their practice. Moreover, the local authority was unable to reduce social workers' workloads in order for them to coach service users and it was felt that experienced social workers would be more used to and more able to adjust their work patterns accordingly.

Eleven social workers took part in the training and were told at the outset that there would be a subsequent research project, based on their experience of coaching service users, which they could opt into. All the social workers were asked to consider this option during the training process, and it was made clear that achieving a coaching certification was a necessary condition of taking part in the research project. An information sheet was given to the social workers at the end of the training course that explained this (see Appendix 2). Seven social workers went on to provide coaching sessions to service users and subsequently took part in the research.

Prior to the study I approached the Director of Children's Services for funding to pay for the coaching training and senior service managers to release children's social workers to take part in it. This was agreed as the local authority was already funding coaching training for staff but had failed to attract social workers to take part, despite numerous efforts. As this training was to be for children's social workers only, it was viewed as a possible means of extending the local authority's successful but limited coaching culture into children's services. The training would also provide a platform for the present study, as it would create an opportunity to collect data on the social workers' experiences of applying learning from the training into their roles when the training was completed.

After a training budget was approved I worked collaboratively with a learning and development manager (who was also a qualified coach and coach supervisor) from the local authority to achieve the following:

- Advertise, set up and analyse tender applications from different independent coaching training companies who could deliver accredited coaching qualifications

- Ensure that the programmes proposed could deliver bespoke training that applied coaching models and theory specifically to children's social work field practice

- Appoint an experienced independent company that employed trainers who had a working understanding of the contemporary children's social care environment

- Appoint a company able to provide ongoing support, supervision and continuing professional development for the participating social workers throughout the duration of the training

- Secure the commitment of the learning and development manager to provide coaching supervision to the group of social work coaches once they had qualified, as part of a hybrid focus group structure

The training course that was delivered was accredited by the Association for Coaching. I was present at all the training days as an observer and met with the trainers regularly to discuss how elements of the training were being received by the social workers taking part. The content consisted of:

- 42 hours of taught input

- six hours of coaching practice outside of course time with professional peers, family or friends

- two individual supervision sessions with the trainers

- 20 hours of evidenced, self-directed learning

Blended teaching methods were used comprising of theoretical inputs, demonstrations, experiential group work and discussion.

1.2.2. The Coaching Project

1.2.2.1 Coaching Delivery

It was initially agreed (by the principal social worker and service managers) that on completion of training the social workers would coach a maximum of two service users for an agreed number of sessions (agreed between the social worker and the service user) on each other's caseload. This reciprocal arrangement proved later to be untenable due to the impact of the Ofsted inspection and some of the social workers suddenly losing their case-holding responsibilities when they were assigned to new roles. In order to provide service user 'coachees' for the social workers to coach, I set up and managed a temporary coaching project within the local authority, which provided a simple infrastructure in which service users could volunteer for coaching directly or indirectly through their existing social worker or social care professional. Service users were shown information (see Appendices 5, 6 and 7) by their social worker/social care professional that had been circulated electronically to social care staff by me and the principal social worker about the coaching project (with the option of taking part

in the research afterwards). The service user then asked for their contact details to be put forward to two nominated social workers who had taken part in the coaching training, or to myself as an initial point of contact, to set coaching up. The two social workers were nominated by the local authority to co-ordinate referrals for coaching as they did not have a caseload and were perceived to have capacity, which the other social workers did not. Also, as members of a new quality assurance and practice development team, they were perceived to be in a good position to promote coaching internally in the organisation.

It was necessary to include the two coaching-trained social workers as they could answer organisational queries, discuss the project in staff and management meetings and explain what coaching was to staff and service users who needed further information. Importantly, as employees of the family support and child protection service, they could receive internal electronic communication about service users that I could not be privy to (as someone now external to the organisation) due to data protection procedures. I met regularly with the two social workers to discuss the suitability of coaching requests, to collate a list of service user volunteers from the different referral sources and to allocate the service users to one of the coaching-trained social workers. The allocated social work coach then made contact with the service user directly to set up the first coaching meeting.

In the first coaching session each social work coach and service user coachee signed and retained a copy of a coaching agreement (see Appendix 10). This was completed during a preliminary discussion between them and detailed the date and time of coaching sessions, where coaching would take place, and the coaching review date (after approximately 4

coaching sessions). The coaching agreement was also where the service user's coaching goals and follow-up activities in between coaching sessions were recorded. Service users were given a 'Take Away' sheet (see Appendix 12) that prompted them to reflect on moments of success or difficulty in between each session. After each session social workers were asked to complete a 'Thinking Time: Reflective Learning Log' sheet (see Appendix 11) to help them reflect on their coaching experience.

1.2.2.2 Group Coaching Supervision

All the social work coaches took part in 4-6 weekly group coaching supervision sessions facilitated by a qualified coaching supervisor from the local authority. Regular supervision was a practical requirement of the accrediting coaching body, the Association for Coaching, whose Global Code of Ethics for Coaches and Mentors (2016), necessitated that, as new coaches, the social workers needed to demonstrate a commitment to understanding themselves, to their self-development and to evaluating their coaching practice through participating in ongoing supervision and continuing professional development activities. The social work participants had differing experiences of the regularity of their own social work-related supervision from managers in their job roles, and whilst the intention of the group was not for it to serve as a substitute for non-coaching case supervision, it was recognised that it could provide much needed time and space for introspection and for sustaining a focus on coachees (Kemp, 2008). Supporting the social workers' regular self-analysis through a consistent, non-judgmental relationship with the coaching supervisor also allowed them to reflect with candour on any critical moments (de Haan et al., 2010) and learning insights from

their coaching relationships and elaborate on any overlaps with their social work practice, as well as monitor their confidence and quality assure their competence as coaches.

Each supervision group had a psychological 'check-in' and 'check out' element, where participants were encouraged to share what had been going on for them in their professional lives since the group last met and their current internal psychological state. The purpose of the 'check-in' was to ground participants in the 'here and now', to tangibly separate them from their work environment where such group reflections were rare, and to establish an atmosphere of natural self-disclosure and synchrony with others in the group. After the 'check in' the coaching supervisor employed a reflective exercise known locally as the 'glass dome' model. The exercise involved the supervisor asking for an individual to volunteer an issue, or an example of coaching practice, which they described briefly without interruption to the rest of the group for 5 minutes. The group were then allowed to ask clarifying questions of the individual at the end for 5 minutes. The group member who had outlined the issue was then put under a metaphorical 'glass dome', where they could only observe and listen to the discussions of the other group members who decided what advice they would give on the issue without speaking to them directly. Each person was then asked to feed back their best piece of advice to the individual, and the group member who brought the issue was asked to respond to this in terms of which advice they wanted to take and why, and to describe what their actions would be as a result. They were also asked to describe how it felt to be listening to group members discussing their issue. The 'glass dome' facilitator was required to manage the emergence of different voices and the energy of the group and to confidently 'hold the space' during silences.

This exercise was used as it had been used previously in group coaching supervision sessions run by the local authority for existing internal coaches, had consistently evaluated well and had yielded thoughtful responses and insights from all coaches involved in the sessions. Very similar models have also been used effectively with social workers (see the 'Seminar Technique' by Danbury & Wallbridge (1989), Ruch's thoughtful case discussion model (2007), and Lees's (2017) Reflective Practice Groups). As a tried and trusted supervision model that does not critique practice or dwell on mistakes, it was incorporated into the study experience to help the social workers feel a containing and enjoyable fellowship with each other in which they could share and develop their future practice.

1.2.3 Insider/Outsider Status

As the key person responsible for initiating the commissioning of the coaching training, I attended all the training sessions to note the content and observe the social workers' reactions to it. This also allowed me to keep informed of the context in which the social workers were operating. Whilst the coaching training was *not* a part of the research process, it did form a dynamic and active pre-research environment where I could observe social workers responding to coaching models and approaches for the first time within a natural community of practice. Attending as an observer also indicated to those social workers undertaking the training (many of whom I knew professionally through delivering training to them previously on reflective practice) that my role was now separate and different from my former role as a registered social worker working in practice improvement and training delivery in the local authority. At this stage the social workers were also aware that I was a coach, a former employee and now a full time postgraduate researcher. The nuance of my

insider/outsider status was thus signified at the outset of the coaching training project to all those taking part – and underlined to myself - prior to the active research commencing. My insider/outsider status continued throughout the research and the impact it had on my own research experience is considered and reflected upon in Chapters Three and Eight.

1.3 Overview of Forthcoming Chapters

This thesis comprises seven further chapters. Chapter Two provides an in-depth examination and critical review of the relevant cross-disciplinary theoretical and international empirical literature within social work and coaching, which contextualises the study. It locates contemporary social work practice within a neoliberal discourse and increasing structural inequality and theorises neoliberalism's influence and impact on social workers' abilities to 'make a difference' through their practice. This chapter defines the remit of children's social workers, describes the role of a coach and appraises the differences and synergies between them. It concludes with setting out the research questions that this thesis seeks to answer.

Chapter Three explains the methodological paradigm and the key theoretical assumptions on which the study rests. It sets out and justifies the study design and sequence of data collection using focus groups and semi-structured interviews with social workers and service users within the research context. It details ethical considerations and strategies that were put in place when difficulties were encountered in accessing and maintaining participants in the study.

Chapter Four details the rationale for the choice of analytic technique and contains a detailed breakdown of how this technique was applied to make sense of the two sets of raw data (focus groups and semi-structured interviews). It describes my interaction with the data, the process of identifying codes and how major themes were developed.

Chapter Five outlines the findings from social work participants. Themes are interpreted and illustrated with excerpts from the data arising from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Chapter Six shifts the perspective and presents the findings from service users. It concludes by drawing together the major commonalities and parallels between both sets of findings.

Chapter Seven presents a critical discussion of the research findings and the unique and compelling contribution to knowledge that the findings offer is highlighted within the context of existing social work and coaching scholarship. It builds upon the existing literature and advances an original model to illuminate the experience of social workers practising at the intersection of social work and coaching.

In Chapter Eight I present my concluding reflections on the research journey, specifically the internal conflicts and practical difficulties that have arisen for me as a researcher straddling the inside/outsider role whilst witnessing the social work participants' experiences of pressure, organisational turmoil and upheaval. It summarises the thesis' contribution,

outlines areas for further research and scholarship and makes recommendations for the future education, training and continuing professional development of social workers.

Chapter Two – A Review of the Literature

Introduction

The previous chapter set out the troubled micro context in which the present study has been conducted. This chapter situates the study in the macro; the national socio-economic and socio-cultural discourse informing contemporary children's social work. The literature explored here aims to refract the devastating effects of austerity-based budget cuts to social services through a neoliberal lens and argues that managerialist and bureaucratic influences and increasing demand have constricted much of social work practice to one that is interventionist, rigid and prescriptive. The enduring dominance of risk-averse, process-compliant practice and its association with institutional fear and anxiety in response to child abuse scandal reforms is also set out.

I contend that, within this environment, social workers' professional fulfilment through conducting practice that is meaningful and 'makes a difference' to service users is curtailed. This chapter introduces the social work and coaching roles, outlines and critiques constructs within the scholarship of both fields and suggests synergies between them. It discusses cross-disciplinary theoretical literature with the aim of enriching theorizing on the use of coaching within social work and situates coaching as a possible practice within it. It critically interrogates the empirical basis of a selection of relationship-based models that are currently being endorsed in local authorities through central government funding to encourage innovation and evidence-based practice in the profession. It elaborates the empirical research on the effectiveness of coaching whilst flagging the inherent problems of an approach based

on individualism that ignores the impact of structural inequality and deprivation. The review highlights the dearth of studies on coaching's use within social work and considers the few coaching studies that are relatable to it. Finally, the summary integrates this review with the rationale for the present enquiry and the research questions.

2.1 The Remit of the Children's Social Worker

The role of the children's social worker as a helping professional is not an easy one, being:

> "charged with entering the lives and moral worlds of families, many of whom have routinely experienced disrespect, and have longstanding histories of material and emotional deprivation" (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014, p. 1).

Social workers are tasked with working productively with those who can be traumatised, violent, vulnerable, fearful, defensive, hostile, anxious and overwhelmed, and whose unrealised needs are such that they are subject to social work interventions. The work of children's social workers is wide-ranging, covering direct work with those who neglect their children, perpetrators of sexual, physical and emotional abuse and support to child and adult survivors of it. They may be based in a range of generic and specialist settings, from preventative family support services to specialist mental health, to teams that work with young people at risk of extra-familial harm such as child sexual exploitation, gang exposure and criminal exploitation. They are also involved in services that support children and young people in residential care and foster care and the teams that work with the carers themselves. This complex and difficult work in which "each case presents a potential catastrophe" (Little,

2017, p. 117) is acknowledged to be emotionally demanding (Biggart, Ward, Cook & Schofield, 2017) and requires social workers to create relationships with those who may be reluctant to co-operate but are often mandated to do so - whilst also carrying the future consequences of service user non-engagement in mind. This can make for encounters that can frequently be distressing and fraught with uncertainty and anxiety and for ethical dilemmas that can strain internal sense-making (Ferguson, 2011; 2018).

Many social workers do report their work as rewarding (Legood, McGrath, Searle & Lee, 2016) and they often have a deep connection to the job, which is founded on an altruistic drive to 'make a difference' to the lives of others (Radey & Figley, 2007). However, the pernicious mistrust, blame and stigma that have come to be attached to the social work role on the back of high-profile child deaths and media 'moral outrage' scandals (Parton & Williams, 2017) have led to the profession experiencing its own form of societal 'othering', with many hiding their professional identity as a form of self-preservation (Legood et al., 2016). Moreover, both Featherstone et al (2014) and Gibson (2019) have highlighted how personally social workers feel about the public shaming of their profession, and how the fear of being branded 'inadequate', incompetent or humiliated is embedded within practice systems and remains an ever-present and self-conscious anxiety "which shapes what they do and how they do it" (Gibson, 2019, p. 5). Gibson argues that poor institutional performance is also individualised and constructed around shame, with compliant administration practice, such as the timely writing and uploading of assessments and reports to systems, taking precedence as the primary social work task and source of pride.

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Underpinning social work processes at a macro level are professional values and ethical principles that promote equality, cultural diversity, compassion, inclusivity, social change, social justice and challenge to forms of subjugation, stigma and prejudice. As a profession it is defined globally by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers as:

"a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing." (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Recognition of the need for continuing professional development for social workers has never been more pronounced, with social workers' academic education and practice skills being required to adhere to detailed capability descriptors within a Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2018) that focuses on the purpose, practice and impact of social work. The PCF is supplemented by Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) that outline a set of standards attached to different levels of seniority and roles within social work. The jury is still out on whether the PCF has transformed the pedagogy of professional practice since it was launched in 2012 (Higgins, 2016), but both the PCF and KSS place considerable weight on building effective relationships with children and families, valuing thoughtful professional reflection and the application of emotional intelligence. How social workers utilise their skills

and the professional conversation to engage service users with their agenda (for example, standardised information they need to obtain for assessments, interactions they need to observe or things they need to see evidence of first-hand) whilst enabling service users' narratives to be heard is a complex and understudied area (Ferguson, 2016; Forrester, Westlake & Glynn, 2012; Forrester et al., 2018).

Social work practice is typically delivered using methods of care, social support and advocacy, balanced – and oftentimes in conflict with – fundamental processes of control, coercion, instruction and judgment (Platt, 2008). The primary children's social work role is the assessment of children and families 'in need' and the investigation and protection of those deemed at risk of potential maltreatment or 'significant harm' (Department for Education, 2018). These dual functions of 'care' and 'control' serve as competing and enduring narratives within social work and increasing anxieties about institutional risk have been implicated in the profession realigning itself towards practices that are risk averse and emphasise client control as opposed to client self-determination (Forrester et al., 2018; Hardy, 2015). Balancing such contradictory pressures in everyday practice can foster understandable confusion and mistrust in public perceptions (Van der Gaag et al., 2017). It can also lead to social workers managing this tension by an exaggerated focus on bureaucratic guidelines, procedural knowledge and the upward delegation of responsibility, which limits and dilutes their responsiveness and the creativity of their interventions (Kirwan & Melaugh, 2015; Whittaker, 2011).

2.1.1 The National Social Work Backdrop: A Neoliberal Terrain

In the last 10 years local authority funding (the main social work employer) has been drastically reduced on the back of a controversial policy of national austerity by current and previous governments, with the intention of shrinking the national deficit through reductions in public spending (ADCS, 2017). Increasing economic pressure has been placed on local authorities, which has resulted in a radical reform of public services. The ideology of austerity was informed by the influence of neoliberalism in successive governments, which led to local authorities being caricatured as sluggish and stuck in a bygone era whilst bolting down public funds, in opposition to the market that is portrayed as driving responsiveness and improvements (Jones, 2017d). As a prevailing economic and political construct, neoliberalism's interest in human well-being is premised upon its commodification for profit (Dominelli, 2010). Its concern is with:

> "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve the institutional framework appropriate to such practices . . . It holds that the social good will be maximised by maximising the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Parton (2014a) contends that a neoliberal, authoritarian agenda has become embedded in social work through the raising of statutory thresholds for access to social services for children and families on economic efficiency grounds, which has promoted a minimalist

interventionalist state. Arguably, the neoliberalist rationality has become culturally tolerated and complicity enforced within the profession:

"instead of social workers delivering quality care for those in need, workers frequently find they are enacting a cutbacks policy agenda and in effect, injecting neo-liberalism into the lives of service users and communities" (Leigh, 2017b, p. 613)

Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has described the effects of austerity in the UK as a "social calamity and an economic disaster" (Alston, 2018, p. 1) that has resulted in a fifth of the population living in poverty. This is a significant issue for children's social care as a strong association has been identified in an evidence review between family poverty and the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al., 2016), with children in the most deprived neighbourhoods being ten times more likely to be subject to a child protection plan or be placed in the care of the local authority (Bywaters et al., 2017). Further, the 2017 inquiry into children's social care in England suggests a relationship between the amount spent on children's services and Ofsted judgements in the most deprived areas (Clements, Ellison, Hutchinson, Moss & Renton, 2017). Until recently such links have either been ignored or challenged in a form of governmental 'austerity denial' (Jones, 2017a) and poverty is an issue that has remained largely invisible in debates about child protection (Featherstone et al., 2019). Poverty of resource has emerged in an analysis by Action for Children, the NSPCC, Barnardo's, The Children's Society and the National Children's Bureau (2019) that estimates that there has been a real term drop in funding equating to 32% per child (Butler, 2019). The analysis also describes a 49% decrease

in local authority spending on early intervention and a 12% increase in late intervention since 2010.

Local authorities have thus been grappling with an alarming financial crisis (Weale, 2017) and children's social services have now been declared to be at "breaking point" (House of Commons Housing Communities & Local Government Committee, 2019) after absorbing the burden of these funding reductions. Escalating levels of deprivation, inequality and increases in reports of child neglect (Sandeman, 2017) have introduced a steadily deteriorating backdrop for social workers to operate within where preventative, early help and community-based services have either been withdrawn or rationed and workers are having to find ways of working with families with fewer services to refer them to for support (Hood, 2019a). The detail of how this has shaped frontline children's social work was highlighted in the literature around the time the current study took place, with social work commentator Ray Jones writing of child protection investigations increasing by 108% and child protection conferences rising by 73% in the previous eight years (Jones, 2017c). Wave One of a longitudinal study involving over 5,000 children's social workers by the Department for Education has further indicated that social workers in local authorities that Ofsted judges as 'requires improvement' are being asked to juggle too many different roles (Johnson et al., 2019). Moreover, those local authorities rated as 'inadequate' (as in this study) and striving to improve their status tend to entrench bureaucracy (MacAlister, 2017) and focus on risk aversion by reallocating resources and focusing them on those children in immediate need of protection (Hood, 2019a).

Recent research on managing demand for services, which analysed correlations in national data from 2014 to 2017 (Hood, 2019a), found that child protection investigations had doubled, child protection conferences had increased by 70%, care proceedings had risen by 56% and numbers of care orders had increased by 25%. Previous research had also indicated that increased demand is screened out by high service thresholds in local authorities, which then results in higher re-referral rates (Hood, Goldacre, Grant & Jones, 2016). This is endorsed by research by Action for Children (2017) that directly attributes the abandonment or shrinking of services as responsible for the failure of 140,000 vulnerable children referred due to abuse and neglect to meet statutory thresholds for social work intervention. Moreover, the literature indicates that increased budgetary pressure and escalated levels of need have influenced social workers when determining the threshold for qualifying as a 'child in need' and for more urgent support (e.g. the NCB survey of 1,600 social workers (Newson, 2017)). On the ground this has meant a clear shift away from early to more reactive forms of intervention; a point echoed in the aptly titled 'No Good Options' report (Clements et al., 2017) and investigated by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children Inquiry (Stevenson, 2017) into thresholds for intervention in children's social care. This underscores Parton's (2014a) contention that child protection and family support services have been shifted to an outpost of a minimalist interventionalist state (Parton & Williams, 2017). In summary, the response of many children's services to the funding crisis has been to adopt rigid, bureaucratic structures that attempt to quantify social worker judgement, decisions and accountability and that focus on producing performance information polarised by risk. Further, there is also evidence of a trend towards social work becoming dominated by an interventionalist and protectionist paradigm and practice becoming skewed by an obsession with audit (Harlow,

2013), targets, scrutiny (Bee, 2016) and ineffective demand management strategies (Hood, 2019a).

2.1.2 The Constriction of Social Work Practice

A rational, managerialist environment produces interventions that promote risk averse, prescriptive and defensive forms of practice (Ferguson, 2011; Munro, 2011; 2012) that often manifest themselves in an authoritarian approach (Featherstone, White et al., 2014; Forrester et al., 2012), which has warning and instructing at its heart as the means of achieving the required changes in the behaviour and circumstances of service users. If families are also resistant or hostile the chances for collaborative, constructive practice are diminished:

> "In their efforts to regain control, increase predictability and reduce stress workers
>
> are liable to resort to power and procedures, whilst parents retreat and disengage"
>
> (Howe, 2010, p. 331)

Dealing with shrinking resources, social suffering (Featherstone, Gupta & Morris, 2017) and increased deprivation can lead to the social workers delivering these interventions feeling overwhelmed, anxious and uneasy. This was identified in the contributions to the 'Care Crisis Review' (2018) that investigated the record increases in care order applications in 2016 and found:

"a strong sense of concern that a culture of blame, shame and fear had permeated

the system, affecting those working within it as well as the children and families

reliant upon it (Family Rights Group, 2018, p. 4)

The demands of case and performance management, audits, statistical returns and protocol-driven practice (Hood, 2019b) have also meant that the time social workers have for face-to-face social encounters with service users has been squeezed to meet the informational input needs of computer recording systems (Little, 2017; Warner, 2013). Professional distance has been further shored up by proximal distance from the communities where service users live (Dominelli, 2010; Featherstone et al., 2019; Featherstone, White et al., 2014) as local authorities have sold off their building stock to reduce public finance debt and have centralised their social work teams into open plan offices where workers are obliged to 'hot desk' (Brindle, 2017; Isaac, 2016) or work remotely (Murray, 2015). Many social workers now work in office environments where the certainty of returning to reliable surroundings populated by team members with whom they have a supportive, professional relationship and who are accepting and psychologically available, is increasingly rare (Biggart et al., 2017).

Research also indicates that less direct time with children is correlated with increases in staff turnover (Hood, 2019a), which may indicate dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities for meaningful relationships with children and for personal fulfilment through social work. Concern about social workers' working conditions and wellbeing was quantified in an independent report in 2017 that outlined that high numbers of UK social workers were suffering from worsening workplace stress and decreasing job satisfaction, with 55% intending to leave the profession within 18 months (Ravalier & Boichat, 2017). This finding

was echoed in a Children's Services Omnibus survey (Marshall, Leach & Cornick, 2017) commissioned to provide a contemporaneous understanding of the key issues facing local authorities when implementing policy relating to children, in which 51% of senior leaders selected 'retaining current staff' as a key risk to the effective delivery of children's social care. Worryingly, many social workers are now experiencing declining wellbeing due to escalated stress levels and emotional distress (Beer & Asthana, 2016) in a profession already at risk of burnout and vicarious trauma (McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2015) and prone to compassion fatigue (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015).

Considering the complex fault lines now running through the profession, I believe that the disjuncture between how social workers have traditionally conceptualised the role, as one in which they could 'make a difference' (Children's Workforce Develpment Council & Jigsaw Research, 2008), and its mutated, output-focused, transactional reality, is an ideological compromise fewer and fewer seem willing to make in the long term (All Parliamentary Group on Social Work, 2013). It would now seem that the opportunities for social workers to 'make a difference' are curtailed by the dynamics between the demands of systems and the people whom the systems are supposed to support and help (Little, 2017). This, MacAlister argues, leaves the profession facing a stark choice: "do we want social workers as bureaucrats or as change agents?" (MacAlister, 2017, p. 161). What is lacking in the literature is an examination of how children's social workers can be change agents in such an adverse socio-economic and impersonal environment beset by practice constraints *in a way that makes social workers feel like they have made a difference.*

2.1.3 The Drive for Innovation and Evidence Informed Social Work

The attention of central government has been focused on an ambitious reform of the social work system since 2010, amidst political and public concern about tragic failures of the system to protect children and rising numbers of children being referred to child protection agencies (Parton & Williams, 2017). The government-commissioned Munro review (2010) of child protection highlighted the need for a radical system change away from a bureaucratic compliance culture and created a vision for service redesign based on improving the face-to-face practice skills of social workers in order to build better relationships with families:

> "skills in forming relationships are fundamental to obtaining the information that helps social workers to understand what problems a family has and to engaging the child and family and working *with* them to promote change" (Munro, 2010, p. 88)

More recently, improving the quality of social work *practice* has become the focus, with extensive budgets allocated to an Innovation Fund Programme in 2014 for children's social care in England. This has been followed by the establishment in 2017 of a 'What Works Centre' to strengthen the evidence base of research and effective practice in the sector, with a view to replicating and scaling this practice throughout children's social care (Trowler, 2017). The ideology behind evidence-based practice (EBP) models has been critiqued as a false panacea that distorts and narrows the possibilities for practitioner behaviour and underestimates the extent to which social workers will construct a response according to the contingencies available within situational and social contexts – as opposed to drawing upon available evidence. Moreover, EBP presupposes that social workers are wholly objective,

logical actors unaffected by cognitive bias that lends a false certainty to the outcomes of their actions and shores up an overly rational managerialist culture (Webb, 2001). Snowden (2003) also argues that: "Context is the be all and end all" (p. 5) and that complex adaptive systems (such as social work) do not contain repeating cause and effect relationships. Thus, the idea of 'best practice' based on evidence of what has happened before is not *natural* practice, where serendipitous and unintended consequences occur that increase the real likelihood of innovation.

Both the Innovation Fund and the What Works Centre initiatives were designed to incentivise the social work profession to take stock of its creative potential, encourage a learning culture and stimulate diversity of thought. Moreover, given that local authorities were already employing a range of divergent interventions (National Children's Bureau, 2017) in children's services, these initiatives were to provide the evidence to determine policy and funding decisions on which interventions local authorities should be investing in (Brindle, 2017; Dudman, 2018). Little (2017) counsels that "any practice model has to withstand the pressures created by the public system in which it operates" (p. 117) and this is the challenge that all new practice projects must meet if they are to inspire change in social work behaviours and avoid claims of fetishizing innovation simply because it is new (Wright, 2017). Despite government endorsement and huge publicity within the profession, there are signs that the Munro review reforms have had a negligible impact on social work practice and the time available for direct work with children and families. This was a strong message in the research paper 'Voices from the front line' (Victoria Climbié Foundation UK & HCL Social Care, 2014) which surveyed nearly 500 social workers. More recently, an enduring allegiance to

compliance, process and managerialism has been proposed as a key barrier to practice reform, summarised as "a lack of appetite to change the closed systems that operate amongst the leaders of social work systems." (Russell, 2019). Despite the profession's unwillingness to reject the fundamentals of managerialism, there is evidence that the opportunities that the Innovation Fund and the What Works Centre created have inspired a renewed impetus for delivering models of practice that 'work with' as opposed to 'doing to' children and families (Family Rights Group, 2018; Little, 2017) and for promoting the value of stable working relationships (Stanley, 2019).

Ruch and colleagues (2010) argue that external and ideological critiques of the profession have resulted in social work historically having an unhelpful tendency to lurch towards intervention models that polarise social workers' responses to service users by either minimising structural problems or not fully acknowledging the psychological factors impinging on people's lives. They propose reclaiming the centrality of relationship-based social work with an emphasis on the deliberate 'use of self' in relation to others as a means of mediating between these positions.

Relationship-based practice is not new to social work, it is integral to psycho-dynamic social work practice (see Ferard & Hunnybun (1972)) and was in vogue in the profession during the 1970's and 1980's, but there is a still relevant tension between how relationship building was sometimes mistakenly practised during that era 'as an end in itself' (Ruch et al., 2010; Trevithick, 2003) and *now*, when we need to ensure that: "the relationship does not become subservient to the intervention" (Wright, 2017, p. 185). Given the return to the relationship

as the vehicle for change, getting the balance right between less transactional, more human relationships and the purpose and intent of social work is still a challenge to be met, especially in services where the forging of relationships is prohibited by high case-loads, rapid staff turnover and a pressure to close cases as quickly as possible (Van der Gaag et al., 2017). As no definitive practice model has been identified in this recent paradigm shift, several relationship and strengths-based approaches have emerged in the last decade that break away from risk-averse models of practice (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner, 2016). All these initiatives require different skills, training commitments and financial investment and are now being embedded in a number of local authorities. A description of three relational models that have received the most attention in the policy discourse that coaching has synergies with (which are therefore important to explore as similar, potentially constructive helping interventions) are outlined below.

2.1.4 Towards New Relational Practices in Social Work

2.1.4.1 Signs of Safety

The 'Signs of Safety' (SoS) Strengths-Based Child Protection model (Turnell & Edwards, 1999) has been a widely implemented practice framework in children's social work and is premised upon the assumption that (mostly involuntary) clients can define and work towards their own family goals in partnership with professionals who retain an explicit statutory authority within a constructive but 'problem founded' working relationship (Turnell, 2004). Identifying and mobilising client strengths within a purposeful, collaborative and goal-focused relationship between social workers and mandated adults is viewed as the main influence for behavioural change. Adopting a strengths-based attitude is viewed as the foundation to a co-operative,

empowering relationship with parents/carers that can elicit solutions to problems that endanger or harm children, with a view to re-establishing safety in the home. Whilst SoS has become a popular relational approach for children's services to adopt strategically as a practice framework, the low response rates, small sample sizes and overreliance on social workers' perceptions that typify the empirical evidence (Baginsky, Moriarty, Manthorpe, Beecham & Hickman, 2017) have brought the outcomes SoS can realistically achieve into question.

Beyond a pilot study by Reekers et al (2018), which found that the SoS approach did not increase parental empowerment, there are few studies that explore the role that empowerment, parental goals and co-operation play in improving families' experiences of social work involvement in their lives. Baginsky et al (2017) conducted a comprehensive and independent evaluation of 10 SoS pilots in local authorities in the UK, all of which had been funded through the Innovation Fund Programme. It found that social workers and managers had high engagement with the approach, were very positive about the benefits of SoS in improving services and had embedded it into child protection systems and processes. However, weaknesses were identified in applying the SoS approach to progress constructive relationships between families and professionals, and there were indications that plans that built upon families' strengths were more likely to be addressed in the earlier stages of involvement rather than being maintained as work continued. A slightly more confused and contradictory picture emerged around goals, with just under half the parents interviewed stating that they had different goals from their social workers, and approximately two thirds agreeing with the goals that had been set for their family and also feeling that their social workers understood which goals were important for them. What is unclear from the

evaluation is how parents' goals were attended to beyond a level of recognition that they existed.

An impressive critique by Oliver (2012) also argued that the contested and complex nature of many SoS relationships meant that there had been a wide variation in how the strengths-based approach had been adopted by social workers, and that the challenges to achieving co-operative mandated relationships had been simplistically and over-optimistically conceptualised within the SoS literature, the majority of which had been generated by its originators. Oliver also cited a tendency for the *language* of strengths-based practice to be used more than the actual practice itself, due to the inherent contradictions of delivering an intervention based on the change potential of people living in environments often stricken by structural problems and a lack of social resources:

"Workers must address the reality that change often relies on people outside the worker-client dyad and on scarce services with long waitlists" (Oliver, 2012, p.9)

Given the arguable bias in the evidence base towards the sources of SoS, more insight is now needed into how empowerment, strengths and parental goals are mobilised within a co-operative social work/service user partnership where power relations are transparently skewed.

2.1.4.2 Restorative Approach

The restorative approach has also been implemented in a number of children's services and

is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of family-centred models of practice premised on the ethos of reducing conflict and repairing harm through improved collaborative relationships and a focus on the problem as opposed to the person. It is adapted from and rooted in restorative justice, an approach created in the 1970's as an alternative to punitive criminal justice interventions and looks to address and acknowledge harms as opposed to punishing those involved (Wachtel, 2016). It can be used formally with families who can be asked to take part in mediation and restorative circles, or applied informally through practitioners combining its values with restorative questions such as: 'who has been affected and how?' (Hopkins, 2009) to promote empathy, elicit strengths and different perspectives and evoke change (Williams, Reed, Rees & Segrott, 2018). Family group conferences (FGCs) are a well-used aspect of the restorative approach and versions of FGCs have been adopted by 76% of local authorities in the UK (Edwards, 2018) and in nearly 20 countries (Barn & Das, 2016). FGCs are a 'family-led decision-making model' that involves families working in partnership with social care services to identify and bring together family members, and other adults who care about their child within their extended support system, to address and agree solutions to child protection concerns that can be implemented in a family plan initiated by them. FGC referrals are co-ordinated and convened by an independent and skilled facilitator in order to balance concerns with the family's strengths and ensure that they are empowered to make decisions within their family context (Edwards, 2018). There is substantial literature behind the beneficial use of FGC's in safeguarding children (see Munro et al. (2017); Tisdall (2018)), although there is limited evidence on the outcomes of FGCs being maintained over time (Frost, Abram & Burgess, 2014). A randomised controlled trial study by Dijkstra et al (2019) on the effectiveness of the intervention found that it did not improve child safety but did have small, temporary effects on parental empowerment, which needed to be weighed

against its increased costs compared to existing services. A proposed Department for Education funded randomised controlled trial to evaluate the efficacy of FGCs through the government's What Works Centre has recently been criticised by academics, who argue that the use of this research design is ethically dubious as it randomly allocates some families the potential benefits of a FGC and deliberately denies this opportunity to others, thus removing choice and restricting the rights of families in high stakes situations who may be at risk of losing their children (Janus, 2019; Turner, 2019) in order to fulfil evidential requirements.

There are encouraging signs that restorative approach training can help family support practitioners to engage differently in their relationships with families (Williams et al., 2018) but, according to the Innovation Fund's own evaluation, there is so far a lack of consistent empirical evidence to demonstrate the positive impact of restorative approaches in social work or criminal justice (The RTK Ltd, 2016). Without such a critique it is difficult to justify its scaling by other services as part of the government's £84 million 'Strengthening Families, Protecting Children' programme at this stage (House of Commons Housing Communities & Local Government Committee, 2019).

2.1.4.3 Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a person-centred counselling approach that foregrounds acceptance and compassion and facilitates dynamic and collaborative 'conversations about change', specifically where individuals feel ambivalent or stuck: "so that people talk themselves into change, based on their own values and interests." (Miller & Rollnick, 2012, p. 4). The motivation and commitment felt towards a proposed change goal is consolidated by

a communication style that utilises asking open questions, reflective listening, and summarising and playing back the statements of the interviewee using accurate empathy. MI has a comprehensive empirical evidence base and has been found to be effective in eliciting change for a broad range of issues, for example in drug and alcohol treatment (Lundahl, Kunz, Brownell, Tollefson & Burke, 2010). The evidence for its application with clients in children's social work is minimal, however, and has mostly been pioneered by Forrester and colleagues (see Forrester et al., 2008; Forrester et al., 2012) premised on the likelihood that MI is theoretically transferable from related services to a child protection context. A desire to improve the quality of the communication skills of social workers also seems to be driving the shift towards MI in Forrester's work. His previous related research, which looked at how social workers spoke to parents about child protection concerns (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss & Hughes, 2008), revealed that social workers often defaulted to confrontational language lacking in empathy, struggled to recognise strengths and asked more closed than open questions:

"There is a sense in which communication skills are taken for granted within social work: like the air we breathe, they provide an invisible but essential context for everything we do. Yet the findings suggest that often social workers are *not* communicating well with parents" (Forrester, Kershaw, et al., 2008, p. 50).

Research in which forty social workers took part in a two-day MI workshop (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbein, Emlyn-Jones et al., 2008) found that only a few social workers indicated skills in MI three months later. A more recent randomised controlled trial (Forrester et al., 2018), which involved a 12-week training programme for social workers in MI skills, also

revealed disappointing results, with no statistically significant influence on parental engagement or child welfare measures as a result of social workers' skill development. Forrester has posited several possible explanations for this, including the idea that the use of MI in a risk and task-heavy context may have led to it being pushed to the margins of social work practice. Forrester has also now questioned whether MI, as a method focused on producing change, is a congruent fit with a system designed primarily to obtain facts, monitor, inform and demonstrate authority. A novel methodology, building on Forrester's previous research and incorporating MI, has recently undergone a three-year trial as part of the Innovation Fund programme. Termed as 'motivational social work' (MSW) it set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the method on the outcomes for children in families receiving the approach and to look at evidence of social worker skill enhancement (Luckock, Hickle, Hampden-Thomson & Dickens, 2017). Despite parental reports of improved practice, and the method being shown to have a beneficial (though uneven) impact on social workers' skills, the formal evaluation was unable to demonstrate meaningful evidence of MSW improving the outcomes for families. There is thus a lack of robust evidence in respect of MI's successful use in social work and whilst its transferability may be demonstrated over time, it remains emergent. As will be explained in Section 2.2 below, coaching utilizes MI skills, thus the current study will add to the evidence base on the possibilities for its adapted use within social work.

The three relational practices outlined above make it clear that social workers are now required to have a more pronounced dual focus to their role. They must ascertain the problems that have brought clients to the attention of social services *and* have purposeful conversations that draw upon clients' strengths to try to resolve them and create change. The

tone and rhetoric of the adaptation social workers need to make to their practice to achieve this can seem absurdly positive and simplistic:

"social workers have been encouraged to refashion themselves into strengths-based, solution-focused, capacity building, asset creating, motivation enhancing, empowerment specialists" (McMillen, Morris & Sherraden, 2004, p. 314).

This duality presents a difficult dichotomy for social workers to navigate, as embracing strengths-orientated practice often runs counter to the procedural cultures that many social workers inhabit. As Glisson & Hemmelgarn (1998) illustrated in their comprehensive longitudinal study of organisational climate within children's services, a positive organisational culture in which social workers have discretion to interpret and to respond with agility to individual circumstances is significant in improving the quality of service children receive and for their outcomes. Standardised processes and systems to meet, record and audit targets, thresholds and timescales are still a dominant feature of the organisational climate informing much of social work practice (Featherstone, White et al., 2014), which may make strength-based relational models difficult to adopt wholeheartedly; "in creating change in children's services, culture eats training for breakfast" (Forrester et al., 2018, p. 189).

McMillan and colleagues (2004) argue that the social work profession needs an integrated strength/problem focus because the reality of service users' problems cannot be discounted and their capacity for growth and change on their own terms should be equally embraced. The three strengths-focused approaches described above indicate a welcome move towards

such integration and speak to a positive desire within the profession to move away from the pervasive influence of managerialism in social work/service user relationships - even if the evidence on their use is limited and still emerging. Further, it is important to acknowledge that: "the absence of evidence does not mean the absence of benefit" (Trevithick, 2003, p. 166) and what *counts* as evidence of good outcomes, and indeed how outcomes are conceptualised, is highly politicized and contentious in the social work world (Forrester, 2017; Hood, 2019b), and has a tendency to ensnare the profession into an overly rational, narrow conception of how complex social work practice should be delivered (Webb, 2001).

That said, there is now a clear need to build a more robust evidence base on these approaches that explores their transformative potential for families. Due to some of the similarities in the ethos, communication and relationship-building skills used in coaching, this thesis proposes that it is timely to locate coaching as part of this paradigm shift within social work, which could help to strengthen and develop the evidence base still further.

This study seeks to consider the strength/problem dichotomy in a new way by exploring the intersection of coaching and social work practices, from the perspectives of service users and social workers located in an extremely demanding, resource-limited, risk-saturated culture. It will also explore what appears to be missing from the debates about which relational practice 'works', which is how constructive working alliances with clients can be established that promote personal growth *and positively energise the social workers delivering them* with a sense of personal accomplishment - so their *connection* has reciprocal benefits for both parties. The next section situates coaching as an approach that may offer this possibility.

2.2 Defining the Coaching Process

There are many conceptions of what coaching is; the most commonly known version is a one-to-one relationship that helps people to learn to maximise their performance in elite sport or as business leaders. In the last few decades coaching as an international industry has grown exponentially and many versions of coaching are now available to help individuals set and achieve professional or personal goals - this is usually termed 'life coaching', 'personal development coaching' or 'health and wellness coaching' (Edleson, 2010). There are now many diverse paradigms within coaching (see Ives (2008) and Palmer & Whybrow (2008), for a comprehensive exploration) and this is due to the plethora of eclectic influences that have informed it, such as psychology, existential philosophy, the Human Potential movement of the 1970's, management and leadership theory and neuro-linguistic programming, to name a few. Rogers' (2016) definition of coaching incorporates themes that are common to many:

> "the art of developing another person's learning, development, wellbeing and performance. Coaching raises self-awareness and identifies choices. Through coaching, people are able to find their own solutions, develop their own skills, and change their own attitudes and behaviours. The whole aim of coaching is to close the gap between people's potential and their current state" (Rogers, 2016, p. 7).

The central focus of coaching is thus to help people activate their intrinsic motivation and realise their aspirations for change (Joseph & Bryant-Jefferies, 2008). It recognises that there is often a substantial lag between thinking about change and taking action to change: "People do not change just because they were told to do so, or just because they want to" (Stojnov &

Pavlovic, 2010, p. 138). Coaching borrows extensively from a mix of theories of motivation and change (Ives, 2008) such as Motivational Interviewing, Solution Focused Brief Therapy (De Shazer, 1985) and the Transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). It subscribes predominantly to the principles of positive psychology, a relatively young field that is concerned with positive emotions, mental wellbeing, building happiness, resilience and strengths and promoting personal growth and hope (Driver, 2011; Seligman, 2003; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). It is thus a multi-faceted developmental activity that draws from and melds many approaches that complement each other in their delivery, with the aim of engaging, challenging and actualising the capacities and self-discovery of the coachee (Grant, 2008). Coaches can therefore adhere to a particular school of coaching, such as Gestalt or Co-active coaching, or employ what Clutterbuck (2010) calls 'managed eclecticism'. In many ways this resonates with the social work role, which can involve a skilled practitioner customising approaches from a range of relevant theoretical models and techniques and applying them flexibly in response to the needs, circumstances and engagement of the service user. Despite the strengths that such multiple approaches to coaching offer, coaching as an industry has been vulnerable to criticisms of fragmentation and confusion due to the lack of a unified theoretical framework that integrates change and learning theories (Sonesh et al., 2015; Stojnov & Pavlovic, 2010) or a congruent approach that definitively sets it apart from other disciplines such as mentoring, consulting and counselling (Jarosz, 2016).

Along with Timothy Gallway (whose ground-breaking book 'The Inner Game of Tennis' (Gallwey, 1977) addressed ways of removing internal obstacles to improve performance in sport), John Whitmore is viewed by many as the founder of coaching who developed the

widely used GROW model (Whitmore, 2017), a four-stage tool for coaches and the main model that the social workers were trained to use prior to this study. It is the role of the coach, when using the GROW model, to enable coachees to progress through and identify clear self-set Goals (G) they wish to accomplish; discover a greater awareness of the Reality (R) of their situation as it is now; gain insight into and evaluate the range of possible choices and Options (O) available to them to achieve their goals; and empower them to self-generate some actions they have the Will (W) and intention to commit to as a way forward. GROW is a basic model and has been criticised for its simplistic take on motivational processes and for weaknesses in moving discussions beyond what coachees may have already considered or tried themselves. Clutterbuck (2010) warns of the dangers of coaches sticking rigidly to it as a model, which can result in mechanistic practice and stifle understanding of crucial elements of the client's situation. The model also lacks a means of maintaining change and does not specify how to review movement towards a goal or the consequences of actions or reflect on the achievement or non-achievement of goals (Dexter, Dexter & Irving, 2011; Jinks & Dexter, 2012; Palmer & Whybrow, 2008; Rogers, 2016). However, it is a memorable, sequential foundational framework for facilitating dynamic coaching conversations that others have adapted and added to (for example see Rogers' (2016) adaptation of Gilbert & Whittleworth's (2009) OSCAR model).

Encouraging hopes, visions and aspirations to emerge in the coaching conversation (Clutterbuck, 2010), which evolve into specific, values-based and attainable goals (Edleson, 2010) that coachees believe they can achieve (Bandura, 2013), is the central activity through which action, purpose and self-directed change are mobilised in the majority of coaching

models (Grant, 2016). According to Locke and Latham (2017) goal setting has been confirmed in innumerable empirical studies since the 1990's as a reliable motivator and goal-focused coaching relationships have been shown to be a significant predictor of successful outcomes (Grant, 2016). The strength of research in support of goal-setting theory is illustrated by Day & Unsworth (2017), who report that setting specific and difficult goals improved performance on 100 plus different tasks completed by over 40,000 participants, with timescales varying from 1 minute to 25 years. Time-limited, personal goal-setting interventions have also demonstrated a significant impact on academic performance for university students (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Shore & Pihl, 2010). Furthermore Grant's (2014) research indicates that a goal-focused relationship may be a *more* significant determinant of effectiveness in coaching than the working alliance (see Section 2.2.1 below).

However, the goal-setting literature is disproportionately focused on the workplace and a more nuanced understanding of how goals can influence life outside work is worth considering when contemplating goals' centrality to coaching. For example, research by psychologists Kegan and Laskow Lahey (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001; 2009) have revealed that people can have competing, hidden and unconscious commitments and assumptions that prevent them from attaining their conscious goals. They have theorised that movement towards conscious goals can result in paralysis and that surfacing these conflicting motivations is essential to examining how to reconcile goal conflicts. Boyatzis & Howard (2016) also highlight that fixing on an ideal future state can lead to us failing to see what is emergent that does not match the goal – that we might benefit from or that might pose a potential threat. Furthermore, people who feel powerful tend to activate what Cuddy (2016)

calls 'approach goals', goals that inspire us to move towards doing something, whereas powerless people who feel threatened, at risk or out of control are more likely to activate 'inhibition goals', which involve withdrawal and avoidance of engagement. Supporting coachees to thoroughly contemplate and bring all possible barriers to consciousness, ensuring that the goals chosen are self-congruent with the coachee's interests, whilst having a rational and integrated relationship with their circumstances and material resources, is thus a core task in coaching (Jinks & Dexter, 2012).

2.2.1 The Role of a Coach

Although the choice of coaching technique and tools may differ according to the underpinning theory of a specific school of coaching, the role of a coach is to work with a client or 'coachee' in a deeply relational, collaborative and egalitarian way, in which both confer trust and power to the relationship and are 'co-active' in constructing it as a vehicle for making meaning, transformation, change and action (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl & Whitworth, 2018; Stelter & Law, 2010; Stober & Grant, 2006). The fundamental basis of the coaching relationship is one of trying to elicit the coachee's 'best self' by conveying optimism and confidence that they have the resources within them to change or to fulfil their potential, thus animating their self-belief (Gallwey, 1977). The coaching relationship is widely thought to be critical to the success of the coachee achieving their outcomes (Bluckert, 2005; Boyce, Jeffrey Jackson & Neal, 2010; de Haan, Duckworth, Birch & Jones, 2013; Sonesh et al., 2015):

"regardless of preferred theoretical perspective, the foundation of effective coaching is the successful formation of a collaborative relationship" (Stober, 2008, p. 295).

Coaching is therefore aligned with a compelling body of research that identifies the working alliance as a more significant predictor of successful therapeutic outcomes than the theory or method of intervention used (Lambert & Barley, 2001; O'Broin & Palmer, 2008). The coachee is perceived by the coach as being inherently resourceful and as having the capability to grow and change: "the client is not broken, does not need fixing, and does not need advice" (Jarosz, 2016, p. 41). Thus, the coachee is viewed as holding the answers to their issue, which the coach, as a 'thought partner', will help to uncover within the safe space of the confidential coaching relationship (Newnham-Kanas, Irwin & Morrow, 2011). The coachee is therefore the initiator of the agenda and the role of the coach is to hold and concentrate exclusively on that agenda (Edleson, 2010; Passmore, 2010). The idea of a coachee 'knowing' their solutions has been challenged by thinkers such as Askeland (2009) who argues that the relational dynamics of the coaching conversation shape and co-construct what emerges as a solution, and that the coach is not as neutral as much of the prevailing coaching discourse implies (Pelham, 2006).

Key to the role of a coach is what both Rogers (2016) and Whitmore (2017) call 'ways of being' with coachees. This starts with establishing trust and accelerating rapport, which involves a relationship based on acceptance (rather than professional judgment or an expert stance) and a heightened awareness of the micro-processes of communication by becoming attuned to a coachee's: "body, voice volume, breathing, gesture, space, language, pace and energy"

(Rogers, 2016, p. 34). This produces strong feelings of congruence, authentic connection and 'Aha' moments of critical insight that can help move coachees beyond the limitations of their existing mindset to be more inclined to take risks to initiate change (Bluckert, 2005; de Haan, Bertie, Day & Sills, 2010; de Haan & NieB, 2015; Longhurst, 2006). This is cemented by deep listening, paraphrasing, clarifying and summarising the coachee's words and the use of powerful, challenging and open questions, such as 'what do you want?' or 'what will you do?' (Whitmore, 2017) to prompt a novel conversation about the topic they have brought to the coaching encounter. It is viewed as particularly useful for people at transition points in their lives, when faced with dilemmas and puzzles or when they feel stuck (Driver, 2011). Coaching is *different* to therapy and counselling as its intention is different: it focuses on a defined goal and does so in the 'here and now' or in a future rather than a past orientated way. It is thus more concerned with generating new possibilities for action rather than focusing on dysfunction or problem analysis (Edleson, 2010, Pelham, 2016). The debate on the contrasts and similarities between coaching, therapy and counselling is beyond the scope of this review but for a more detailed exploration see Giant (2014), Griffiths & Campbell (2008), Hart, Blattner & Leipsic (2001) and Summerfield (2006).

The practicalities of coaching are characterised by an agreed number of sessions, the frequency and timing of which are negotiated between the coach and coachee and written into a formal coaching agreement or contract, along with details about confidentiality rules and how the coach and coachee are going to behave towards one another in the session and communicate outside of it. Research has suggested that increasing the number of coaching sessions does not increase the likelihood of a coachee achieving their goals and thus the

quality of the coaching relationship is more important than the quantity (Sonesh et al., 2015). This counterintuitive indication contrasts with an argument often made in social work, that supportive approaches should not: "be chopped up into short-term, time-limited, discrete 'interventions' delivered by disembodied experts" (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014, p. 1745) as these do not lead to families feeling heard and understood. The present research aims to touch on these overlapping perspectives by exploring short-term coaching interventions to social work service users, although it will be for others to study this in greater detail.

The 'coachability' of a client is essentially determined by their voluntary engagement; they are choosing coaching and are ready to be coached because they would like something in their life to change, thus coercing a service user into coaching to make a change that a *social worker* would like to see would not work or be appropriate. Research on leadership coaching has also indicated that individuals with low levels of self-worth and those who are highly self-critical may avoid coaching (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2011) and those with severe or clinical mental health conditions are generally not deemed to be suitable for coaching (Dexter et al., 2011). However, I would argue that given an acknowledged need for much more research on the characteristics of coachees who could benefit from coaching (Mosteo, Batista-Foguet, McKeever & Serlavos, 2015), and on how to engage clients in coaching whose adverse circumstances render them less likely to see coaching as an option (Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016), the idea of coachability 'criteria' should be resisted, leaving coaching open to those who self-identify as wanting to change and who accept it as a process (Perrault & Coleman, 2004).

Coaching is sometimes viewed as a "professional field where the rapid growth of practice has outpaced research" (Mosteo et al., 2015, p. 85), although in the leadership and business fields there is considerable empirical evidence of coaching's effectiveness in these areas (see Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen (2014) and Grover & Furnham (2016), for a systematic review of research papers since 2003), although criticisms about small sample sizes in many studies, the ready acceptance of the self-reports of coachees and a lack of longitudinal studies and randomised controlled trials have led to this evidence being viewed as inferior and lacking in academic rigour. There are also convincing signs that the number of global, peer-reviewed, empirical studies on health and wellness coaching has been growing rapidly since 2006 (Wolever et al., 2013). However, studies on the use of coaching within social work are scant and the few that have been undertaken are outlined in the next section.

2.2.2 The Use of Coaching in Social Work

There are many parallels between coaching and the theoretical models that underpin the interventions social workers engage in with service users that indicate that coaching is a natural fit for social workers to use as an approach that would complement their practice. Essentially, both use comparable supportive processes that cultivate self-understanding and awareness to effect behavioural and attitudinal change (Caspi, 2005). In a study in the U.S., Burroughs and colleagues (2016) found that the social workers they surveyed considered themselves to be using coaching as part of other practice strategies such as Motivational Interviewing and Signs of Safety, and approximately half the social workers regarded themselves as already being coaches as a result. De Jong & Berg (2001) have also suggested that an approach that takes a 'not-knowing' stance and focuses on bringing clients' strengths

and potential into their awareness can be used to co-construct co-operation with involuntary social work clients. Scholarship in domains of practice closely related to social work has revealed that the integration of coaching approaches could have potential benefits for youth services (Hall, 2014; Leach, Green & Grant, 2011) and adolescents at risk of developing mental health problems (Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016).

Third sector organisations that work with social workers, such as Save the Children, have also been utilising coaching to improve their organisations with the intention of benefiting their end users (Whybrow & Lancaster, 2012). Furthermore 'Emotion coaching', which derives from the research of Gottman and colleagues (1996) and uses attuned adult-child relationships to increase behavioural and emotional self-regulation during instances of conflict or mis-behaviour (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015), has demonstrated that it can improve relationships in school, youth and children's centre settings (Digby et al., 2016). Most relevant for this enquiry is a single, small-scale study in a UK state-run family support service (Moran & Brady, 2010) which found that using life coaching can have a positive impact on service users' self-efficacy. However, it concludes with caveats regarding the tensions between a service user's agency and their ability to make change happen in a context of structural disadvantage.

This leads us to a criticism that should be levied at coaching but is largely absent from the discourse in part, I would argue, due to its evolution in the world of sport, leadership and management, which is its apparent blindness to the impact of economic inequality and how

deep socio-cultural structures are deployed in the systems in which we are enmeshed. Coaching is predominantly undertaken and paid for by the workplace or life/development coaching is accessed privately by the "affluent few" (Nelson-Jones, 2007, p. 12) who can afford it, and thus the studied populations have emerged from individualistic, corporate cultures (Shoukry, 2016). This has significant implications for this study, as social work service users do not fit the mould of typical coaching clients and are more likely to be experiencing social disadvantage and deprivation. The coaching process does not attempt to address these or to look beyond a narrow individualist lens to "see the social in the individual and the individual in the social" (Featherstone et al., 2017, p. 194). Its emphasis is only on the micro – on an individual capacity for isolated self-understanding, on individual agency and mastery over individual circumstances. Arguably, coaching overstates the need for individual self-responsibility and for the coachee to self-manage progress towards their goals (Askeland, 2009). In doing so it fails to acknowledge that what coachees might present as individual problems are in fact social problems, produced as a consequence of their relationship with the adverse social structures in which they are immersed (D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007). An insensibility to the effects of socio-economic issues outside of a service user's control within a *coaching* interaction could thus lead to an entrenchment of this disconnect and of individualistic social work practice (Featherstone et al., 2019). Moreover, the resources and capacities of service users to realise change and construct meaning within oppressive surroundings that constrain choice may be limited (Moran & Brady, 2010):

"Under oppression the concept of choice may be prohibited by external coercion, or internally relinquished because of the internalisation of oppressive beliefs" (Shoukry, 2016, p. 17)

The extent to which we are free to choose and make decisions according to our circumstances is a matter for existential theory and philosophical debate (see Spinelli & Horner (2008) for an existential approach to coaching) and is outside the remit of this review. However, this investigation *will* explore how service users theorise their personal experiences of coaching and apply them within their situational context. It will also study the impact of delivering coaching to a service user population with social work involvement where the service users are unknown to the social workers and are thus external to traditional casework structures. It will therefore add to the sparse literature on coaching concerning issues outside of organisations and to the few comparison studies of coaches' and coachees' experiences in the extant coaching literature (de Haan et al., 2010).

The beneficial synergies of using coaching within social work have only just begun to enter the margins of social work discourse and have mostly focused on coaching as a means to consolidate and promote knowledge and skills transfer from training into practice (Health and Social Care Board, 2014; Perrault & Coleman, 2004), or to improve the supervisory relationship in the profession (Harlow, 2013; Tsui, O'Donoghue, Boddy & Pak, 2017). A 'Review of the Evidence into Coaching and Mentoring in Social Work' commissioned by the Health & Social Care Board in 2014 identified twelve international studies relevant to these themes but no specific examples of the use of coaching as a service user intervention within social work were found. There are some more recent signs that coaching approaches have begun to gain some traction in statutory social work, again around the same themes identified above. For example, the government-backed, independent social work charity 'Frontline' has recently begun promoting peer coaching and one-to-one coaching to accelerate professional

development during the second year of its programme to social work trainees and to consultant social workers based in child protection services (Grant, 2017; Rice, 2017). Kinman & Grant (2016) and Baker & Jones (2014), cite 'peer coaching' as a support to build resilience and identify the strengths of social workers in statutory children's services. Grant, Kinman & Baker (2015) also argue for the use of peer coaching within social work education, as part of a proposed emotional curriculum designed to support emotional resilience and enhance the wellbeing of social work students. Beyond these few specific studies and references, coaching is starting to be recommended in occasional social work texts and papers to develop practitioners (see McCarthy (2015) and Noble Perkins & Fatout (2000)), but to my knowledge there is just a single book on the use of coaching in social work to date (Edleson, 2010), which serves as a basic introduction and contains some specific examples of how coaching has been used in non-profit, family support and community development services in the USA.

The afore-mentioned government Innovation Fund Programme (Section 2.1.3) refers to external individuals designated as 'coaches' being used to promote confidence in the transfer of skills learnt by social workers during training in a new (MSW) practice model, by using 'coaches' to feedback observer and parent views on the social worker's performance in practice (Luckock et al., 2017). The 'coaching' given to social workers was an adjunct to progressing a novel practice methodology, rather than a central influence in the methodology itself, but resulted in the recommendation to integrate 'coaching' into management supervision for the cases involved and in scaling the model going forward. However, in a conversation with the lead researcher it emerged that those giving the coaching were not formally trained or accredited as coaches (Luckock, personal communication, 19 July 2017).

Whilst it is positive that a coaching-like intervention will be included in a government-backed social work methodology, this highlights a key confusion in the social work discourse around defining and understanding *what coaching is* and the differences between coaching and mentoring.

From the studies already mentioned it seems that the term 'coaching' is being used confusingly as a ubiquitous catch-all for anything that is not problem-focused. To reiterate, the above-mentioned government-funded study fails to define coaching or cite the coaching literature and such a demonstrable lack of reference to coaching epistemology is problematic as it risks the emergence of haphazard approaches that do not meet ethical and professional coaching standards and could lead to disillusionment with coaching as an approach. This point is underlined in a study by Burroughs and colleagues (2016) who identified that social workers who are interested in coaching should have formalised coaching training that leads to certification, something that this enquiry will address, therefore expanding the existing scholarship and ensuring its credibility within the evidence base.

2.3 Chapter Summary

This review has pulled together and discussed the value of the critical literature within contemporary children's social work and coaching and has established that there is a considerable empirical gap in the scholarship on the use of coaching *within* social work. The review has revealed the burgeoning use of the term 'coaching' in the social work discourse, which may signal a recognition of it having a place within the social work profession, but which

is not yet readily apparent in empirical literature. Based on this review, there is now a need for a clearer understanding of how coaching can be utilized within the social work profession and how it can be accurately incorporated into the social work lexicon.

In this chapter I have suggested that three of the key interventions currently being promoted as progressive relational practices in social work are not well researched and have limited empirical substance within the profession. The current research will therefore be valuable as coaching draws from and can complement each of these relational approaches whilst providing insight into an exceedingly under-researched area. A coherent argument has been presented for the potential of coaching relationships to enrich and shape the repertoire of social workers' practice, to transform discursive content in the social work-service user dyad and to tap into the vocational psyche of social workers "wanting and needing to make a bigger difference" (Edleson, 2010, p. 38) in an adverse practice context. This review has thus added to the paucity of literature on how coaching can be used within social work and has contextualised the rationale for the current study.

Impetus for Thesis & Research Questions

This study used qualitative methods to explore the experience of incorporating a coaching role within social work and considers if and how both roles are able to coexist in a social work context. In doing so this enquiry will address some of the identified shortcomings in the knowledge corpus and will provide a necessary and exciting first step towards expanding and

deepening the understanding of coaching and its potential contribution to the social work profession. The questions that the present research sought to answer were:

- Does engagement in short term coaching lead to new thinking and behaviours by social workers and service users?

- How do social workers and service users experience the intersection of social work and coaching practices?

- Can accredited coaching training and practice equip social workers with greater confidence in their ability to make a positive difference to the lives of service users?

The methodology for exploring these questions is set out next in Chapter Three. The research strategy, real world design, quality criteria and ethical considerations are considered therein.

Chapter Three – Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter presented a review of the research and theoretical literature that has informed my research questions. By sketching out the wider academic field I have provided a relevant context in which this exploratory research can be located and considered. This chapter outlines the philosophical territory; the theoretical assumptions that are informing my position as a researcher and which have shaped the focus of this enquiry. My choice of methodological approach is explained, including the research strategy and rationale for the study design. The research context, ethical considerations and the process of identifying and accessing participants are also detailed in this chapter.

3.1 Epistemology & Ontology

The generation of knowledge in the present study is located within a theoretical framework that is concerned with interconnecting concepts and philosophical propositions that address the construction of reality and creation of meaning. The theoretical position adopted for this inquiry is constructivist, which is concerned with social realities rather than empirical realities (Mason, 2002). Constructivism comes in many variations and has spawned several interconnected discourses and theories that share the idea that people create their own phenomenal worlds and meanings from their perceptions of events. It emphasises the subjective and the active role participants play in creating meanings (Burr, 2015) and has relationships and interactions at its heart:

"Meaning is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object waiting for someone to come upon it . . . Meanings are created by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43).

The constructivist theoretical stance provides a perspective through which to conduct a qualitative, exploratory inquiry that allows for the unforeseen and provides an agility that is necessary in the social work world:

"So much of professional practice plays out in messy, unbounded ways that do not lend themselves to preformed standardised measurement" (Padgett, 2008, p.16).

The epistemological discourse of the current 'post-truth' era, where traditional knowledge and validation structures are under assault and are viewed by sections of society as irrelevant and disposable (Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016), has provided an unsettling backdrop in which to conceive the study. This idea of epistemic competition for truth (Sismondo, 2017) and the hostile backlash concerning the requirement *for* rational truths about reality for societies to function on agreed understandings, has thus provided a meta-theoretical context to the study. The challenge for me paradigmatically has been to put aside this influence along with any latent positivist assumptions about the need for access to a neutral, absolute truth (Gergen & Gergen, 2015) as this sits in opposition to the approaches and claims of the constructivist tradition informing this enquiry, where conflicting, emergent and partial truths can be constructed and co-exist between the researcher and the researched (Coleman, 2015).

In order to reconcile this metacultural backdrop and the needs of this study, which seeks to interpret the subjective experiences of others and provide applied recommendations, I have located myself ontologically as a 'critical realist'. Critical realism arose through the philosophical ideas of Bhaskar in the 1970's and 1980's (Fletcher, 2017) and adheres to the idea of there being an objective reality that can generate multiple interpretations and knowledge claims that inform a 'meta-theory' of reality, rather than arriving at a definitive truth (Cruickshank, 2003). Critical realism can consider processes or phenomena in the natural and social world that exist independently of the human experience of them *and* what is socially mediated, such as organisations or norms (Groff, 2004). It does not have an associated set of methods attached to it but instead serves as a framework in which to generate theories about reality, identify tendencies and causes for social phenomena and proffer explanations, critiques and alternatives: "when we change our theories about the world, the world itself does not change but our understanding of it does" (Edgley, Stickley, Timmons & Meal, 2016, p. 320).

Critical realism is consistent with a constructivist stance as it can engage with entities that are socially produced, relational, emergent or in a state of becoming in the social world. For this inquiry, a critical realist ontology provided the opportunity to explore and challenge the habitual conventions of social work practice and process, whilst holding some realist assumptions about the world and the shared social contexts of those I studied. For example, the social work participants all worked in offices in a local authority in the North of England, which exists independently of my or their thoughts and perceptions of it – it exists as a physical, tangible, 'empirical' reality. However, this assumption cannot be without its caveats and limitations, since social workers do not operate in a closed, objective system; thus it is

not possible for their worlds to be predicted, controlled for or mechanically broken up into neat chunks that can be studied independently. Logically then, it is also not possible to make generalisations and 'truth statements' about this subjective reality that can transcend temporal or contextual parameters (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study the social workers' subjective reality is influenced by meanings made through exchanges with each other, with colleagues and with service users. It is also informed by the nexus of overt and tacit values informing the profession's political and socio-cultural history and the local authority's operating environment and socio-economic circumstances at this particular time: "the realities we study are social products of the actors, of interactions and institutions" (Flick, 2007, p. 12). This view of interrelated social and physical worlds has enabled the enquiry to explore causes and perspectives and to have the agency to suggest a better way of doing things, as Burr points out:

"Critical realism is 'critical' because it tries to uncover the implicit and potentially misleading or damaging assumptions of various social policies and ways of thinking: it is interested in generating knowledge that is in the best interests of people." (Burr, 2015, p. 109).

Using critical realist principles to underpin the exploration of how meanings are constructed allowed the study to propose recommendations to replace one form of practice for another and produce a shareable research product. This enquiry is therefore founded philosophically on what I have argued to be the compatible pairing of a critical realist ontology with a constructivist epistemology. This was deemed to be a compatible theoretical framework due to its potential to illuminate the participants' socially constructed knowledge within a

coaching relationship - in a reality *external* to these constructions - which could also produce

recommendations for social work practice and social work education policy.

The theoretical principles utilised for the study provided a valuable grounding, however this

research is more pragmatic than paradigm-driven (Brannen, 2005), as, to reiterate, it is an

enquiry ultimately concerned with advancing applications useful to the everyday 'real worlds'

of social workers. The enquiry is thus very much in the tradition of what Robson and McCartan

(2016) would term 'real world research':

> "Real world research looks to examine personal experience, social life and social
>
> systems, as well as related polices and initiatives. It endeavours to understand
>
> the lived-in reality of people in society and its consequences" (Robson &
>
> McCartan, 2016, p. 3).

The present study has been driven by an intention to explore the feasibility of a new relational

approach that could have a tangible impact on people's lives within the 'real worlds' of the

social work and coaching fields and within a volatile and dynamic 'real world' local context.

3.2 Research Design

The study design comprised of nine focus groups (see Figure 1.) conducted over a ten-month

period with seven social work participants. The focus groups were 'hybrid', as each one was

preceded by a group coaching supervision session (as described in Chapter One) facilitated by

a coaching supervisor from the collaborating local authority, which I observed as the

researcher and drew from when facilitating topics for discussion. When the last focus group was completed each of the social work participants was interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews. Six service user participants were also interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews soon after the completion of their coaching experience. After each coaching session social workers were asked to complete a 'Thinking Time: Reflective Learning Log' sheet to act as an aide-memoire that they could consult before focus groups and interviews. The research process and timeline are depicted in Figure 1.

Research Trajectory

Research Pre-requisite

Call for social work participants	Coaching training and qualification gained by social work participants	Call for service user participants
Nov 2015	July 2016	July 2016

Dec 2016 – July 2017

Social workers coach service users

Hybrid Focus Groups

Coaching Supervision | Focus Group

Sept 2016
Oct 2016
Nov 2016
Dec 2016
Jan 2017
Feb 2017
March 2017
May 2017
June 2017

Semi-structured interviews with service users
July – Oct 2017

Semi-structured interviews with social workers
July – Oct 2017

Ofsted judge children's services 'Inadequate' Nov 2016

Figure 1. Research Structure & Timeline

The study design structure thus integrates two qualitative research activities to answer the three research questions. These methods were selected to generate 'richly descriptive' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) data and to complement each other in the study of inter-related

phenomena - the experience of delivering coaching and the experience of receiving it at the intersection of social work and coaching practice. Both methods are compatible with holding a critical realist position (Mason, 2002).

An intention of qualitative research is to: "permit new ideas and serendipitous findings to emerge" (Padgett, 2008, p. 47). The qualitative research process is often characterised as iterative, and the stages and structure of a qualitative study commonly reflect this process:

"Qualitative designs are distinguished by their recursiveness and flexibility, often weaving back and forth between research questions, data collection, and data analysis" (Padgett, 2008, p. 49).

Qualitative studies should therefore be sensitive to the interpretive and emergent nature of the paradigm but should also provide a fit with the intent and aims of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Flick (2007) argues that research methods should be appropriate to the topic to be studied and the context in which the study is taking place. He cites the lack of 'appropriate' methods as the driving force behind the development of new methodologies and the ongoing refinement of the broad range of methods now available. According to Flick, 'appropriateness' should be a guiding principle in the choice of method in qualitative research, and thus an inquiry that seeks to explore the intersection of social work and coaching demands a research methodology and a means of data collection that have synchronies with both practice approaches in some ways *and* is suitable for the research questions.

The qualitative paradigm thus offered the greatest opportunity for synchrony with the exploratory premise of the research, the need for an experiential, inclusive and involving research process for the participants, and the study's theoretical commitment to a constructivist approach. Qualitative methods allow for rich descriptions of experience and the dynamics leading to change, and this aligns with the experience of unfolding co-creation in both coaching and social work processes (Stelter & Law, 2010). Moreover, the bulk of social work and coaching research is qualitative, relies predominantly on small sample sizes and reflects the types of research questions it has typically addressed (Ianiro, Schermuly & Kauffeld, 2013). Whilst these are typical features of social work and coaching research, they are not necessary or preferable in order for its messages and implications to be accessible and easy to appreciate. However, they do indicate that this research could find a place within a substantive existing tradition.

Further, it was surmised that qualitative methods would appeal to both sets of participants. Service users would have the opportunity to tell the story of their coaching experience in a research relationship that was without judgment and encouraged them to freely explore their subjective perspectives. It was also thought that social workers would be more likely to engage with research that not only spoke to and aligned with their value of 'direct' (face-to-face) work and the familiarity of relationship building but also offered a means of sharpening their practice skills with service users. Enabling social workers' and service users' voices to gain volume on the research subject through their engagement in qualitative research activities would also carry the potential to effect change within the profession: "Social work

research thus aims not only to support practice but also to transform it" (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 12). Dominelli (2005) argues for the following as distinct features of social work research:

- A change orientation

- A more egalitarian relationship between themselves and those who are the objects of their research

- Accountability to 'clients'/service users for the products of their work

- A holistic engagement with the different aspects of the problem(s) of people they are investigating (Dominelli, 2005, p. 230).

Assuming one's research subjects have agency and are active rather than passive recipients in the research process is at the core of Dominelli's reasoning. This assumption also informed the choice of methods, as both focus groups and interviews can engage participants in the active exploration of subjective experience.

3.3. Rationale for Focus Group Method

Focus groups were chosen as a method for the social work participants as their 6-month coaching training prior to the research had already created a sense of them being a bonded group in which they could discuss issues thoughtfully and reflectively. Focus groups would thus provide a natural extension of this pre-existing group dynamic and allow me to witness participants discussing coaching with each other using their own concepts, which I felt could be explored in later one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Focus groups would also allow for the social work participants' potential unreliability. It would not be necessary for the same participants always to be present in each group every time, and the method could thus

accommodate the 'real world' compromises necessary when including social workers as participants. The children's social workers involved in this study belonged to a service in which crisis intervention and unanticipated workload demands and limitations (such as unscheduled court attendances, a new case or demands from an unexpected change of role) were commonplace and had to be prioritised over and above their commitment to any study. The research activity thus needed to be flexible and acknowledge that social workers' potential to participate as individuals in the study could be compromised at any point.

The focus group method thus offered "unique potential to combine structure and spontaneity" (Barbour, 2007, p. 40) in the research, taking account that individuals would drop in and out whilst ensuring that a cohesive, familiar and regular group could still meet in their individual absences, without a major disturbance in group dynamics, which they could re-attend when their commitments allowed (the number of attendees at each group can be found in Appendix 16). As each focus group followed and inevitably drew from group coaching supervision discussions (which I observed as a researcher) they are termed 'hybrid' focus groups. A debriefing session took place between the coaching supervisor and I to discuss the content of both groups afterwards (see Figure 2. overleaf).
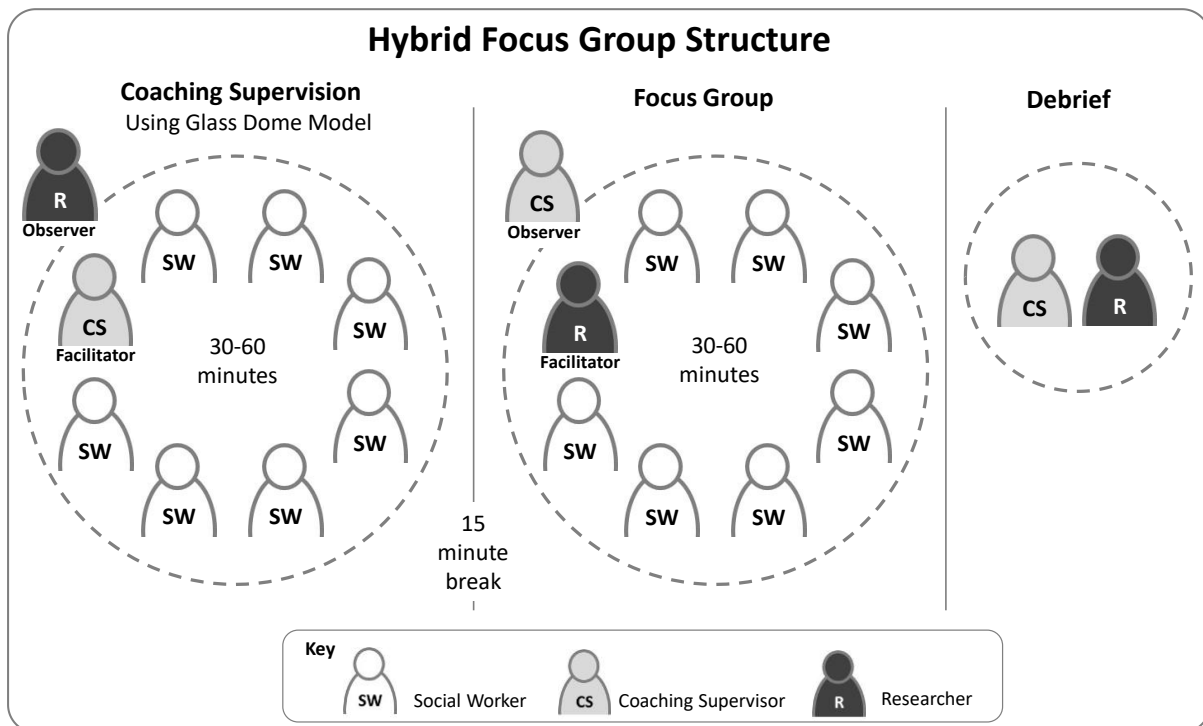
Figure 2. The 'Hybrid' Focus Group

The structured reflective time that a hybrid group could offer had the potential to serve both as: "as a data collection tool and an intervention simultaneously" (Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller & O'Conner, 1993, p. 146). The regularity of the sequencing of self-revelation (Krueger & Casey, 2014) in each group allowed trust to develop between me, the coaching supervisor and the participants, and enabled the exploration of deeper, more thoughtful responses in the focus group element. This sequencing helped to enable the groups to meet what Merton and Kendall (1946) describe as the 'criterion of depth', with the central task of the focus group interviewer being to:

"*diagnose the level of depth on which his subjects are operating at any given*

moment and to shift that level toward whichever end of the "depth-

continuum" he finds appropriate to the given case." (Merton & Kendall, 1946,

p. 555).

A convincing argument is made by Franz (2011) for 'unfocus' to be allowed to happen in focus

groups, to allow the discussion to wander away from the artificiality of pre-planned interview

questions, which leads to a richer exploration of unexpected, emerging themes and issues

that stray away from the ostensible purpose of the group. Placing the focus groups *after* the

coaching supervision element provided flexibility, as pre-planned questions in the topic guide

could be adapted (see Appendix 13) and supplemented by questions devised in response to

relevant issues that had arisen during the supervision session. Frantz's finding that 'unfocus'

can have a releasing and quasi-therapeutic value was also an important consideration, in light

of her assertion that 'unfocus' is often caused by:

"recent or cumulative personal or professional events taking place in the group's

environment related to environmental, economic, or social forces" (Franz, 2011,

p. 1383).

This echoed the context in which the social work coaches were operating, and thus the

cathartic, synergistic benefits for participants of a varied and textured group format that

supported a contained 'unfocus' was considered as important as them answering pre-planned

focus group questions.

Further, it was thought that a series of focus groups sequenced regularly over a period of six

to twelve months (it was not certain at the outset exactly how many focus groups would take place due to the changing circumstances of the social work participants, which affected their availability) would enable a more complete knowledge of the social work participants' shared reflections on their experiences of coaching over time. It was also anticipated that taking part in focus groups would provide data that could be collected whilst coaching delivery was ongoing. Focus groups could thus generate multiple perspectives on the social work participants' more immediate experiences of coaching, which they could explore and elaborate upon together. With seven participants *theoretically* able to attend, the size and composition of the group also met Padgett's recommendation:

"the size of a focus group should be large enough to generate diversity of opinions but small enough to permit everyone to share in the discussion" (Padgett, 2008, p. 100).

Focus groups were not deemed appropriate for use with service users as it was not certain at the beginning of the research where the service users would come from (due to the majority of social workers suddenly changing their roles and losing their caseloads, where service users were originally to be drawn from). When service users were identified it was clear that they would be receiving coaching at different points in the research timeline and were often very difficult to contact. Practically, getting them together to share experiences (which could have been very recent or occurred some months ago) underlined that this was not methodologically appropriate.

Focus group procedures have, in the main, stayed faithful to Merton & Kendall's (1946) seminal work 'The Focused Interview' and focus groups typically contain a small group of participants who possess some shared characteristics and who take part in a discussion with a specific focus to elicit qualitative data (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This data is obtained through using open-ended and non-directive questions, which derive from the client-centred psychotherapeutic work of Carl Rogers of the same period. Rogers felt that non-directive interviewing could enrich social research, as it avoided client defensiveness and enabled the exploration of attitudes towards the self and behavioural dynamics (Rogers, 1945). As the Rogerian approach for asking questions is also compatible with coaching and coaching supervision (which all the social workers experienced during and after their coaching training), the synchrony of focus group processes with the topic for discussion was viewed to be beneficial, as it could provide a familiarity that could engender openness whilst channelling debates around the research questions.

Researcher status and power are also perceived to be diminished in focus groups, the interaction of participants providing the primary direction and control in where discussion leads, allowing the researcher's influence to become diffused (Wilkinson, 1999). This was an important advantage, given the potential influence of my insider/outsider status on how participants would give voice to their realities. Reviewing the use of focus groups across a diverse range of social work research literature, which included workers and service users, Linhorst (2002) found that participation in focus groups can lead to various 'positive secondary consequences' such as empowerment, ownership, acceptance, consciousness-raising, greater participation in decision making and therapeutic effects. Linhorst also

championed social work research as being able to develop the focus group method away from rule-bound, mechanistic applications towards more creative uses that can take account of the 'person-in-environment' perspective; where the relationship of interactions and transactions between individuals and their environment are explored (Saleebey, 1992).

3.3.1 Rationale for Semi-Structured Interview Method

This section provides the rationale for the semi-structured interview and outlines the specific structure, sequence and purpose of the 'conversation as research' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) approach. The task of this enquiry was to employ an interview method that would enable participants to feel confident to explore their experiences and stimulate new, insightful inter-subjective knowledge. Leaning on Bion's (1962) psychoanalytical concept of 'containment', it was hoped that that the interview would provide a safe space for participants to explore their experiences of coaching and that some reflective benefits for participants might be possible through this act of re-telling (Ruch & Julkunen, 2016). Kvale and Brinkman (2009) emphasise that interviews are now a pervasive part of many social interactions within contemporary culture. The use of the interview in children's social work as the basis for assessment and relational approaches means that it can serve as a familiar and non-threatening method to employ with existing service users. However, the interview also echoes the power asymmetries of the social work/service user professional relationship - like the social worker, the research interviewer initiates an instrumental dialogue in which they determine the interview's focus depending on their interests and agenda. The interviewer decides which questioning techniques to invoke, which prompts to employ, and they may manipulate the dialogue to service a hidden agenda that they alone interpret and exclusively define the

meaning of (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It is also a method biased towards those who can express themselves and take an active part in constructing a useful discourse:

> "the interview method is heavily dependent on people's capacities to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember" (Mason, 2002, p. 64).

As it might have been a struggle for some of the service user participants to express complex issues, ensuring that they and the social work participants had the opportunity to voice their views and could reflect at length on their experiences of coaching in their own words and at a time and venue of their choosing was incorporated into the design.

Semi-structured interviews use a schedule of pre-prepared, purposeful questions asked in a sequence, but with the expectation that subjects' responses will require further spontaneous probing, supplementary questions and exploration. The interviewer must perceive the significance of what is being subjectively co-constructed in real time and follow up unexpected avenues unwittingly introduced by the interviewee. The method thus offers a flexible structure that incorporates planning, impromptu adjustments to language and active digression from the script of questions to take account of participants' reactions and the interview atmosphere (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It was felt that this method would provide an interview structure for participants to discuss their experiences, whilst also generating exploratory thought and allowing for the pursuit of unexpected insights (Berg & Lune, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were also deemed to be a suitable method as they echo and harmonise with the coaching approach and thus fit with Flick's previously mentioned guiding

principle of 'appropriateness' (Flick, 2007). The following description of an interviewer's role, from Padgett's 'Qualitative methods in social work research' (2008), is comparable to the attitude of curiosity and openness to the unforeseen that are required of a coach:

> "the interviewer is expected to listen empathically, monitor body language, anticipate the next question, and mentally or literally take note of red flags (e.g., discrepancies, statements signalling deeper meaning). When everything is clicking, both interviewer and interviewee part company feeling they have had a mutually beneficial encounter." (Padgett, 2008, p. 117).

Akin to the coaching encounter, semi-structured interviews comprise a goal-directed conversation (Padgett, 2008) that follows a flowing yet structured narrative that requires interviewers to listen more than they speak, avoid closed questions and allow respondents time to think (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews were also chosen as the most appropriate method to explore service user participants' experiences as they could be scheduled to take place very soon after each service user's last coaching session, when their experience was fresh in their minds. Repeated interviewing was considered; one prior to and one after receiving coaching – but it was viewed as too logistically difficult to achieve. The priority was for the social work coaches to arrange times to get to see service users to deliver the coaching intervention, and as this contact often required persistence and tenacity, it was thought that it might over-burden service users with an initial interview prior to coaching. Also, given that recruitment of the majority of service users to the study was achieved via the researcher's attendance at service

user groups, it was felt that seeing them again prior to coaching commencing would have contributed little in terms of data and could have proved confusing in terms of the roles of the social work coaches and the role of myself as the researcher.

3.3.2 Rationale for Combining Methodologies

Methods that synthesise different research activities can enrich the research task, corroborate the quality of the study and strengthen the findings, as they increase the scope of analysis to include "multiple constructions of the phenomenon" (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006, p. 47). This study sought to combine interview and focus group methodologies to enhance the opportunities for exploratory detail, primarily about the social work participants' experiences over a six to twelve month period. It was anticipated that interviewing the social workers individually after the focus groups had ceased would give them the opportunity to comment on any issues they might not have felt comfortable raising in the groups, and allow them to reflect at length, without any prospect of group interruption, on their experiences. Pulling together the material from focus groups and interviews would therefore produce more multifaceted data to further elaborate their subjective accounts. It would also help to elucidate how meanings were arrived at and shaped by participants and situate them in the context of their individual social worlds (Mishler, 1991). It was therefore anticipated that these two exploratory research activities would provide different vantage points from which to view the subjective experiences of a sample of social workers delivering coaching sessions to a sample of service users.

3.4.3 Design of the Focus Group Topic Guide

The characteristics of the focus group technique have led to numerous criticisms of the approach, which it is important to examine. Krueger and Casey (2015) draw attention to how group members may tailor their stories, perform socially acceptable descriptions of their attitudes and behaviour or censor their contributions to fit with group norms and perceived moderator expectations. This tendency towards the superficial and 'group think' (Janis, 1982; MacDougall & Baum, 1997) can be exacerbated by the artificiality of the group, which can only ever aspire to a pseudo-naturalism due to its contrivance by the researcher to a specific end. Linked to this is the idea that participants are inclined to intellectualise their responses in discussions as this is easier than trying to articulate and name emotions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The presentation of self within a focus group setting can therefore be as a rational thinker, who does not knowingly reference an awareness of the subconscious irrational drivers, feelings and internal states that are influencing behaviours. Critics thus argue that participants' potential unwillingness to share self-knowledge in the group setting makes focus group findings trivial and lacking in depth. Moreover, the small numbers involved, coupled with a lack of clear sequential structure to discussions, can also taint the data that emerges as inherently flawed and unrepresentative (Barbour, 2007).

To counter such criticisms, focus group questions were planned into a pre-prepared topic guide for me as the moderator, to provide a loose structure for discussion in the focus group, based around the research questions. The topic for the first focus group was planned around the participants' use of coaching since their training, but after this the process became more iterative. Focus group topics were always planned but were sometimes substituted for

questions influenced by unanticipated avenues of discussion that emerged from the group coaching supervision sessions, which took place before the focus groups. The aim of such questions sought to follow up research-relevant comments made by participants and to explore them in more depth. Topics for discussion also surfaced in reflective debriefing sessions between me and the local authority coaching supervisor, which took place immediately after each focus group. The wording of questions in the topic guide was often adapted to suit the language and tone of the group. The focus groups thus combined planned and improvised questions into a process of collective sense-making, which prevented it from being overly structured or contrived (Wilkinson, 1998).

3.4.4 Design of the Interview Topic Guide

The question content was designed to meet the research aims and was influenced by the literature on coaching and social work and from focus group discussions. Data obtained from the hybrid focus groups also evoked insights that informed the development and revision of questions. Mason (2002) suggests that the sequencing of questions should be prioritised in the planning for interviews as this will aid the construction of a meaningful discourse together around the research topic (Mishler, 1991). After rapport has been established, introductory open-ended questions should be used followed by more focused questions formulated to promote personal insight and meaning making (Flick, 2007). For example, in the interview guide for service users, Question 1 asked respondents to consider the influence of the environment on their experience of coaching: 'Can you tell me where your coaching took place and how you felt about it taking place there?' This question provided a transition from pre-interview small talk and a frame for more exploratory questions, where the skilled use of

probes to clarify, steer, contrast and re-visit answers could be used to elicit more detailed description (Mason, 2002).

In the present study questions were constructed to surface insights in a relaxed narrative, to accommodate spontaneous deviation from the script of the interview guide in order to probe deeper whilst providing a structure that would help participants to make sense of the experience of coaching. As part of the collaborative nature of this research enquiry, the questions contained in the interview guide for service users (not including questions pertaining to factual, biographical or demographic information) were given to social work coach participants in the ninth focus group, prior to any interviews taking place, for suggestions and feedback when considering it being used with those they had coached. No alterations were deemed necessary to the language or structure, so all the questions were retained and deemed as productive to the research. This inclusion of social workers' views in the approval of questions was important to ensure that they were phrased in a way that would be easily understood by those whom they had been coaching:

"Questioning and answering are ways of speaking that are grounded in and depend on culturally shared and often tacit assumptions about how to express and understand beliefs, experiences, feelings and intentions" (Mishler, 1991, p. 7)

The knowledge of service users gained through focus groups and coaching supervision discussions also provided a good contextual basis to improvise from the interview schedule

and proffer alternative interpretations of questions during interviews according to the language needs and experiences of service users. All interviews terminated with a closing question to ensure participants had the opportunity to mention other issues that they felt were important but which had not been explored (see Appendices 14 and 15 for the interview topic guides).

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Focus Groups

Each hybrid focus group lasted between 30-60 minutes and contained a 15-minute break to signal the separation between the coaching supervision element and the focus group. All the hybrid focus groups were held at a local university within a short walking distance from the social workers' offices. Consent forms were signed on the final day of coaching training prior to the first focus group taking place. As there was a gap between consent forms being signed and the research commencing, participants were given the opportunity at the beginning of the first focus group to remind themselves about the research information sheet and ask any further questions. The focus groups were audio-recorded with permission from participants. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) state that:

"Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction" (pp. 4-5)

Close attention was thus paid to the facilitation of group interactions as this would ensure

that all the participants had an opportunity to speak and explore their experiences. This in turn produced a richer dimension to the data collected. This was aided through debriefing sessions after each focus group with the local authority coaching supervisor. Issues of group dynamics were discussed, the unpredictability of participants' attendance due to the organisational crisis, and ideas for managing potential issues that could affect data collection in the next group (such as reluctant, competing or dominant speakers or dips in group energy) were thought through in these sessions.

The use of a 'moderator' to facilitate group discussion and an assistant 'scribe' to take field notes is common focus group practice. For the most part the moderator acts simultaneously as a background participant and audience to the social actors taking part, but they can choose to intervene to control when participants have their turn to contribute, to elicit views and to draw out talk and opinions on the topic. The group members collectively parade their responses for the moderator to hear and observe, generating a constructed discourse that is situated in a specific social context (Myers & Macnaghten, 1999). In the present study it was necessary to modify the practice of having a scribe and a moderator out of pragmatic necessity, but this was done without compromising the integrity of the method. Both roles were incorporated into one, which would best be described by the term 'facilitator', which more accurately describes the fluidity of the role I undertook. My experience in my 'insider' role as a social worker, coach and trainer in reflective group work meant that I could use my advanced facilitation skills (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Linhorst, 2002) to confidently manage the focus group process:

"focus group facilitation best practices include respect for participants, empathy, background knowledge on the topic being discussed, clear written and oral communication, good listening skills, the ability to control personal views, a sense of humour, and the ability to handle unexpected situations" (Franz, 2011, p. 1382).

Attendance at focus groups fluctuated (see Appendix 16 for a record of numbers attending each group).

3.5.2 Research Environment: Focus Groups

According to Mason (2002), research environments need to feel like spaces where it is possible to foster trust, rapport and candour. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) refer to data as being 'context bound', arguing that it is not possible for venues to have neutrality, and that researchers should pay attention to the messages being transmitted to respondents by holding groups in specific settings. The influence of contextual and situational factors (Orvik, Larun, Berland & Ringsberg, 2013; Vicsek, 2007) within the environment on the richness of the data should therefore be given careful consideration. Whilst acknowledging that a university setting is not neutral, and can be associated by some social workers with a nervousness attributed to a return to academic learning, this location was deliberately chosen as a detached and different physical environment to provide an uninterrupted, calm atmosphere where the social workers would be unobserved by their managers or peers who were not taking part in the research (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

As the research progressed it was increasingly felt that the setting provided a temporary refuge from a fractured organisation and offered the rarity of a reflective space. The association of an academic environment also underlined the difference between the coaching training social workers had undertaken in the pre-research phase and the move to the active research phase. Moreover, it provided the benefit of a regular, confidential, informal setting to get participants together to provide an audience for each other (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999) and grow the new reality they were constructing as novice social work coaches:

"participants are influencing and influenced by others - just as they are in life"

(Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 7).

The disadvantage of providing an external non-workplace meeting space was that social workers sometimes found it difficult to find the time to take the 15 minute walk to the university, or became disorientated on campus by the number of buildings to navigate through, both of which meant that they sometimes gave notice of their inability to attend just before a group was to meet, or were late arriving.

3.5.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place with social workers *and* separately with the service users they had coached when all coaching had been completed. One interview was conducted per social worker and per service user participant. All the interviews were arranged at mutually convenient times, which took into consideration when service user or social worker participants said they would be able to give their full attention to the process for

approximately 45 minutes to an hour. This time limit allowed space for small talk and introductory questions. The scheduling and timing of interviews also took account of interviewee fatigue within the process (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In this study the priority was for all participants to experience interviews as a humanising and natural conversational process within an inclusive social research structure. I achieved this by using humour and rapport-building questions to put participants at ease and set the tone for each interview before using questions from the pre-planned interview schedule. Participants were reminded of the research information sheet prior to the start of the interview and given the opportunity to ask any further questions before consent forms were introduced and gone through carefully. I spent time talking to participants after the completion of each interview to ensure they felt listened to and had felt able to fully explore and articulate their experiences.

3.5.4 Research Environment: Semi-Structured Interviews

All the semi-structured interviews took place in locations that were chosen by the participants as being conducive to their needs for ease of access and comfort in the interview. Locations included the participants' own homes or private rooms in residential children's homes.

3.6 Sampling

This study involved two different sets of participants, which made up a purposive sample of a population of interest. The two sets of participants were:

- a pre-existing group of children's social workers from different teams in a child protection and family support service in a local authority in the North of England. The social workers had obtained a foundation level coaching qualification to enable them to deliver an agreed number of coaching sessions to a small selected sample of service users.

- individual service users (parents, carers and young people) accessing the broad range of services offered by a child protection and family support service in a local authority in the North of England who had volunteered to be coached by the social workers.

3.6.1 Sampling Strategy: Social workers

My primary strategy was to include all eleven social workers who had self-selected to be part of the coaching training project in the study sample, but after initial interest four dropped out after training because of sickness or to take up roles elsewhere; this left seven social work participants in the sample. As the size of the sample was limited to the social workers who had become qualified as coaches through the coaching training project, issues of age, gender and diversity were therefore not considered. I included all those who came forward to be part of the research as it enabled the inclusion of social workers from different teams and could thus provide a window on the use of coaching across a family support and child protection service.

3.6.2 Sampling Strategy: Service Users

All parents, carers and young people who were accessing family support and child protection services were eligible to take part in the research, with some exceptions. The age criterion for young people to be involved in the research was eleven years old and above. This was lowered from an initial age criterion of fourteen (which had been arrived at as a 'best guess' in discussion with the social workers who had taken part in the coaching training) when it emerged that young people in children's homes who were younger than fourteen who wished to self-refer for coaching would be ruled out. I felt it was important to give the opportunity to as many young people as possible to explore and reflect upon their coaching experiences and, as including more young people would increase the size and diversity of the sample, the age criterion was lowered.   The sample was drawn from the service users who had received coaching from social workers as part of the coaching project. Service users - either parents or young people - who would *not* be suitable for coaching were identified via the following exclusion criteria (see Appendix 4 for copies of information sheets circulated to social workers and managers in meetings and on email):

- Those undergoing counselling

- Those who were not open to and felt negative about the idea of coaching

- Young people in legal proceedings where they were acting as a witness

- Young people for whom there were immediate safeguarding concerns

These criteria were devised on the advice and experience of the coaching trainers and in consultation with the social work participants, who felt that coaching service users who were receiving counselling could be confusing for them. They were also based on information in

the literature that indicated similar exclusions for a solution focused service with young people in care or on the edge of care (Fernandes, 2015) and identified the boundaries between coaching and other disciplines such as psychotherapy and counselling.

3.7 Recruitment and Participants

3.7.1 Recruitment of Social Work Participants

Access to social workers was negotiated and agreed verbally by the local authority collaborating with the coaching project and the research in a series of meetings. Meetings firstly took place with the Assistant Director of Children's Services who approved the research project, and the practicalities were worked through with Heads of Service, the Principal Social Worker for Children and social work team managers. Permission to approach social workers was agreed on the condition that social workers would not receive any reduction in workload to complete the coaching training, to coach or to attend focus groups/interviews. When permission to recruit social workers to the coaching training and study was confirmed, an email and flyer were distributed via the Principal Social Worker to social workers and managers. This was followed up by the researcher's attendance at a wide range of management and team meetings of staff in the Family Support and Child Protection Service to promote the study in person and hand out information sheets about participation in the research. These professional meetings included:

- Early Intervention and Targeted Support Service managers meeting

- Youth Offending Team managers meeting

- Youth Offending Team staff meeting

- Connected Person's Team meeting

- Family Drug and Alcohol Court Team meeting

- Assessment and Intervention Team meetings (five meetings attended)

- Children's Rights Team meeting

- Independent Reviewing Officers Team meeting,

- Staff meetings in three children's homes

- Meeting with the Educational Psychologist responsible for supporting the Pillars of Parenting programme for looked after children in children's homes and foster care.

All the social workers who took part in coaching training and went on to deliver coaching to service users opted to take part in focus groups during their coaching delivery period *and* in semi-structured interviews when their coaching was completed. The option of taking part in one or the other of these research activities was not specified but all participants had the right to withdraw at any time if they changed their minds about taking part. It was also acknowledged at the outset that the regularity of participants' attendance at focus groups would be dependent on their unpredictable capacity to remain involved over a prolonged period.

3.7.1.1 Participants: Social Workers

The social work coaches shared characteristics of being both social workers and recently qualified coaches employed by the same local authority, at similar status levels within the organisational hierarchy and with the same training experience and qualifications. All the social workers who volunteered had over seven years of experience of direct practice in the social work field. The participants' ages and experience reflect a substantial portion of the

typical characteristics of the national workforce statistics for England (Department for Education, 2017) at the time of the study (see Table 1). These indicate that 40% of children and family social workers have between 5 to 20 years 'time in service' at a local authority and 54.3% are between 30 and 49 years old. Local authorities participating in a voluntary individual return in 2015-2016, which contributed to these statistics, indicated that 78.8% of their children and family social workers were female and 13.9% were male, which also echoes the characteristics of those that took part.

3.7.2 Recruitment of Service User Participants

Six service users were recruited to take part in the research through contact with their social workers or during first-hand meetings with me prior to their coaching taking place. These meetings included:

- Residents meetings in children's homes (three meetings attended)

- Care Leavers Forum meeting

- Children in Care Council meeting

- Steps Programme meetings facilitated in various community locations by the Early Intervention and Target Support teams (four meetings attended)

- Christmas party for foster carers and kinship carers run by the Connected Person's Team

Table 1. Social Work Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Approximate Age	Gender	Job Roles During Research	Case Holder Status	Years of Practice Experience When Coaching Completed
Sophie	Early 30s	Female	Senior Practitioner Advanced Practitioner Consultant Social Worker	Fluctuated	7
Danielle	Early 30s	Female	Senior Practitioner Advanced Practitioner Project Manager, Signs of Safety	Fluctuated	10
Megan	Mid 30's	Female	Senior Practitioner: Practice Educator Consultant	Fluctuated	13
Esme	Mid 30's	Female	Social Worker (Connected Person Team)	None	10
Jane	Early 50's	Female	Deputy Manager	None	14
Kathy	Mid 30's	Female	Senior Practitioner Advanced Practitioner Team Manager	Fluctuated	11
Ben	Mid 30's	Male	Stronger Families Consultant Deputy Team Manager Deputy Team Manager	Fluctuated	12

*Fluctuated: some case-holder responsibilities at times during the study due to changes in role

Attendance at these meetings took place during the 3-month period after the social workers had qualified as coaches. My attendance served a *dual purpose*: to promote the coaching project as widely as possible to gain referrals for the new social work coaches *and* to promote the option of service users taking part in the research after their coaching was completed. These promotional meetings were supplemented by posters, flyers, and information leaflets for parents, young people and staff (see Appendices 4, 5 and 6). Printed copies were distributed in the meetings and electronic copies were circulated on email after each meeting. The information made it clear that service users had the option of taking part in coaching and not taking part in the research, and this was re-iterated in the meetings where there were opportunities to ask questions about how this would work and about both elements more generally.

They were contacted again by me when the social workers delivering coaching informed me that coaching had been completed, to check that they were still happy to take part in the research. The coaching project referral meetings that took place between me and the two nominated social workers (referred to in Chapter One) ensured that the exclusion criteria (see Section 3.6.2) for receiving coaching (and thus taking part in the research afterwards) were enforced. After each meeting the nominated social workers contacted the referring social workers to check that they were aware of the conditions for taking part and to check that permission had been granted either by parents, or the case-holding social worker for young people subject to a care order. The criteria for taking part were also reiterated in the first coaching meeting to check that all those who had volunteered for coaching – either through

their social worker or directly to me as the researcher – understood the conditions for coaching and the subsequent research.

To try and prevent social workers 'referring' service users for coaching as a new 'service', and to try to emphasise the research-based nature of the coaching offer, it was made clear in the information sheet that coaching interventions could not:

- Act as replacement for other existing interventions or an alternative to unavailable services

- Be treated as part of an assessment

- Be viewed as a pass or a failure – the outcome would be defined by the service user's own goals

- Be used as evidence in court as an example of a service that should be available to others

3.7.2.1 Participants: Service Users

Basic pen pictures of those service users who were coached and interviewed are outlined in Table 3.2. Pseudonyms have been given to each service user and details of their coaching goals and the frequency of sessions are provided.

Table 2. Service User Participants

Name & Age of Service User	Brief Biographical Details	Number of coaching Sessions	Goals Discussed
Emma, 35	Female, carer to her husband's daughters, 4 young children who were subject to a Special Guardianship Order	3	Controlling her stress & angry emotions, (AKA her 'chimp' 'Boris')
Angela, 65	Female, grandparent and carer for her daughter's 2 young children both of whom have learning and physical disabilities and were subject to a Special Guardianship Order	4	Making time for herself
Olivia, 36	Female, carer for her young niece and nephew who were subject to a Special Guardianship Order	2	Weight management
Daisy, 15	Female, living in a children's home. At high risk of child sexual exploitation and abuse, with a history of attacking staff and making false allegations	4	Improving her self-image, self- esteem, anger management
Gabriella, 17	Female, mother to an 18-month-old subject to a child protection plan	3	Moving out of her mother's home, being more independent, making better decisions
Mason, 15	Male, living in a children's home	7	Increasing friendships, controlling anger

3.10 Quality Criteria

It is implicit that, by using qualitative research methods, this study was "seeking liberation from the stranglehold of objectivism" (Koch & Harrington, 1998, p. 886). However, in order to defend the subjective quality and intellectual integrity of the study and to provide a standard by which it can be judged, it is necessary to draw upon qualitative-specific criteria that provided an evaluative framework that was relevant not only for the methods employed but which also aligned with the philosophical position that the research required and was meaningful to the participants involved (Yardley, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert the criteria of 'Credibility', 'Transferability', 'Dependability' and 'Confirmability' for the qualitative paradigm to address threats to trustworthiness and to conceptualise rigour. Yardley (2000) goes further and offers a flexible alternative to the application of fixed evaluation criteria through the conception of 'core principles.' In rejecting a catch-all set of standards she proposes that truth and meaning are constructed communally and culturally and must therefore be interpreted and positioned within each study:

"to limit the criteria for truth would mean restricting the possibilities for knowledge, and would also privilege the perspective of the cultural group whose criteria for truth was deemed correct" (Yardley, 2000, p. 217).

Yardley proposes four principles, which are based on constructivist values: 'Sensitivity to context', 'Commitment and rigour', 'Coherence and transparency' and 'Impact and importance'. These core quality principles have provided the means for assessing quality throughout my engagement with the research process and with participants and are

sympathetic to my philosophy, approach and research aims. Each principle is explained below with some examples of how they were applied during the enquiry.

The 'Sensitivity to context' principle comprises all the facets of the study context, all of which carry equal weight, including interrogation and use of theoretical and research literature pertinent to the context. It includes sensitivity to the socio-cultural environment, to participants' perceptions and to the researcher's relationship with these. Yardley suggests that the researcher's characteristics should not be viewed as neutral within the research context and consideration of these should be included within the design. A reflexive self-critique of my role in the present study can be found in Chapter Eight. The 'Commitment and rigour' principle refers to data generation and collection, which is detailed, systematic and can demonstrate a deep level of 'prolonged engagement' with the research issue. Central also is the idea that the analysis is immersive, 'far-reaching', and contains a comprehensive breadth and depth that compel the researcher towards a moral guarantee that:

"unexpected findings or observations which conflict with the investigator's understandings of the topic are not merely noted, but actively sought, minutely examined, and satisfactorily accounted for" (Yardley, 2000, p. 220).

This principle was addressed through hybrid focus group de-briefing sessions with the coaching supervisor and with my academic supervisors and through keeping a research journal. An excerpt from my journal is included here to provide an example of how my reflexivity was captured:

13 December 2016

Whilst I felt disappointed that only three social workers turned up to the group today, they provided a real insight into the day to day and cultural challenges they are facing when trying to integrate coaching into their practice. The prevailing mindset of the office was revealed and reflected upon with flat resignation. A pseudo macho culture was described in which the phrase "pull your knickers up and get on with it" was commonly used to refer to the directive attitude of managers, and being publicly summonsed to a manager's office to explain or be chastised for the decisions on their caseload was described as a "walk of shame". Two social workers talked about feelings of dread before going to work and of crying in their car - as crying in the office would be seen as a sign of weakness. I felt sad, alarmed and worried for the survival of their wellbeing (and the research project) in such an environment. Despite this, I got a real sense that the social workers valued meeting each other outside of the office in a space which gives them time to breath and check in with one another. In the focus group de-brief session, we discussed the effects of the macho context at length and how the hybrid groups offer a different dynamic and a form of temporary escape. The hybrid groups seem to provide reassurance (to them and to me) and to re-boot the social workers motivation to continue coaching, e.g. "believe me there are lots of things I can be doing - but I'm here".

Data immersion is addressed next in Chapter Four, which comprises an account of the detailed analytic process.

The 'coherence and transparency' principle was characterised by a clear fit between the researcher's philosophical and theoretical positions. Transparency also refers to reflexivity in the methodological choices of investigation and interpretation and open disclosure of all factors influencing the research, such as concrete problems and actions taken, along with the intentions, motivations and assumptions that emerged. The theoretical and philosophical position adopted for this research is set out in Section 3.1 of this chapter and the thesis in its entirety details the research journey in depth.

The principle of 'Impact and importance' concerns the applied relevance of the research to explain issues or recommend hitherto unthought-of solutions and its ability to propel theoretical knowledge forward or expose and address theoretical weaknesses:

"the ultimate value of a piece of research can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom findings were deemed relevant" (Yardley, 2000, p. 223).

The cogency and clarity of the researcher's argument should also provide a "rhetorical power of persuasiveness" (Yardley, 2000, p. 222) within the narrative, which the research audience finds accessible and convincing. The material impact and importance of this research has been built upon its meaning for those who took part, its application to their practice and its future application to the practice of others. Practice implications and recommendations are addressed in Chapter Eight and dissemination of the study findings at national and

international social work and coaching conferences and events have commenced (see page 14 for a list of conference presentations).

3.11 Ethical Issues

Yardley's (2000) 'Sensitivity to context' principle, referred to in Section 3.10 above, refers to considered thought being given to the specific ethical decisions, dilemmas and issues that have arisen during the research process, within the research setting and in the interpersonal relationships between participants and researcher. I shall now discuss these in more depth as they pertain to the present study.

The study was fully approved by the University Research Ethics Panel after some initial feedback indicated a need for further clarity about pre-conditions of the project, the coaching training and qualification stage. This enquiry is premised on the idea that in order for social workers to coach service users *ethically*, they must firstly be trained and attain a professional qualification in coaching accredited by a recognised coaching body.

All the social workers who took part in the study were registered with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), were bound by its revised Standards of Performance, Conduct and Ethics (2016), and were checked with the national Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). In addition, they were subject to local authority professional codes of conduct and policies relating to data protection and the sharing of client information.

Rigorous ethical research practice demanded that the same checks with DBS were applied to me as the researcher with access to vulnerable service users under eighteen. Research governance policies were also consulted for best practice (see the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (Universities UK, 2012) and the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003)) and specific guidance was obtained on interviewing young people from the National Children's Bureaux 'Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People' (Shaw, Brady & Davey, 2011). The ethical challenge of conducting research with young people was also carefully considered to ensure that those involved were viewed as active participants in the research process and that research activities were understood and in keeping with their everyday social experiences and did not evoke hierarchical power dynamics (Christensen & Prout, 2002).

3.11.1 Gaining Informed Consent: Social Workers

In order to ensure that social workers did not feel coerced into taking part it was emphasised in the information sheet, and re-visited in consent forms for social work participants (see Appendix 8), that they could attend training, achieve the coaching qualification, deliver coaching interventions and receive coaching supervision without taking part in the subsequent research phase - and could choose to do this with no adverse consequences for themselves professionally.

3.11.2 Gaining Informed Consent: Service Users

It was initially agreed by the collaborating local authority that the sample of service users for

the research would be drawn from live cases and comprise of individual parents and young people receiving some form of service provided by the Family Support and Child Protection Service. Initially this referred to young people aged over fourteen years but after visiting residents' meetings in children's homes to promote the research, it became apparent that some young people aged under fourteen would be suitable and wanted to self-refer for coaching. A revised application to the University Research Ethics Panel was submitted and granted to allow the age criterion of the research project to be lowered to age 11 and over, taking into account developmental maturity, articulacy and suitability for coaching and subsequent interview on a case-by-case basis, rather than just chronological age.

Explicit informed consent was therefore sought from the parent, carer or social worker (if a looked after child) of each participant under eighteen. All consent documents and information about the coaching and the research study were expressed in language that was accessible and age-appropriate for young people aged eleven years upwards (see Appendix 9) and was explained to the service user participants by me as the researcher and by their social work coach at the outset of the coaching, when going through their coaching agreement.

3.11.3 The Right to Withdraw from the Research Process

The Research Ethics Panel raised the issue of power in relation to service users and questioned whether they would feel able to say 'no' to the research interview but 'yes' to receiving the coaching intervention, given the inherent inequality in the service user/social worker

relationship. As it would not be fair or ethical to withhold a potentially beneficial coaching intervention from service users, the choice to 'opt out' of the semi-structured research interviews but still receive the coaching from trained social workers was explained to all service users approached to take part, and was reiterated in the information sheet and consent forms prior to interviews taking place. In addition, it was frequently re-stated to service users that they did not have to make their minds up straight away to take part in the study and had the option to withdraw at any point with no negative consequences to them, the services they received, or the professional relationships they had. This allowed flexibility in the enquiry as I anticipated still being able to question social workers about their experience of delivering coaching to service users even if the service user chose to opt out of the research interview, without compromising ethical principles and retaining the research value of the coaching experience.

Social workers were informed that they could coach service users and attend group coaching supervision sessions but would be able to opt out of data gathering in the focus groups that followed them if they wished. Thus, it was explained that although coaching supervision sessions could be used to inform the questions and direction of the focus groups afterwards, it was possible for them to withdraw from this element. Alternatively, they could take part in the focus groups and transcribed data from recorded discussions could be omitted to ensure that data from those who did not want to participate in the research would not be included in the final thesis. It was also possible for participants to take part in focus groups and not in the interviews, or to take part in interviews only. All participants were asked if they wished to continue to take part in the research before each interview.

3.11.4 Support for Participants

I was mindful throughout the research process of the ethics of making demands on overwhelmingly busy social workers to attend focus groups and to communicate with me about their contact with coaching referrals. I was acutely aware that time spent meeting the needs of the study took time away from the needs of their work (Barbour, 2007) and had the potential to inconvenience and further diminish their capacity to cope in a time-famished environment of increasing structural and political flux. In order to weigh up the protection of participants with the protection of the integrity of the study, I employed a relationship-based approach in keeping with the study subject and communicated and consulted regularly with the social workers individually by telephone, text and email, and collectively in the coaching supervision/focus groups. This approach to enriching the quality of my relationships with the social workers ensured a greater chance of mutual understanding (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014), and enabled them to feel comfortable in voicing any potential threats to their continuing practical, psychological and emotional ability to take part. It also gave them the option of ceasing to be involved if they felt it was more of a burden than a benefit.

A relationship-based 'ethics of care' (Hugman, 2010, p. 158) approach to accountability was incorporated into my interactions with all participants throughout the study, which were based on principles of attentiveness, responsiveness and responsibility. This came to the fore in a concrete sense by ensuring that service users were told about information and locally available support services should they become distressed or require help at the termination of interviews. Moreover, the hybrid groups were designed to be a safe environment for the social work participants to receive professional support from an experienced coaching

supervisor and to provide a means for social closeness to develop between individuals who were professionally isolated in their organisational context. The valuing of participants and participants valuing *each other* were therefore key elements of the relational ethics of this study (Hugman, 2010).

3.11.5 Confidentiality of Data & Participant Anonymity

All participants were informed that the information they provided to the researcher would be treated in confidence – with the exception of information that indicated that they, or someone they referred to, was at risk of harm or where the researcher deemed them to be at risk and not able to seek support. Participants were informed that if they disclosed a previously unknown safeguarding concern or an instance where there were immediate concerns about their safety, such information might have to be passed to an appropriate authority.

It was agreed with the local authority and explained to service users that no formal digital record was to be made of what had been discussed in coaching sessions on the parent or child's file beyond 'is receiving coaching'. This was in recognition of the right of service users to define their own coaching goals and progress - which would remain confidential and totally separate from any ongoing social work assessments, processes and recording systems - unless they wished to and gave permission to have it recorded on file.

Research participants' identities were protected by assigning each social worker and service user a pseudonym to ensure they are not identifiable in any written or verbal report emanating from this research. In addition, the research report refers to the local authority taking part as one in the 'North of England', to further maintain its anonymity (when participants refer to the local authority it is termed as 'Northern LA'). The treatment of data security, retention and disposal from focus groups and interviews has been in accordance with the University Data Protection Policy (2015). Both data sources were recorded on a digital device and transcribed, and recordings were then deleted from the device, uploaded to a password-protected laptop and external hard drive backed up by a secure cloud -storage facility that can be accessed only by me as the data custodian. Some hard copy anonymised transcripts were viewed by the research supervisors for thematic analysis advisory purposes and then shredded.

3.11.6 Service User History

Social workers were explicitly not allowed to know or search for the background history of service users. This had instinctively been viewed by me as a power advantage that could compromise the non-hierarchical nature of the coaching relationship and was a deliberate part of the design to help neutralise power differentials in the social worker/service user coaching relationship and to delineate it as different to the social work relationship.

3.11.7 Researcher Safety

Interviewing took place in the homes or chosen venues of service users. As a lone

researcher in the community, I ensured that the dates, times and locations of interviews were logged with the service user's case social worker and with the two nominated social workers who were part of the coaching delivery project. I arranged to text the nominated social workers on leaving each visit, and when I undertook interviews out of office hours I informed a responsible family member and made the same arrangement.

3.11.8 Role Conflict

As highlighted in the introductory chapter, this study was motivated by my own transformative experience of being coached, delivering coaching as a qualified coach, my professional identity as a registered and former practising social worker and my access to others with similar knowledge and skills. This convergence of accessibility, professional interests and experience in studying what is familiar has two benefits, described by Padgett (2008) as a means of accelerating rapport and conferring a 'head start' in background knowledge. For this enquiry, the twin advantages of having an in-depth understanding of the local social work environment and having previous professional relationships with senior social work and training and development managers, and some of the social work coach participants, have without doubt meant that gaining trust and initial cooperation in setting up the study have been straightforward. However, it has also highlighted some ethical risks; in the initial stages of the research I wrestled with and reflected on my dual role as an 'insider' social worker, coach and former local authority employee and my new role as an 'outsider' postgraduate researcher. This placed ethical reflexivity at the centre of several supervisory discussions in order to surface where my former roles ended and my new role as a researcher *and* 'manager' of the temporary coaching infrastructure to recruit service user coachees

overlapped. Because this fused role was not always visible or tangible to participants, this ethical navigation became an ongoing necessity to ensure that I did not disregard any situations where I might unconsciously exploit the ambiguities of my dual role to my advantage, for example by using my previous 'insider' working relationship with some participants to influence the content of discussion in focus groups.

Interestingly, the ongoing regularity of the hybrid focus groups enabled the ethical dimensions of the study to be part of an integral process rather than a single event (Hugman, 2010) where the ethical complexities were continuously and hypothetically examined. Examples of those considered included the hypothetical moral dilemma of coaching a service user towards a goal that conflicted with the values of the coach, deconstructing the voluntary nature of coaching and its egalitarian stance with a statutory context, and examining whose interests were best being served by the cancellation of a coaching appointment.

The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the methodological choices in the present study and to state how these were informed by my philosophical position. The following chapter presents the structure and details of the analytic process.

Chapter Four - Analytic Strategy & Process

Introduction

The preceding chapter provided an overview of the research design and methodology. In this chapter I outline the analysis of the hybrid focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the social workers and the analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the service users. This is followed by my reflections on this process as a precursor to the presentation of the research findings, which I articulate in Chapter Five.

4.1 Analytic Strategy

The mixed methods in this research have produced voluminous amounts of messy, unruly data, and the task of demonstrating its interconnectedness in an orderly process required me to sequester myself away to devote my absolute attention to it. The complexity of the data produced in 9 focus groups over a 10 month period, combined with 13 semi-structured interviews, created a multi-faceted research picture that initially defied straightforward categorisation. Gabb (2009) warns that:

> "the need to edit, synthesize and paraphrase complex and multi-layered data can lead to the narrativization of experience and the 'tidying up' of findings" (Gabb, 2009, p. 43).

I have dealt with this epistemological dilemma by founding my analytic strategy on an integrative approach to the data, which did attempt to neaten and make the data corpus manageable without losing its richness or depth. I achieved this by analysing the verbally detailed responses of social work coaches in focus groups and semi-structured interviews together as one data set and analysing the less verbose responses of service user coachees separately as another. As outlined in the Methodology Chapter, the interpretative scheme for this data employs a social constructionist and critical realist lens. My analysis has thus sought to illuminate how participants constructed their coaching relationships, along with an exploration of the situated knowledge and social meanings that developed inter-subjectively between social work coaches and service user coachees - and between them and their wider social worlds. How participants contextualised, shaped and negotiated what constituted change in their thinking and behaviour within the reality of their socio-cultural environment was a key analytic interest.

4.1.2 Rationale for Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis has been formally claimed and used extensively as an analytic method within the social and health care disciplines (Braun & Clarke, 2014) following the popularity of Braun and Clarke's (2006) paper, which acts as step by step guide. It is this paper and their companion website that have driven and provided the direction for my analysis. Thematic Analysis is viewed as having a particular value for applied research, as it lends itself to data presentation that is accessible outside the narrow world of academia (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This study is concerned with application in the real world and it met Braun and Clarke's recommendation for a medium-sized Thematic Analysis project. I therefore felt confident that

this foundation method of analysis was a wise choice to capture what was important and compelling in the data. As an analytic approach Thematic Analysis is very flexible; it can be used with almost all forms of qualitative data and does not dictate what epistemological or ontological frameworks should underpin it. Nor does it have a set of strict analytic procedures to adhere to, which made it an ideal choice for analysing both focus group and interview data. As an inexperienced researcher, it also provided an accessible, versatile and non-technical form of analysis to help me to interpret and make sense of the entire set of raw data which I could quickly gain competence in.

Thematic Analysis involves searching for patterns of meaning across a data set in order to address research questions, which are expressed as codes, categories, sub themes and themes (Braun & Clarke, n.d.; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a sequential six stage process that involves moving from familiarisation and immersion with the data corpus to systematically searching within it to generate codes from data excerpts. These codes are recursively refined, clustered and collated into provisional themes that are centred around a key organising concept. They are then named, their meaning is defined and they are used, along with convincing data extracts, in the final research report. Braun & Clarke (2013) define a theme simply as a 'central organising concept' that contains different related facets and that:

> "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

DeSantis & Ugarriza provide a more nuanced description:

> "An iteration or recurrence of a variety of experiences that is manifested in patterns or configurations of behaviour, that is ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. As such, themes are embedded in repetitive or variant, often disparate expressions of social behaviour or verbal interaction. This iteration makes themes identifiable and converts them from the emic-implicit meaning of participants to the etic-explicit meaning of the researcher" (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000, p. 363).

Themes are therefore abstract manifestations in the data, and the role of the researcher is to unify these into representations and indictors of explicit meaning and relevance within the research project.

Braun & Clarke argue strongly that Thematic Analysis is an 'interpretive act' and that "the researcher is positioned as *active* in the process: themes do not just 'emerge'" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 96). This view is diametrically opposed to the position espoused in much of the literature before their 2006 paper, which contended that themes did indeed 'emerge' from data, not spontaneously, but through a form of mental extraction by the researcher (see DeSantis & Ugarriza's (2000) 'Criteria Foundational to the Definition of a Theme'). The process of mental extraction is, of course, a process of *interaction* with the data and it is unsurprising that the scholarly arguments for how themes come into being in the mind of the researcher has moved on. 'Real' themes are not waiting to be revealed through an unbiased

objective process, they are subjectively interpreted, constructed and defined from a vast array of possibilities in the data. Thus, Thematic Analysis is consistent with a constructionist perspective that cautions against the idea of objective propositions and single discoverable truths (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000).

Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that researchers are merged with their deep theoretical commitments and assumptions, that these inform theme development and that they should be transparent from the outset. My broad assumptions were that I would interpret rather than just describe my findings, through an organic and iterative process that tried to create a coherent and compelling story about the data. This story would reflect my philosophical allegiance to the paradigms of constructionism and critical realism and would demonstrate this consistency through representing the multiple constructions of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and through the language used in the research product. My final assumption was that my research would produce actionable outcomes and implications for the social work profession.

Connelly & Pelzer (2016) have highlighted the problems of superficial or underdeveloped themes that, in consequence, fail to convince or deliver any original knowledge and burden the reader with trying to determine what the connections are between data and conclusions. They cite that the mismatching of data extracts to themes can indicate poor skills in conducting in-depth interviews with participants and/or the analytic process being halted prematurely before a thorough and wide-ranging analysis has been completed. Either of these issues can result in scant experiential data and superficial themes that fail to convey

meaningful findings. This is a criticism I tried to guard against by planning for a period of analysis that tried to reflect the amount of time I had spent in the field (thirteen months). I naively factored in six months, which was then extended to eight and then to ten months but which fell short of matching it equally as recommended by Janesick (2016), although it is difficult to see how this hopeful ideal could be reconciled with the time -famished context of many real world research conditions. However, this is a consideration for another time. Inundating readers with large numbers of themes can also be viewed as equivalent to presenting under-analysed data, which can lead to difficulties in discerning which themes are most relevant and lead to the false or under-emphasised importance of implications from participants' stories (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Keeping this in mind, the process by which I extensively modified the themes presented in my findings, to avoid reaching spurious conclusions (Edgley, Stickley, Tmmons & Meal, 2016), is detailed in the section below.

4.2 Delivering the Analysis: Theming the Data

All the focus group and semi-structured interview conversations were transcribed verbatim by me from audio recordings. Participant names were substituted with pseudonyms to secure anonymity. Each focus group yielded between 10 and 27 pages of single-spaced text. Interviews with social work participants were generally substantially longer (approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours) than interviews with service user participants (approximately 20 minutes to 1 hour long). I engaged in 'intensive reading' (Caillaud & Kalampalikis, 2013), reading each transcript carefully and listening to the recordings of each focus group or interview between 5 and 10 times in order to stay close to the data, embed my familiarisation with it, and ensure that any moments of possible analytical significance were not overlooked.

This also served to challenge any premature pattern development and to reflect on the trustworthiness of any initial assumptions I might have fixed upon during earlier parts of the research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

I coded as a 'splitter', breaking down and searching for convergences in the data corpus line by line, on hard-copy printouts of transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). This involved utilising tentative codes in the first coding cycle, which were reviewed and analysed further in a second cycle of coding to de-privilege some codes and cluster other single codes together into those with a more evocative or graphic 'grab' (Padgett, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). For the second cycle of coding I imported the data into the NVivo data management software programme. This enabled me to condense some of my code choices into broader codes nested within more defined hierarchies and conceptual categories. As part of this iterative process I curated an electronic mind-map as a means of visually displaying clustered themes and categories I had developed and as a discussion tool with my academic supervisors. These supportively provocative discussions provided the basis for a more thoughtful exploration of the selection and qualities of dominant codes and the interrelationships between categories and higher-level themes and helped me to hone their analytic utility. I used these opportunities to help me ask questions of the data, to consider why I might be resisting possible interpretations suggested by my supervisors and to defend my choices for themes. This in-depth engagement with the data enabled me to progress how I assigned levels of meaning and often prompted the re-negotiation of early thematic claims. The supervisory relationship thus ensured that I asked questions of *myself* about the coherence of my interpretations and that the process of theming the data did not take place within a stale and colourless analytic vacuum.

In devising final categories and themes from the raw data from focus groups and interviews I reviewed not only the frequency and extensiveness of concepts that surfaced but also the importance participants attached to them and the intensity with which they were expressed. This helped me to maintain a first-person perspective during the analytic process, understanding the words of participants from their own perspectives, as Watts advises: "Try to see the world through their eyes. Try to be *them*. Empathy is central to this process" (Watts, 2014, p. 5). The internal consistency of the views articulated (during a single interview and, crucially, over time within the 9 focus groups) and the specificity provided by participants was also a key part of my data-driven strategy (Krueger & Casey, 2014). A final immersive analytic method I employed involved hand writing and cutting out all proposed themes and sub-themes individually and manipulating their configuration spatially on a 2 metre roll of paper. Saldaña (2016) refers to a version of this as 'Tabletop Categories', a workshop technique that enables the touching and manoeuvring of already coded and categorised data to explore potential hierarchies. My adaptation of this method took place over a two week period and involved physically viewing the concepts in different positions and from different vantage points. This embodied, more sensory analytic method, physically moving toward or away from themes and 'handling' them, energised my analysis in a final push. It forced me to re-evaluate my stance in relation to each theme and decide what was instrumental in establishing the backbone of ideas generated by the research. This last deconstruction and critical questioning of all analytic decisions made so far challenged my choice of language to describe themes and how I was theorising the data. This exhaustive and microscopic review of the data corpus led to each theme and sub-theme being refined so that they mostly derived from direct speech used by the participants and ensured that they could be tracked to meaningful excerpts of text. The NVivo-inspired themes arrived at capture the meanings and metaphors peppering

the language of participants and sought to illuminate the data through concepts that would be recognisable to them.

Saldaña (2016) advises plotting concepts according to dimensions of magnitude to aid the understanding of how themes are interrelated. I utilised this process to resolve any residual ambiguities about connections between concepts, to abstract how themes overlapped and to craft how they could be usefully applied as recommendations for future ideological change at micro, meso or macro levels (see Appendix 17 for a sample extract that maps the magnitude and naming of a theme and sub-theme to its supporting datum).

The totality of these stringent processes has tested my perseverance and flexibility as a researcher but ensured my deep familiarity with the data corpus. In doing so I believe the scholarly integrity of my analysis fully adhered to Braun & Clarke's (2006) process of generating meaning, concepts and themes from the data.

4.3 Interactional Group Data: Reflections Informing the Analysis

From a constructionist standpoint, interpreting the interactions of the focus group participants and how they constructed responses in the social context of the group is an instrumental part of data immersion. The focus group literature on analysis (see Barbour (2007); Carey & Smith (1994); Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999); Kreuger and Casey, (2014); Orvick, Larun, Berland & Ringsberg (2013)); argues that the credibility, strength and rigour of

analysis are increased by considering group interactions, and that these should be captured immediately after each group has taken place. They contend that transcriptions de-contextualize the data from the group environment and are in danger of overlooking the texture of discussions, the emotions intuited when views are expressed and any sense of empathy, challenge and partnership that can develop in groups. However, interactional data from focus groups is rarely published; in a review of 200 studies of focus groups Wilkinson (1999) found that:

"Focus group data are most commonly presented as if they were one-to-one interview data, with interactions between group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed" (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 77).

Being aware of this criticism and recognising that focus group transcripts are only a partial re-construction of encounters, I tried to pay attention to contextual factors, significant interactional sequences and non-verbal communications between participants and myself within the hybrid groups (Caillaud & Kalampalikis, 2013; Orvik et al., 2013). As advised by Carey & Smith (1994) and Barbour (2007), I noted what I felt sensitised to as features of each group; this included interruptions, contradictions, evasions, silences, awkwardness, ironic in-jokes and consensus, along with group exchanges that humorously or painfully elaborated the perplexing development of a social work coach identity.

These subjective impressions and speculations were entered into my reflective research journal during data collection and scribbled down excitedly after enlightening post-focus

group de-brief sessions as ideas for preliminary analytic consideration. This was part of an ongoing reflexive process that commenced after the first focus group was held and continued sequentially after each group. Saldaña (2016) recommends noting stand out 'codable moments' prior to commencing the disciplined analytic process, although clearly it is important not to prematurely fix upon possible 'pre-codes' as this will bias later theme development. I used this broad reflexive process throughout my time in the field to try to ensure that the contemporaneous influences on me as a researcher during the whole research project were included in the overall critique (Koch & Harrington, 1998). I thus drew upon the sum of these reflections on group interactions to inform and enhance my thematic analysis.

4.3.2 Reflections on the Analytic Process

Engaging in the formal analytical process presented a huge challenge for me as a new researcher and, at times, I struggled to manage the overwhelming sense of ownership and responsibility I had to do justice to the data alongside my lack of confidence in analysing. This resulted in a painstaking and frustratingly slow process in order to learn how to conduct an analysis that could evidence themes that were thoroughly developed that avoided the concerns of unsubstantiated findings. During the analysis itself I experienced different extremes; feelings of intoxicating interest as an insight or 'aha moment' occurred as codes seemed to coalesce into categories and new connections were made, and feelings of isolation as I scoured the data corpus time and time again. My feelings of anxiety around being lamentably de-skilled shifted towards the end of the 10 month analytical process, as a sense of increasing competence finally emerged as a reward for my commitment. I thus surfaced

from the exile of a laborious analytic process with a belated sense of confidence in my mental dexterity and in my bourgeoning researcher identity as a result.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the progress made in answering the research questions and shed light on the complex process of theme construction in this study. It has revealed a thorough, systematic and replicable analytic technique that describes data immersion, coding cycles, iterative category and theme development. I have positioned myself as an interpreter of data and have suggested that original knowledge has been constructed through my interactions with it. The next chapter moves from the process of how themes have been realised to exploring each theme in turn as a study finding.

Chapter Five - Findings Part 1: Social Workers

Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, thematic analysis was used to identify, develop and actively interpret the key concepts and patterns of meaning within the data generated by the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2017). My aim in this chapter is to set out the major themes generated through this analysis to convey the breadth of the study findings. As outlined previously, these themes represent the results from two data sets. One data set utilises responses from social workers and comprises of hybrid focus groups held during the coaching process *combined* with semi-structured interviews held on completion of coaching. The second data set derives from semi-structured interviews conducted with service users after the coaching process had ended. Themes relating to the experiences of *social workers* are detailed in this chapter and have been constructed to illuminate a path between the data and my interpretation of its quality, meaning and importance in addressing my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bywaters et al., 2016; Mason, 2002; Watts, 2014). To assist the reader these are set out again below.

Research Questions:

- Does engagement in short term coaching lead to new thinking and behaviours by social workers and service users?

- How do social workers and service users experience the intersection of social work and coaching practices?

- Can accredited coaching training and practice equip social workers with greater confidence in their ability to make a positive difference to the lives of service users?

5.1 Theme 1: Cultural Blockers to Coaching

This theme contextualises the specific professional landscape in which social workers in the study were operating and highlights related cultural obstacles to coaching that were revealed across the data. Sub-theme 1. encapsulates a snapshot in time of the uncertain and besieged organisational background against which social workers were struggling to make space for coaching. Sub-theme 2. highlights misconceptions and gaps in understanding about coaching that surfaced from service users and the social workers' colleagues. Sub-theme 3. focuses on time pressure and reveals how social workers had to be inventive with their demanding professional schedules to fit coaching in.

5.1.1 Chaos & Black Holes: A Ruptured Work Environment

The practical and emotional difficulties of introducing coaching as a new intervention in an extremely turbulent, pressurised, and uncertain organisational environment was a recurring topic that ran through all the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The chaos that ripped through the fabric of the local authority children's service in the lead-up to the Ofsted inspection, the inspection process itself and the official label as an 'inadequate' failing service meant that the social workers lost much of their role clarity during the period of time in which they were coaching. Some of them were displaced from their physical environments and the prospect of job losses loomed large in their thinking, as social worker Megan encapsulates:

> **Megan:** I think with toxic working environment in relation to this model of coaching
>
> for us here and now, I think Northern LA wasn't in a good position for it to be piloted.

And, I do think that at the time we started we were in an environment where people were disappearing down black holes. And coaching just wasn't a priority for everybody because we were so, driven on ticking the boxes that needed to be ticked, so they didn't disappear down that hole that, coaching wasn't . . .

Interviewer: What do you mean, what do you mean by black hole?

Megan: So, so people would, come into work one day and get, either messaged, communicated to them or a tap on the shoulder. Then someone would - *and disappear*. And somebody would come and collect their belongings and that would be them gone then. And nobody'd say what had happened to them, the majority of time they'd been suspended or contracts ended. So I think 'cos people were *so* worried if I didn't tick the boxes that needed to be ticked to keep the government happy, that coaching just wasn't a priority, because you were too busy, making sure you didn't disappear down the black hole.

A sense of rupture and estrangement from the social workers' familiar practice environment was prominent in the data. The participants repeatedly spoke of losing their grip on the certainty of their role and this formed a vaguely menacing and panicked backdrop against which to conduct coaching. This chronic uncertainty and sense of threat acted as a cultural blocker to coaching getting started or being maintained by the social workers once begun. High, and, at times, unbearable, organisational anxiety was witnessed by the social workers themselves in the way workers and managers talked to each other or it was experienced by them directly in the way they were treated. The extract below, spoken by Danielle, is her

response to the idea of contacting a new coachee. It reveals a sense of vulnerability and a lack of emotional containment in the office environment:

> **Danielle:** I have no idea, I have no idea because it's-it's-*it's like a war zone in there*. It's like oh you go in there [laughs], I'm just like you go in there - and I do sometimes because we're separated because we run across the full service we're not just A and I, [Assessment & Intervention] we run across everybody. So we're in our own room. We're isolated from everybody else. But I like to just go and sit in there, sometimes to hear conversations. Well I like to be nosey, and see what's going on. And, and it's just *absolute, chaos.* And there's people crying, there's people leaving, there's people handing their notice in left, right and centre*.* I sat in there one, um I sat in there one day last week and three people emailed to hand their notice in. And something had kicked off. And I don't know what, but, there is stuff going on in there and even in the room that I'm in now there's like stand-up arguments every day, because of the characters that are in that room, I think. That's not a nice environment to be in. But the other option I have is to go to that other environment and sit in that room, which isn't a nice environment to be in.

The findings suggest that the organisational anxiety and role overload created by the inspection disrupted the social workers' secure base at work. The social workers who remained part of the research felt that the unprecedented drains on their capacity acted as cultural blockers to taking on service users as coachees:

> **Esme***: Because I'm just absolutely - I were dead on my feet. You know, for about six months I was just churning work out. So it was really hard to sort of, take what I've learnt, put it in to my own work - because you haven't got - actually you haven't got any time to reflect or to try and think about where, where you're actually going with it. And also to try and fit in, it's almost another case isn't it? To try and fit in another case on top of your caseload already, were just impossible

However, despite universal participant agreement that coaching was an additional burden, it was also seen as offering hope for a more optimistic kind of practice to the one they were in the thick of, as Megan poetically puts it:

> **Megan:** For me, I'm just ready for something positive (**Esme**: Mmm!) and coaching is positive. And we're in a world where everything at the moment seems really negative*. This will be the sort of positive. This will be the light on the dark day won't it?!

Paradoxically, the findings indicate that using coaching may also have helped some of the social workers to tolerate the unpredictable effects of the 'black hole' conditions of organisational chaos by enabling them and others to see their situation from different vantage points - and in doing so to nurse a small sense of transformational agency. This was evident in coaching conversations two of the social workers had with colleagues who were struggling with waiting for the environment to stabilise. Using coaching techniques with them

helped them to consider new perspectives without needing to wait for an external change which was outside of their control:

Adrian: I found myself doing it [coaching] yesterday. I was sat and somebody started talking about, erm, how they would be better off working at Asda or Morrison's or summat like that. So I went into that coaching mode then and said "So, ok then, so tell me about, tell me about what difference would you have at Asda, so tell me about what difference you think" – you know what I mean, I did that, I wasn't telling them what would to do, I just did that, "What would Asda look like for you?" [Group laughter], "Is that true do you really know what Asda would look like for you?" [Laughter] "What do you get from Northern LA, what's your hourly rate? What do you get? What's this", erm, and they started coming out with you know, sick pay and we actually get this and Asda didn't get paid that, so by me just saying you know, to them, to think about that, they worked it all out for themselves and they said [sharp intake of breath] "thanks for that Adrian that's really, that's really made me feel more positive about what I'm doing here". So you do you know what I mean, just by, I didn't give 'em any prescription or anything like that, like you would normally do as social workers. Just asked them those simple questions, 'what would it be like if this was like that, what would it be like if this was like that'", "oh, oh yeah you're right . . .

This extract about a colleague's negativity being reframed in a single conversation is indicative of the shift in dialogue and reported self-talk that figured prominently in the content of focus

groups and interviews with all the social workers. Their accounts reflect the impact of their churning workplace culture on their capacity to coach and attitudinal shifts in how to manage this, coupled with the identification of two key cultural blockers to coaching that are outlined below as sub-themes.

5.1.2 *'Wrong' Impressions*: A Void in Vocabulary & Understanding of Coaching

The lack of a pre-existing language or framework for coaching within social work surfaced repeatedly in the findings through basic misunderstandings of its premise, as Jane and Sophie outline:

> **Jane:** they said "oh, I don't need to be coached". That's what they said, they saw coaching as if you had problems.

> **Sophie:** there was a lot of referrals, I think where people had kind of been given the wrong impression about what coaching was or they'd been told they *had to do it.*

The findings convey that many referring social workers thought coaching to be a deficit intervention, primarily designed to improve some weaknesses or lack in performance, and this misconception was then passed on to some of the service users who were referred. Some social workers also thought it was mandatory for service users to engage in it, when the basis of coaching is its voluntary nature. This indicates a void in understanding within children's

social work about what coaching is and how it should be utilised. Most managers and members of staff had heard of coaching but had no experiential knowledge of it. Accounts from the social workers suggest that people without experience of coaching tried to fill in the gaps in their knowledge by mistakenly likening it to something they could more easily imagine. Indeed, before receiving coaching training Kathy confessed to initially conflating coaching with a stereotype of a brash American motivational speaker raving about ways of making a fast dollar. For some service users counselling was the nearest familiar intervention, and this was the basis for some confusion:

> **Kathy:** a lot of people think, the perception of coaching is counselling. That's - that's people's perception . . . I think that the person came to coaching and thought it were more like counselling, if I'm honest. Even though I'd explained it wasn't I think that's what they thought they may get from it. I don't think it - because I sent her all the stuff, I don't think it were just that, I think the emotions were running high. I think the situation, the thing that she'd experienced were more at forefront of her mind, than actually thinking this is coaching. You know I think it were just, she needed a place to be, feel safe I think and, say how she felt. I think she found that but I think she missed the bit about what my role was, so to start with. And I had to stop her several times and tell her that I, you know, wasn't there to do, find solutions and I weren't. I had to keep doing that in the first half hour. I had to do it quite a few times.

According to the social workers, the lack of an experiential frame for coaching in social work and a dearth of understanding meant that service users were being approached about it by

service representatives who misunderstood it and this resulted in a number of inappropriate coaching referrals. This was a source of frustration for some of the social workers, who had to invest time defining and explaining it repeatedly, despite leaflets, flyers and posters. The findings strongly suggest that the lexicon of coaching has no foothold in current social work discourse. This acted as a cultural blocker to social workers' and service users' engagement with coaching, both conceptually and practically.

5.1.3 Rushing All the Time: Time Scarcity

Constant rushing caused by competing demands on the social workers' time was a common complaint. For one social worker, Ben, this meant rescheduling or cancelling sessions with his service user coachee, which caused him to feel guilty as coaching was something he enjoyed and wanted to commit to. Both Ben and Kathy eventually dropped out of facilitating formal coaching (they continued to coach members of their teams and colleagues informally) as they felt they could not commit the time to coaching and did not want to be unreliable. The remaining social workers tried to find ways of incorporating formal coaching sessions and time for processing them into their working day, but this resulted in an extra burden on their time and increased pressure:

Esme: I tried to factor in time after, but that never worked. So after an hour, the phone's ringing, I've got fifteen emails, and you know, it just doesn't happen. So, I wanted like a bit of, time, like you said, didn't you 'have a bit time before, a bit of time after', and you've got no chance! [laughter] I'm like that 'whaaat!' . . . like I said

cos it was so busy, I didn't feel like I could. I had so much to do, I couldn't - I didn't

have a spare hour. I needed more hours in the day. Otherwise, I'm working at home

on a night, you know?

As Esme alludes to, the time needed for the practical elements of coaching; to prepare

beforehand, to travel to meet the service user, to facilitate the coaching session and to reflect

afterwards, were all factored into the 'time needed to coach' but allocating this amount of

time proved very difficult for all the social workers. Creating the time and space to coach also

required a shift in thinking about how they utilised their time with service users, as

accountability for their time and how they used it to achieve *their* outcome was no longer

relevant:

Sophie: You are so used to having to do things quickly, having to get *to know people*

quickly, having to you, know, in our role at the minute we go out on cases that we

don't, case hold where we support other people on visits, and you know It's all

about, "Hello, I'm Sophie, how can I get you to get on with me because there's some

conversations we need to have about really personal stuff about your life" [spoken

very quickly], and it's all about, cracking on with that at your own agenda rather

than, allowing it to be somebody else's agenda.

Danielle: As a social worker you wouldn't have the time to go and sit with somebody

for, two hours, an hour and a half, whatever it is. And just sit and listen to whatever

they want to talk about. Cos you've got things you've got to stick to, you've got a

plan, you've you know every visit you go on, what's my purpose for this visit?

According to accounts, this recognition of the time needed to coach and the scarcity of time available within the confines of their social work roles led some of the social workers to be more adaptive and inventive with their time in order to persevere with coaching. Some found time to fit coaching in during work hours 'under the radar' of their workload responsibilities, returning to the office late to catch up. One 'created' time to coach during their annual leave, one coached during their notice period. Coaching therefore continued to happen in spite of institutional rupture, but the very limited time available was a further stumbling block to coaching taking place and to recognising the time needed for it.

5.2 Theme 2. *Born Fixers:* The Ubiquity of the Fix Mindset & Transmission Based Practice Habits

The interconnecting concepts contained within this theme relate to the common social work practice habits that had evolved for the experienced social workers in this study, which reveal themselves to be diametrically opposed to the coaching mindset. Sub-theme 1. explores the concept of an inherent urge within the social work psyche to fix others, which was actively upset by the social workers in order for coaching to take place. Sub-theme 2. reveals how adopting coaching language and a coaching approach led to the social workers questioning their habit of transmitting instructions and advice according to an agenda pre-set by them. Sub-theme 3. details how social workers' anxieties when coaching, without their usual paperwork props, systems, processes and accountability requirements, permeated their experience. The findings in Sub-theme 4. feature the social workers' regretful recognition of their poor listening skills prior to coaching training and the impact that improved listening skills had on their practice.

5.2.1 I'm Not Here to Fix it: Identification With & Disruption of Fixing

Social workers in the study collectively described their professional social work identities as 'fixers' - of situations, circumstances and people. This was referred to in the data as an innate and almost compulsive drive to help, which comprised of mending what was broken, restoring order and furnishing solutions:

> **Megan:** as a social worker, we're driven to fix things, to put things right. For us to take over, take control and put back together I suppose like a jigsaw or a Rubik's Cube.

This was a strongly held and ingrained feature of the mindset in which they engaged with service users as social workers. It was also part of the way they felt they were already perceived by service users and by other agencies involved with families, who also looked to social workers to reform and fix:

> **Kathy:** some people have come into this profession thinking that they've got the answers and, that's how they want to play it. That's the kind of social worker they are. I have the answers listen to me and you'll be fine. . . until you change the whole notion that social workers have magic wands and we come and fix things, then in crisis situations everybody's looking to that social worker to fix it. . . Actually, the other partnerships we work with, schools, health visitors, they are so reliant on social workers having the answer, so reliant on social workers coming in and waving the magic wand.

The social workers quickly identified that their fusion with a 'fixer' archetype needed to be suspended temporarily in order to coach. Instead of telling service users what the solutions were and then imposing them on their behalf, they needed to enable service users to find their own solutions. This new understanding of their role proved to be difficult initially for the social workers, and the mantra 'do not give advice, do not give advice, do not give advice' was often used by some as part of their internal psychological preparation and self-monitoring during coaching, to disrupt their strong fixing instincts. Two social workers found this more of a struggle when coaching in children's homes with young people, where the environmental associations triggered them to behave as social workers:

Danielle: Like the social worker's inside, you're like wanting to fix it like that. I mean it was stuff that I could have fixed really easily, do you know what I mean? And I were like, I were, it was really hard to, not, be, that person.

As coaching progressed the cognitive strain of *not* fixing surfaced less and less during reported coaching encounters. Not-fixing also became seen as an optional way of behaving with others beyond the service users they were coaching. This was not as natural initially and required effort, but was viewed with more psychological distance than previously - as a choice between two modes of behaving; fix mode and coaching mode:

Megan: I think I'm more mindful of, putting things back to people. So, you know, Danielle's question *again*. You know, 'well tell me how you would tell somebody else to manage a problem like that?' or instead of me going into very quickly, fix mode. I

go into more of, 'well let's talk about it, and let's see whether you can come up with some solutions to move it forward'. Instead of me coming up with solutions to move it forward for them.

The use of fixing within social work generally also began to be viewed more philosophically, with most of the social workers looking back over their careers with the realisation that the hitherto unquestioned drive to fix others could now be replaced by the coaching method of facilitating others to make progress on their own terms:

Kathy: when I'd first become a social worker I was very much focused on the practical things that I could fix i.e. her foster placement and where she was living and stuff. . . You know what I mean you've just come out of Uni and you're very eager to like get into all the social work and you're still very eager to fix people. . . You *go in with*, 'I'm going to fix these people, rah rah rah.' Six, 12 months later you actually find that you don't fix people whatsoever, you know and sometimes you can make things *worse*. It's *okay* that things have not completely been fixed. It's okay to have to go in there and one thing has changed and you step back out again. That's absolutely okay, acceptable. Rather than, you have to go in there and you have to fix everything. . . Because what you find is you go in there and you start off with thinking, right there's two problems in this family. I go in there, right I've fixed problem one, I've fixed problem two. Oh there's now a problem three four and five. Right, okay get on with that. And before you know it, you know, you've been working

with families for years, months, years . . . But I'm not here to fix it. I'm not here to

get you to there. You're there to get you to there'.

Accounts indicate that the heightened awareness of the urge to fix, epiphanies about its

redundancy as a helping strategy, and the positive experience of its deliberate disruption

during coaching resulted in the social workers breaking with fixing as their customary method

of interaction with service users and colleagues:

Sophie: You know, you can say what - you can do what you normally do and you can

say what you normally say and it goes in one ear and out the other, and you can see

that process happening. Or you can flip it and you can use a coaching approach, and

it's - you can almost see the confusion! What is this social work anyway?!

5.2.2 The Default Position: Agenda-Led Practice & Telling People What to Do

Telling, directing, ordering, enquiring and advising was viewed as the default method of

communication for social workers - which as social work *coaches* they had to actively resist.

Much of their time as social workers was spent dealing with crises that required the

transmission of clear instructions to 'fix' issues in short timescales, often with the threat of

enforcement of a consequence if service users did not comply. For supervisees and colleagues

it was quicker to be directive than to allow time for their learning, which as social work

coaches they acknowledged as a short term and short-sighted solution as it created a

frustrating dependency on them for answers:

Ben: in terms of social work it's easy to default to your standard position, of giving advice and guidance and that's the easy option, because that's what we always have to do and that's the way we've practiced for many years. And, it's just the easy option to tell somebody to do it in a certain way. But we know that actually that doesn't always work, or when you do that you, almost breed a culture where, I can think of one person in particular who, if I'd have continued, to work with, or continued to manage, I would have had to, do something to break that cycle, almost of dependency. I used to joke that this person had worn a groove in the carpet . . . like I say the default position and the *easiest* thing to do is say is 'oh just go do that. Just go do that''

Kathy: Before, when you're offering people solutions, nine times out of 10, you're part of that solution - you know, because you're offering yourself up, you know, to do this or do that. Whereas actually when you, when you're taking a coaching approach, that person has come up with their own solutions. So you've actually left them to it rather than jumping in there and directing, you taking that step back.

The data revealed that all the social workers felt that their habitual social work practice had been very agenda-led by the need to obtain information and answers in as short a time as possible. This was linked to time scarcity and the need to feel in control but was also linked to the drive to fulfil organisational and statutory processes and requirements. As a result, the language they used within this practice had become a standard 'spiel', which was concerned with transmitting this agenda and which inevitably contained undertones of negativity and

blame for things not done. One social work coach, Megan, described this as somehow infecting the interactions between social workers and service users:

Megan: I think we contaminate a little bit, to fit whatever box we need to fit back at the office. To fit whatever box the government wants us to fit. To give us the statistics that we need to . . .

Contrasts were articulated in the data between the timbre, pace and pitch of coaching language and the overly rational tone of many commonly used social work phrases, which were likely to stoke resistance:

 Esme: Coaching kind of, taught me that, that actually, this is a better way of them finding their own solutions. They might not be the solutions you *want* them to be, but it's better for someone to try and work it out themselves in't it than to be told 'I think I you should do this, you need to do that'. It's, it's those, it's that language as well: 'I think you should. You need to'. If someone tells me that if I've got a problem, you've lost me straight away.

Some of the social workers reflected ruefully on their previous practice where their agenda had prevailed as they felt they had dictated terms, asked closed questions and even told service users the answers to questions as they did not have patience to wait for them to respond. Social worker Jane considered some of her previous failures to engage families and recognised that the directive language she had used had not helped them to own a shared agenda for change through generating their own solutions.

As the research progressed all the social workers found opportunities to put the conventions of their social work conversations to one side. Accounts reveal that they incorporated more coaching questions and language into their practice in their social work roles and saw uncovering the service users' agendas as pivotal to effecting change:

Sophie: I'm much more conscious now of trying to say to people "What do you want from me? You know, what do you want from you? What do you want from your life? What are your goals? How can we, you know, work together for that?"

Being more fluid and flexible, less dictatorial and problem focused became seen as the way to prompt new thinking, which was cemented through grateful comments from coaching interactions:

Sophie: I had some really good feedback from that in terms of "Oh, that was really helpful. That's the first opportunity I've have to think about that, I've not thought about" and I was like, "Well, I haven't told you anything you've got there yourself just by using some questions" "Oh I don't think I did that very well" "So, what would it look like if it had been different?" "Oh well, I would have done x y & z" alright and then starting to build in that way. And so that for me as well, was quite, 'Oh, I'm helping' and sometimes I can feel I'm kind of telling a bit when I help people, and when I support staff. And that was really nice to kind of feel that I can do this without feeling like I'm, telling.

It was evident that using the coaching approach had introduced the novel option of *not* instructing and trying to fix service users. This enlightening notion was viewed as having the potential to turn even hostile confrontations into productive (if unconventional) coaching conversations:

Sophie: I remember, Sarah in one of the early assessment sessions kind of being a bit "Urhh, and what we're just gonna do, we're gonna go out and see people and they tell us to fuck off? How's coaching going to help with that?!" [laughter]. Well, and it, but it stuck with me, my brain ticked over that for quite a while and actually the conclusion I've come to is I think coaching is ideal for that. "Okay. So what you want – what I'm hearing that you want is for me to fuck off. How many ways can you think you might be able to get me to fuck off? What's it going to look like when I've fucked off you know? What do you want out of that? What does me fucking off get you?" you know. "Well, it gets me this. And I don't have you knocking on my door" you know. You know it opens a conversation . . . You know actually I find that easier to respond to because I don't go into, "Well, I can't fuck off because I'm here for your kids" which tends to be the standard social work response, um into, you know, it's now "okay. Well, we can work on that then. So, what do you get out of me going away? Alright, so you want X, Y and Z." Then we've got conversation about something other than me fucking off. Brilliant, love it!

It was acknowledged by all the social workers, however, that initiating coaching-style practices within their social work roles was not appropriate in all circumstances, specifically

where child protection risks were a paramount concern and where authoritative 'telling' was indeed necessary.

5.2.3 It's Difficult Without Your Tick-box: The Infiltration of Social Work Process & Mindset into Coaching

Social workers often commented, in early focus groups and when they began to coach, about their difficulty in tolerating the ambiguity and openness of coaching, and the lack of a linear, systematic process to follow. In one such focus group Megan asked for a flow chart of a typical coaching session so she could map a process to follow, but then acknowledged that this was an attempt to calm her anxiety about her lack of familiarity with coaching by trying to impose a social work-type process upon it. Accounts indicate that it was hard for the social workers to transcend their process driven mindset and this infiltrated their coaching experiences:

Megan: It feels difficult. Without your little tick box. And thinking in your head 'I've not asked this question, I'm not asked about school'. And there would be, I wouldn't say awkward silences, but there'd be silences where I was dying to like, say something. But that was Daisy's time to think about what she wanted to say to me. And then she would start talking again . . . I think the hardest thing for me was, I would come away from a visit with, satisfaction that particularly for Daisy, she'd, she'd identified some goals and how we could achieve those goals. But if I was a social worker I'd come out thinking well that's been a waste of a visit I've not ticked x, y and z box. And then I'd put myself under pressure to think, oh my God, how am I going to go back to the office and say to my manager "I visited Daisy but I didn't

check her bedroom because we got talking about, and the, the, it didn't seem appropriate then to say, oh come on Daisy, let's go look at your bedroom" so I think because we weren't case accountable you could let that go . . .

As Megan refers to here, the lack of case accountability was seen to be key to the social workers thinking and behaving differently with service users and being able to distance themselves from the infiltration of social work processes during coaching sessions. The absence of prior historical knowledge about service users was an initial source of frustration to social workers Ben and Danielle, who relied upon knowing as much background information in advance of meeting a service user and were thus tempted to consult the local authority electronic system about them. It proved especially difficult when service users revealed information that, in their social work roles, they could have taken action to improve:

Danielle: How to not, how to not be a social worker. But it's hard isn't it. And it's just hard isn't it, and it was, but when you've got a vulnerable child you know, a vulnerable kid and you just feel for him and you just wanna do, what you can don't you? And that, well that's not social work that's anybody'd help, but. There was stuff he was saying like practical stuff that could've really just easily. You know if you were his social - he didn't go to school because he didn't have any black trousers. Well as his social worker you'd just go to the office and say, "Take him out and go and get him some black trousers. And charge it to us if you need to if you haven't got any money left". Do you know what I mean, but you can't get involved in that kind of stuff. And it's like, it's hard not to do that. And when he's really, really upset about,

not knowing his background and not knowing what's going on and why he's in care, not knowing what's happened in his life. That's like a basic social worker task. I didn't know it cos I'd obviously not read his file I knew what he'd told me about his life. But, to me I just wanted to go back, read the file and say this is, this is the situation.

For other social workers, not knowing the case history was a liberating experience that freed them from pre-conceived notions about their service users and allowed them to arrive at coaching sessions agenda and process-free without tasks to enact. The established habit of preparing for social work visits by organising paper tools to elicit the service user's voice – but based on the social worker's agenda - was soon referred to as being 'social work prepared'. This was described as a kind of practical back-up or psychological armour for the social workers to keep visits with service users on track with their agenda and to provide them with options of activities to *do* to achieve the outcome of their visit. This also served to guard against silences in conversations that they were uncomfortable with and felt the urge to fill. This quickly surfaced during initial focus groups as a method of preparation that was not very suited to coaching:

Danielle: I was just in social work mode - when I - when I was in there, and it was on my mind, ''Oh what - like what can I - what can I do? What have I got with me to go through or what sheets have I got that I can do?" . . . I was like "this is about me, can you tell me a little bit about you?" and then I just went on into this whole thing and then I thought I haven't got a bit of paper for that! [Laughter] "Can you fit into any of these categories please?!"

Being 'social work prepared' was viewed by the social workers as significantly different from being 'coaching prepared', which involved creating distance from their social work role by finding time to prepare psychologically to fully inhabit the role of coach without the reliance on prior historical information or paper worksheets. The social workers thus moved from the idea of preparing *content* for coaching to preparing a coaching *mindset* and to committing and adapting the psychological resources required. They also felt that, for service users, using paperwork had strong associations with 'being social worked' and such a symbolic reminder was therefore off-putting for them both and was mostly avoided. During coaching sessions the social workers therefore developed a heightened awareness of the social work mindset and its infiltration and effect on coaching, and at times this proved distracting.

How persistent the social workers should be when service users either failed to get back to them, to turn up to coaching sessions or to respond to requests for follow-up sessions was prominent in the data. The voluntary nature of coaching was an important distinction that the social workers were very aware of, and they were conscious of wanting to respect a service user's choice to stay in touch on their terms. Most of the social workers had experience in their roles of 'door stepping' avoidant service users and of being doggedly persistent to achieve and maintain contact with them. This level of persistence needed to be drastically curtailed with service user *coachees* and this blurred the lines of communication and introduced elements of ambiguity for the social workers:

Sophie: I find it really hard. Cos I'm used to being a social worker who, if people don't engage, then you rock up, and you knock on and you go back, and you go back at

another time and you get a message to them via somebody else and - because it, it isn't negotiable. We, we need to see them, we need to see the kids, we need to build that relationship. And then I think maybe I kind of went the other way with coaching in - didn't get a phone call, didn't want to push it. So, just didn't. So I think it went too far, the other way, um. So it, it's for me it's been a difficult balance to strike because I know how persistent I am as a social worker, and that's not appropriate for coaching. But then it's . . . see how far that goes.

Trying to judge how persistent to be continued to be a challenge for the social workers throughout the research.

5.2.4 Bloody Hell, I Never Listen to Anybody! Learning to Listen Differently

The social workers perceived that their listening skills were heightened considerably during scheduled coaching sessions with service user coachees and when using coaching with service users on their caseloads, with colleagues and with family members. These new skills in listening were a source of revelation to all the social workers and it quickly became apparent to them that poor and distorted listening had been a very common feature of their practice until undertaking coaching training. What also emerged repeatedly in the data was that they had carried mistaken assumptions around with them about the excellence of their listening skills, based on associations with their professional identity, highlighted here by Sophie:

> **Sophie:** Because we all thought, "Yeah we're cracking listeners, we're social workers!" And yeah, we are really good at listening, but then we're very, very good at jumping in halfway through listening, with a bit of advice. Um, and that taking time to listen to the whole thing, letting somebody properly stop, evaluating it and feeding it back. And it's that feeding back um, that makes such a difference for relationships, um and how somebody responds to you.

The social workers reflected universally on their former erroneous listening skills, which they had equated automatically with advice-giving within social work. Practising coaching therefore brought a new consciousness of hitherto unnoticed unhelpful listening habits, such as ignoring what they felt was not relevant to their agenda and queuing to speak. Coaching helped them to self-monitor, to calibrate their listening skills and to occupy a state where their own internal listening (listening to one's inner dialogue) was less of an anxious distraction. As beginner coaches, talk of being internally flustered about formulating the right coaching question to ask next was quickly replaced by talk of being absorbed in encounters through listening intently. This absorption manifested itself through examples given by the social workers of time passing very quickly and through the idea of 'being present', to explain their psychological state during coaching sessions. The data indicates that the act of coaching rapidly led the social workers to learn to listen at a much deeper level and to hear others differently. This prompted a new awareness of choices in their behaviours as coaches and in their social work roles. Kathy describes this in relation to a looked after young person she was working with on her caseload where listening differently was instrumental in changing the way she practised:

Kathy: I think previously both, both myself and the carer had not actually listened to her. So she's perhaps she'd been telling us for a while what the, the key issues were, and we'd be focusing on what we thought the issues were, and how we could help her, rather than listening to what she felt the issues were and supporting her with that. So from those, from those sessions I've done with her, I was able to go back to the carer to say look I think we've been approaching this a bit wrong, you know, and so it, it, we, we, stopped focusing so much on the things that we thought were helping. . . So those listening skills. We were sitting in McDonalds at the time! [laughs] But I remember, do you know what I mean, because of actually listening to her, I can remember thinking 'flipin' eck Kathy', I'd missed it. I'd absolutely missed what she was trying to tell us. Um, and I do remember that moment very clearly sat in McDonald's when she was talking. And for me it was like 'Whoa!' you know!

Reading body language, facial expressions and paraphrasing to demonstrate understanding of the speaker's experience, validating their spoken message and checking the accuracy of what had been heard was viewed by the social workers as a foundational component of active, empathic listening. The data revealed paraphrasing to be a wholly new skill for them as experienced social workers, that sometimes felt artificial to use but had a profound and lasting effect on how all of them practised during the research period. The social workers cited that paraphrasing paradoxically reduced the pressure on them to remember everything in a visit, as more focused concentration and frequent playing back what they had heard improved their recall. It also helped them to obtain better quality, more detailed information from service users during assessments and home visits and enabled them to pay better

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attention to speakers by putting old habits that militated against deep listening, such as copious note taking, to one side.

5.3 Theme 3. *Bouncing Down the Street!* Re-energising the Drive to Make a Difference

This theme centres on the rejuvenation of the social workers' practice through their formal and informal coaching experiences. Sub-theme 1. conveys how social workers were able to reconnect with their professional values and feelings of having made a difference as a result of coaching. Sub-theme 2. centres on the evidence of coaching working to affect modest transformative changes in service users, which social workers perceived themselves. Subtheme 3. outlines how letting go of the attributes of power associated with social work during coaching interactions led to a tangible sense of empowerment for the social workers and service users.

5.3.1 This is What We Came into Social Work to Do: Fulfilling Vocational Aspirations

All but one of the coaching relationships resulted in the social workers feeling like they had made some kind of difference to the people they were coaching (the one relationship where this was not the case was where the service user felt they were not yet ready for coaching). All animatedly described how using coaching had generated highly positive feelings of exhilaration, excitement and hope that enabled them to energetically reconnect with their original social work intent to help produce change in others:

Kathy: I came out thinking, we were in Halifax and I came out, walking down the street and I felt really good. I felt, you know, like with a renewed, with a renewed energy kind of thing. I was like- I-I-I felt myself bouncing down the street cos actually, you know, something had worked, you know. I felt like I'd-I'd achieved something, something were going somewhere, you know- that- that- that there was something happened.

This extended to the belief that using coaching created opportunities for to them to reaffirm their original vocational values and aspirations as social workers:

Sophie: I think it's-it's helped me, kind of go back to that a little bit almost, um, making a difference and, feel a bit more hopeful about maybe affecting some positive change sometimes . . . almost feel a bit more hopeful about my own ability as a practitioner, to support families, to make positive changes that are lasting . . . it feels exciting, it feels like, doing something, a bit different. Um, it feels like, it's given me a way to align some of those ethics and values, that I got in my social work degree.

Paradoxically, *coaching* was described as the kind of practice the participants had come into social work to do. Danielle revealed that she didn't want the coaching sessions to end as they were such a source of fulfilment and professional satisfaction:

Danielle: I really enjoyed my coaching. I enjoyed the time that I, went and did my coaching sessions, cos you came away feeling like this is what I always wanted to do as a social worker. As a social worker you wanna be able to give someone that time to just sit and listen. And not be rushing off or not have a form to fill out or not have to do an assessment session or whatever it might be. That, that's I came thinking 'Oh do you know what, it was really nice to spend time with a child today?' And just listen to what they have to say.

The experience and feeling of making a difference to others was not one that happened frequently for the participants in their social work roles. For Ben, the feeling of making a difference when using coaching reminded him of when he had been a student thirteen years previously, which was the last time he could recall feeling so positive about the impact of his practice. Using a coaching approach therefore produced a buoyant, rarely felt sense of achievement, which re-ignited their motivation to have a transformational influence on others in their working lives.

5.3.2 *It Works*: Perceiving Movement & Change Through Coaching

The social workers articulated direct evidence of small, transformative changes in those whom they formally coached, mostly after three or four coaching sessions. They described modest but meaningful signifiers of their service users' progress, which often happened in between coaching sessions rather in the sessions themselves. For example, Daisy was said to be no longer physically attacking staff by the end of coaching, and Mason was taking action to be more sociable and to manage his anger more effectively. Emma was described as having

achieved control over her angry outbursts. Social worker Jane was able to outline numerous changes made by 65-year-old Angela on her goal 'to find more time for me', after a reported ten years of unproductive social work involvement:

Jane: Because I remember thinking, when I asked her 'what would she want to do for herself?' She couldn't come up with anything. Absolutely nothing could she come up with. And, and then, this third session, the last one. She'd been out with a friend, who she'd been friends with 30 years whose husband had just died. So it were just - I know it's - little bits isn't it? But actually, I don't think she had thought about it. . . . going out with friends, Women's Space, groups. And now she's signed herself onto more things for herself, at school. She's going on two mindfulness courses! . . . what she said and "I've realized, Jane", she said, that were the outcome for me, at the end, "You're right, you know when you've been trying to help me." Help me, that's what she said! [laughs]. "I don't do anything for myself." So she's picked that up, as well, from mindfulness. So she's now going onto some more . . . So there's that third session I came away thinking do you know what? I might have achieved something here. Small. But, for her, it's probably big . . . Cos you can see, that you can change people. Or you can change the way they think, and probably, uhm, make them feel better about themselves, or they have a plan don't they? So, and it works.

One of the social workers who retained a caseload during part of the research used coaching with a young person in a foster placement. She described coaching as helping her to forge a more understanding, less dependent relationship with the young person, which in turn led to the young person behaving in a more balanced way:

Kathy: I think they gave her a lot more insight. By the time I'd finished working with her, she was much more stable. And I think that she'd stopped beating herself up so much because we'd had that conversations and it was around her dad and her relationship with her dad . . . And she was investing more in her foster placement. Which meant that she was much more stable, which meant that she wasn't going missing as much, which meant that she developed the relationship with a foster carer . . . So she'd moved from a semi-independent living arrangement whereby she was missing almost every night and the police were being called and she was taking drugs and alcohol and she was having sex. Within-within four months we'd got her into a foster placement, where she was doing voluntary work, she was going on holiday with her foster carers, the missing episodes were very, very few and far between. She was um, on contraceptives, you know contraception and she, she'd got herself into a relationship with a boyfriend rather than having sex willy nilly. So I think she moved herself on quite a bit, from where we'd originally started.

The social workers also relayed how using coaching questions and approaches with colleagues and supervisees had given them the opportunity to think differently when circular thinking had blocked them from seeing how they could move forward:

Ben: We were just going round and round and round and I thought well we're not getting anywhere really let's try something completely different. And that seemed to work. It, it she thought very differently, well she told me she thought very differently about the situation once we'd left.

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All the social workers were able to describe the positive effect of using an intentional informal coaching approach spontaneously (outside of formal coaching sessions with service users) either to diffuse hostility in a difficult home visit or in a meeting. An example was cited of coaching being used to manoeuvre past defensive reactions and produce more collaborative responses with substance-using parents whose children were at risk of removal. It was also viewed as contributing to the accelerated progress of a very complex case:

Sophie: So there'd been, domestic violence, mother's profound mental health problems, and all of that kind of being swept under, and these kids just felt like - and I walked in and they were like, "We don't want anything to do with you." And using quite consciously actually, using some of the coaching stuff just to say: "Okay, well what do you want?" you know, 'What, what do you want? What do you want to happen? Um, and then, you know, being quite non-threatening talking about goal stuff cause obviously we've got teenagers moving towards - and all very bright and quite focused in various different ways despite their issues. Um, you know doing some of the goal stuff, so the non-threatening, being supportive rather than I think, and it was perceived as supportive from what I understand from them as well that it wasn't somebody coming in and going, "Right how are you doing? You need to behave yourself better at school and stop giving your mum a hard time." And then going away again. It was somebody taking interest. And then how is that relationship the use of the empathic listening and they, you know: "Sounds like when you talk about mum you don't seem too confident that she's gonna be doing X Y and Z" or something and then using that finally drew out what was going on in the house. Which was horrendous, mother trying to kill herself every second day, and these

kids just managing it. Um, but that drew all of that out that, *it hadn't come out before,* and I genuinely don't think if I had - I think I would have got it - if I, you know if it'd been my case and I've been running it, and I you know I'd had sort of a few months? But I think using some of that coaching stuff, I think got me there much quicker this was in a space of two weeks.

Coaching was also valued as a technique to help people to open up and self-generate solutions. In one case it had such a positive effect that it inspired an internal coachee to seek coaching training themselves:

Jane: The second one [internal coachee], they were less emotional and then it really got much better after that. They were coming back and giving me really clear examples of how they'd, changed their behaviour. How it had made them feel happier, how it made them feel happier in their work and in their own life. So then that's, it's nice to hear that. I genuinely believe that's, well the manager gave me a bit of feedback, obviously they didn't talk about what happened. But she said she was much more confident, self-assured. So I do believe that, I don't know, that something helped . . . On a positive note, she's going to go and do coaching training, so they must see something in it must they, so?

Overall, the strong view of the social workers, borne out in the data, was that coaching worked by helping people take incremental steps forwards in their lives. It was repeatedly described as an approach that promoted confidence and positivity and that provided a means to move beyond stuck behaviours and unhelpful ways of thinking.

5.3.3 Letting Them Lead: Ceding Social Power & Control

As novice coaches, social workers in the study could no longer claim expert status to give them authority and legitimise their role. They were very aware of their lack of experience and their desire to have fidelity to their coaching training and to 'do a good job' of coaching was taken very seriously by them. This meant not dictating prescriptive tasks for coachees to complete and locating the power and control to define and meet goals absolutely with the coachee. The data suggests that the social workers consciously ceded the power associated with their social work status during coaching by deliberately avoiding behavioural habits that denoted power, such as leading the agenda, dominating the conversation and defining the outcomes of their engagement with their coachee. The mantra 'Don't lead, don't lead, don't lead' was used by some to remind themselves that this behaviour was not appropriate in the coaching relationship. This ceding of authority was highlighted by Megan in her relationship with service user Daisy as a refreshingly different and more equitable relationship for both of them:

> **Megan:** For Daisy, she, cos I told her I'm brand new to coaching, and that we're just human and I might make mistakes, and I think she quite liked the fact that we were equals, I suppose? Do you know, so I was like, "This is what we're working from. I need to look at this, so that I know that you're getting the very best out of me," and I think she quite liked that I've not come with an agenda, or full of knowledge, that, this is what we're doing, this is how we work round it, and we can move from the, you know, from certain sections, jump around it, but this is what we're, we're doing. And I think she quite liked that.

According to the data, being knowledge-free about the circumstances of the service users was a key element to this sense of greater equality within the coaching interactions. As previously stated in Chapter Three, the background history and chronology of any previous interventions was not known to the social work coaches, which meant that their customary prior knowledge could no longer be a power advantage. As the social workers dispensed with their professional need to know, they noticed that they were able to sit with service users without being triggered by preconceived notions of what goals they should be working on according to their social work history. This was felt to be an empowering experience for the social work coach and service user (see section 6.1.3 '*You Have to Do it This Way:* Comparisons Between the Received Experience of Social Work and Coaching'), as it helped them to feel temporarily emancipated from the tone of their usual social work/service user roles:

> **Sophie:** So, she was known - I don't know the full story. Which is incredibly - liberating! It was so weird to go to into someone's house and, "Just like tell me what you want. Don't tell me anything it's fine" and her face lit up when I said that and she sort of almost physically grew! **. . .** Um, I wasn't frustrated by not knowing the case history, of Gabriella, I just loved it and embraced that. Like, I might want to know but actually. I was like, Freeing! Happy days.

Having no knowledge beyond the service user-completed referral sheet, no agenda, no outcomes, no timescale to meet and no case-holding accountability also allowed the social workers to let go of the control they would normally hold over the trajectory of change in social work encounters. The social workers felt that this primed both them and the service

users for a different encounter where social power was more equitable. However, not being in control of the direction that coaching would take was initially anxiety provoking for the social workers, and they found it challenging to behave differently outside of the tightly controlled and delegated demands of the social work system:

Esme: there's that control element as well, you know you have to let go of that a little bit as well. You can't control this, with social work, it's very controlled and managed, isn't it? And timescales and, you know this has got to be achieved by this time, and, you're very, you've got those constraints. But sometimes that's quite nice, to have that.

Interviewer: Well, it is, it's nice and safe! [laughs]

Esme: Yeah, it's very safe! You've got two weeks to do that! [laughs] This has to be in then! You see, It makes things a lot easier. For us it takes, it kind of - oh it takes that responsibility off us a little bit doesn't it? If that's what someone else is telling me to do I have to do that.

Being allowed to place institutional bureaucracy and digital scrutiny to one side thus sometimes created a perverse vulnerability during coaching, as the protection afforded by them did not apply. According to the data, as they became more experienced with the fluidity of coaching, the challenge provided by this uncertainty was welcomed with the phrase 'it goes where it goes' being added to the 'don't lead' mantra. As the social workers became more familiar and confident with ceding control, they saw the coaching approach as a practical means for them to translate the abstract theoretical concept of empowerment and show it in

their practice. For social worker Sophie, returning power to service users through the coaching approach in her everyday work became a means of holding the outcomes she wanted to achieve on visits more lightly, as well as a way to diffuse the frustrations of those who had been through the social work system many times and who she viewed as having been "social worked to death":

> **Sophie:** "In the past I've probably been more forceful: 'No *I need you to stay and talk to me, come on we need to sort this out I need to know what's going on*' and actually it almost gave me permission to go: 'Right fair doo's, erm, you don't want to talk to me today that's absolutely fine. What I'd like to do is come back. Erm, would you like to talk to me if I came back and you were, not trying to do your makeup or you weren't still in bed?' It kind of almost gave me permission to do that. And *that* on its own I think is, quite powerful in relationship building as well, so.
>
> **Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Because you're coming back on their terms, not on yours?
>
> **Sophie:** Yeah, yeah it's, it's that shift from, and I think that's what the whole coaching things been about for me really is that shift from the doing to, to the working with.

This standing back from coercive power and demanding change became preferential in the social workers' everyday practice, and using a coaching approach was viewed by all as a way

to increase ownership and support service users in a more receptive, respectful, empowered, mutual relationship.

5.4 Theme 4. *Head Swapping*: Conflicted & Agile Professional Identities

This theme reveals the key tensions that adopting a coaching mindset had on the established professional identities of experienced social workers. Sub-theme 1. proposes that the psychological and practical adaptations social workers had to make in order to coach required an acute separation of role and suggested a conflict in identity. Sub-theme 2. suggests that social workers fashioned a more agile identity that was congruent with both their social work and coaching personas. Sub-theme 3. Indicates that the identity shifts in some of the social workers were both commended and remarked upon critically by those around them.

5.4.1 Two Worlds & Two Heads: Compartmentalising Social Work & Coaching

The social workers spoke frequently of having a 'coaching head' and a 'social work head', which suggested that two very different mindsets were required to accommodate the difference in roles as a social worker and as a social work *coach*. Parallels with this experience were regularly drawn between them and an old children's TV character who they were all familiar with called Worzel Gummidge, who was a scarecrow who swapped heads for different occasions:

Ben: It's about switching off from what I've been doing, to, almost putting a - it's like Worzel Gummidge isn't it when he puts a different head on – get my coaching head

out and pop it on! . . . And I think for me sometimes I have to sort of flick a little switch to say 'right coaching mode now' . . . I feel like I need time and space because for me it's like, you know like I say switching heads.

This metaphorical 'head swapping' from being a social worker to a social work coach required a temporary identity shift that was sometimes unsettling and difficult for the participants as it required them not only to behave differently but to actively put aside and separate from the duties of their circumscribed roles:

Jane: But you've got your social work head on haven't you, your family support head on really thinking, 'Umm she needs support with this, that and the other'. Actually, I wasn't there for that. But it's hard not to get caught up in it

The mandatory requirements of their professional social work roles presented a conflict with their voluntary commitment to volunteer service users, which added to the potential for role confusion and placed a further pressure upon them. Below Megan describes the strain of going from an unplanned child protection investigation to a planned coaching session:

Megan: So like a section 47 comes in, I've just come out of a medical at Pinderfields and then I'm thinking, "I've got to be there for six o'clock. I don't want to be late, I don't want to cancel her." And there is no downtime because your head is still in the section 47, you've got all your stuff to do, and really, it's, it - coaching is something that I wouldn't need on that day when something like that's happened.

Does that make sense? Because I've - in my head I want to go back to't office and get all the stuff I've done *before I've gone to coaching*, on the system, or speak to somebody and I find that really - I found that really hard.

A stark contrast was drawn in the data between the other-worldly reality of formal coaching sessions and the harsh reality of social work, which was sometimes experienced as disorientating when there was inadequate time for adjustment between different 'heads':

Esme: I think you do need that time. It was almost like two worlds, so for an hour, 'oh, here I am, I'm coaching, you know, this is nice, I'm listening, doing all that'. Bang as soon as I'm out of the door, I'm back in another world and that's forgotten. You know, I'm back in - I'm back to my job, back to the chaos, back to being a social worker. I never have that time to sort of reflect.

One social worker spoke of a time when their internal 'social work head' could not be switched off as she needed to impart some information to the service user vital to their welfare. She informed the service user that she was temporarily stepping out of the coaching role to do this, but she experienced this interruption as very dislocating. All the social workers spoke of experiencing a more elevated internal self-monitoring of their thoughts and use of language during coaching sessions. One even spoke openly to the service user she was coaching about the internal conflict she was experiencing with her different 'heads' in the moment:

Megan: I'm like how do I get out of this? And I think that was the point I kind of said "I need to just have a minute. Because, I feel like we're going around in circles, my social work head's kicking in, I'm wanting to give you advice and that's not what I'm here to do. I want to help you find your own."

Flexing their identity to think and behave as a coach - or as a social worker – was therefore an adaptive challenge that persisted throughout the study as both worlds continued to collide.

5.4.2 Moving from Social Worker to Coach: Flexing & Merging Personas

As coaching sessions progressed the social workers employed deliberate psychological and practical strategies to enable them to flex their identity more easily. These included clearly separating the parts of their days dedicated to coaching from their social work roles by walking to coaching sessions instead of driving, allocating time to sit in their car or in a café beforehand to prepare, and seeing service user coachees at the end of the day when they could take more time and slow down the pace of the encounter:

Sophie: Um, the first time I went to see her, I walked up from the office. So headphones in, wasn't in the car getting annoyed with road rage. It's not far. Um, so yeah, that gave me a little bit of separation between - and also something, I don't walk to visits as a social worker. . . . for me just the fact that I was going, you know, with Gabriella I was going into her house and didn't know her, and didn't know anything about her. That was - that was almost enough to trigger for me. This is very

different and behave very differently. Um, I still made sure I walked up and gave

myself a bit of breathing room out of the office and everything. Um but I didn't find

it as . . . hard as I thought it would, as I thought I would.

Megan: If you're having a bad day, I could bag the bad day, put myself in a different

box like Danielle said, so I'd go get a coffee, put myself into coaching head, go do my

coaching and have relatively nice coaching sessions with Daisy. And then go back to

the chaos. So there were positives about, escaping a little bit.

These strategies helped them to flip their personas and to tolerate and align the

contradictions in them more easily in one composite identity. The data revealed that towards

the end of the research most of the social workers had a greater confidence and poise in using

a coaching approach, and this became evident in their everyday practice:

Jane: I'm thinking about coaching people all the time. But, I think, it's come out as,

do you know what I mean, it's like a natural thing, I don't have to think about it! . .

. Whereas, I did have to think about it. I used to have to think about it all the time. I

used to have to think 'What is it I say next?' Almost like I were thinking, 'Oh god, I

could say a wrong thing' and it wasn't that. It's just I used to think – 'How do I word

it now?' So, I am going to get the right answers, or the right thought processes, for

somebody. Whereas I find it more now I just say it.

This suggests that the coaching mindset had become internalised by them as they customised elements of coaching attitudes and behaviours, honed through coaching interactions, into their social work identity:

> **Sophie:** I almost find it quite hard to separate, the two *now* because I think I'll probably end up being a social worker who coach, who coaches in my practice approach.

5.4.3 Have You Had a Head Transplant or Summat?

According to the reports of some of the social workers, integrating coaching into their social work role was perceived by some colleagues not only as a fundamental change in the way they approached things but in *who they were as people*. This was most pronounced in the data for social worker Jane, whose new passion for using coaching in all her working relationships rattled a colleague who questioned what she perceived as an about-face to their usual like-minded way of interacting:

> **Jane:** I've had the *funny* bit about, one of my colleagues who I'm closer to I suppose as a DTM [Department Team Leader] said, "Get those headphones off your head, Jane and become normal again". I said, "I beg your very pardon!" What she meant is, I'm like "Well, why don't you do, what, what are you doing about it then? Why are you moaning?" And she went, "Oh, I preferred you as you were."

> **Interviewer:** So, what did you think?

Jane: I'm not going back! "Get your headphones off." But I thought, actually, what she means, "I prefer it when you weren't like that" She says, "What's up with you, why have you become like that, why have you become like that? I said, "Well, I feel better in myself for becoming like that." "Yeah, no, but where's all your fight gone?," I said "It's still there, I just don't say it in the same way." That's what they think though, I've lost that - I haven't, I just say things differently . . . But, I think, my relationships with staff have changed. Just because I've used it more, and I don't think they're aware I'm doing it. Well, I know they're not.

Interviewer: So, does that mean that your relationships are better? Or -

Jane: They're better in some terms. And then, some are different, because I think people are thinking, Erm, one person said [Laughs}, "Have you had a head transplant or summat?"

The head transplant analogy is very close to the analogy of head swapping used by the social workers themselves. This suggests that using coaching not only had an effect on how the social workers experienced their self-identity, it also affected how their identity was perceived by others. For Jane, transplanting her old mindset meant she no longer felt the same degree of anger and frustration with the bureaucratic system and started to challenge the idea that she and others had no influence or control within it. She did this by reframing the discourse in her team through the regular use of coaching language and active questions such as 'what do you want?'. This placed the onus on the coachee to name action that was the *positive opposite* of complaining, which shifted the focus from passively waiting for the environment to change. Bucking the trend of cultural negativity caused some team members

to look at her cynically and critically, but to others, she reported, she gained a new reputation of being 'serene' and supportively challenging. This offers an insight into the impact of a coaching mindset on professional relationships when that mindset represents an alien way of thinking and acting.

5.5 Theme 5. Everyday Infiltration: Ripples Beyond the Study Brief

The ripples from using coaching approaches outside of formal coaching sessions is the subject of this theme. It sets out how coaching moved from being a sidebar in the social workers' roles to an approach that infiltrated many aspects of their professional and personal lives. Sub-theme 1. outlines how using informal coaching permeated and benefited the social workers' professional lives. Sub-theme 2. exposes the conscious and increasingly common use of informal coaching within the social workers' personal relationships, to benefit others. Sub-theme 3. details the social workers' projections of how coaching could evolve within practice structures and how coaching training could enhance social work education and development in the future.

5.5.1 *I Have Conversations I Wouldn't Have Had*

As the study progressed it emerged that the use of coaching was not being restricted to the formal coaching sessions with service users as set out in the study design. The data revealed that the social workers used coaching language, questions and models informally in supervision with experienced and new members of staff, with students, in management meetings, with service users on their caseloads, during duty visits and during assessment

sessions. They used it in planned ways and opportunistically when they thought a new approach could reinvigorate thinking:

> **Jane:** I think it works for everybody doesn't it really? I've, observed myself, making it work in meetings, and with staff, and with Angela, and in my own life . . . I found it really useful with staff especially, uh, when you're looking at the work they're doing with families. . . you'll get people who are stuck with cases. Well, I've done all this, and if nothing works - yeah, but what do you want? What do you want them to do? And what you asking them to do? And they go, "Oh, yeah, perhaps I am, perhaps I haven't made it very clear" . . . so I found it really useful for that . . . I know it's basic questions, but when you put in a way of coaching and you say it in a different way, people then are like "I see" and are able to think what my parts to play in that then?

Coaching conversations became interwoven into much of their practice and were cited as stimulating them to have a more patient, slower-paced dialogue with those they worked with and those they worked alongside, which also provided reciprocal benefits to them:

> **Sophie:** the skills and techniques I've picked up from coaching . . . have permeated a lot actually through, because I did start running a few cases, more than a few cases, over the last sort of six weeks I was at Nothern LA. I'm really prone to, frustration and a lack of patience sometimes, endless with the families [laughs] I work with - but sometimes with colleagues who, you just think, "You're grown adults, come on." Um, it's, it's really helping me kind of have those, those conversations in this, that way and not be quite so, "Just shut up." . . . I do use it at work sort of talking to

people about cases and about how they feel, particularly when having sort of informal chats with people about, motivation and . . . I have conversations that I wouldn't have had previous - um - with people, so.

The use of coaching approaches was also described as having a ripple effect on the way some of the recipients of informal coaching then went to replicate it in the way they worked with service users:

Kathy: I've spoken about coaching approach. You know what I mean, some of techniques, so I think that they've, you know what I mean, they have been able to use that. And one, one erm, social worker in particular, with a dad that she's been working with, you know what I mean? With the some of the stuff that we've been using in supervision, I've been, as if - as if she was a dad, you know what I mean? So I've picked some of the questions and then she, she um, said to me "well actually Kathy, I tried that - you know when you said to me about such and such. Well I actually asked him and we had a really, really - that's the most he's ever spoken to me". So, yeah, I-I think that by me using it, you know, I think that it's, you know, that for them it's something different. Um and a different way of-of-of, you know approaching people.

Reported benefits for service users who received this 'infiltrated' coaching style approach from non-coaches were that it calmed irate and violent parents, promoted 'aha' moments of insight, and encouraged agency and collaboration. Using open questions, such as 'what would

it look like if things were a bit different?' during informal coaching with colleagues helped them to envision a different future and new ways of doing things. Modelling a coaching approach and seeing its positive influence led one social work coach to decide to use it as the bedrock of her leadership when she gained her first management position during the study. This was viewed as a radical departure from the 'command and control' style of management that her new team were used to, and she purposely used coaching with them to grow trust and confidence in their abilities and decision making. The use of coaching approaches therefore moved from the narrow margins of the study design to being used much more broadly by the social workers and those whose practice they influenced.

Interestingly, two of the social workers engaged in formal coaching of their own during the study and all of them cited their coaching training in helping them to obtain new positions in and outside of the local authority. Some spoke passionately about the impact of using coaching, which was described as having 'significant' and 'profound' effects on them and provoking internal 'shifts' in their thinking. Towards the end of the study coaching was commonly referred to with a mixture of affection and regret for the chaotic and limiting context in which it took place:

> **Sophie:** I absolutely adore it. Um and I think I just - yeah, disappointed it I haven't had the chance to embrace it in the way I would like to.

This suggests that despite the chronically uncertain and besieged environment in which coaching was trialled, it developed into a desired choice in their practice and a driver for growth and change in their own lives.

5.5.2 I Find Myself Doing it: Incorporating Coaching into Personal Encounters

The data strongly indicates that using coaching techniques became commonplace in some of their personal relationships. During the initial focus groups the social workers spoke frequently of intentionally using coaching techniques to re-direct communication in their relationships towards personal goal setting, imagining a different future and to help the person being coached feel like they had experienced the comfort of empathic listening. Examples mentioned included encounters with friends, children of friends, their own parents and partners:

Kathy: Aww I've used it loads! [laughs]. . . I think one of the I first times I'd used it was sat in a car, in ASDA car park! With a colleague, and it was a personal thing um, but this colleague was often coming to me with her dilemmas, you know of her family life. And um, I knew I was doing it, because it-it to me it was a different approach that I had not tried before. So um, we were, we were sat talking so it just started to bring in - so some of the questions and stuff that we had been taught. Um, and just remembering not to problem solve. You know what I mean, being very conscious of myself, of not to offer solutions. That I think was my first kind of encounter. Um, and I think I don't know if it was that same evening or the following

evening I was in the bedroom with my husband! [laughter] And again very similar

scenario where he'd be unravelling this whole woe and normally I'd be jumping in

there with 'why don't you do this, well I'll do this and I can do this' and uh, you know

all this problem solving. So again you know it was like, 'Hmm let's have a go at it of

trying something different.' So again it was just about me being more mindful about

some of the things I was asking and perhaps making sure that I wasn't problem

solving. And that conversation with my husband worked really well, it didn't end up

like an argument like it normally would do! [chuckles] Actually he ended up - he was

in tears by the end of it, I think it was because I wasn't offering solutions, and he

could see actually there was things that he needed to do? Rather than him

depending upon *me* to come out with the answers, he was thinking more. So I think

it was a more in-depth discussion than we've had previously. . . *That*, that I would, I

would definitely say, was one of the big, biggest, things. Erm, Making my husband

cry, as daft as it sounds! [laughs] I felt that was a really good conversation, you know,

and he hadn't picked up that I was social working him as he calls it. You know, in

previous conversations 'stop social working me!' was actually to me it was a- it was

a really good conversation and I've continued to do, have that. You know, when

we've got in those situations. I've continued to stop trying to rescue him and offer

solutions. So I think that's benefited our relationship even.

Using coaching also enabled some of the social workers to re-set the habitual role they played

within their close relationships, as it liberated them from being the provider of answers or

being responsible for taking action to resolve problems on their behalf. Drawing attention to

the maladaptive patterns and roles that they and their partners re-enacted during arguments

was emphasised by two of the social workers. They described using their coaching training on Karpman's Drama Triangle (2011) and Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1968) models to try to shift their positions from relating in 'critical parent', 'child' or 'rescuer' ego states to more balanced 'adult' to 'adult' states - although this was not always successful! Over time, using coaching approaches became second nature when addressing some of the issues in their personal relationships and this was positively reinforced as they were able to witness and feel the beneficial impact first-hand:

Sophie: I find myself doing it - I like all the empathic listening stuff, the feeding back and the - so 'it sounds like what you're saying to me is' I find I use it a lot in my personal life, one of my best friend's is permanently having crisis at work and three hours of listening to the same stuff about work . . . it's such a useful way. "So what it sounds like is actually you *want,* you know, that this is an issue for you". I – "it sounds like actually what you want's that" to start and then, "So what would it look like if you had a little bit more of that"? is my favourite type of question, and sort of. But I find it - I'm more conscious about it in my personal life . . . And it's, made, quite, a big, difference. Professionally and personally – I do it to people in my [laughs] personal life now! My fella's, talking about work, and he hates this job at the moment. 'Alright, so what it's sounding to me like . . . is that you're saying that!' [laughter] But he's quite a - he just rants - about how much he hates this job at the moment. And actually that's quite good at just pausing the rants. I've got a bit, slightly for my own sanity. But it is quite good at pausing the rant and just getting him to go, "oh, okay, yeah, I am yeah, yeah I am feeling like that about that, you know, I am mad about this". So I am. So yeah, so that was really - quite - profound.

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And then that - all that stuff about realizing that . . . it can, take the pressure off that

doing to - to people.

This demonstrates that coaching had not only been integrated into their repertoire of professional skills, it had been absorbed into how many of the social workers behaved when they wanted to be supportive to those in their private lives. This cross-over from the professional to the personal indicates that coaching methods had become embedded and embraced in their development as people, not just as practitioners:

Kathy: I think I've grown a lot and I think my confidence has grown a lot, so although I wasn't able to take part in the formal bit of it, I still think I've got a hell of a lot from it.

Sophie: I think I can be a better social worker. Still with that bottom line. And kind of a better human being almost alongside it. [chuckles] If there's the coaching approach integrated into it.

This, in turn, suggests that the felt experience of using coaching had a positive transformational effect on their sense of self and on the tone of their helping intent, although this was more significant for some than others.

5.5.3 Reshaping Child Protection Practice: *The Coaching Contribution*

Throughout the study all the social workers vocalised their enthusiasm for how coaching

enhanced their existing practice. They reflected on their lengthy social work training and the skills it had furnished them with and found it lacking in practical demonstrations of theoretical concepts; such as how to empower someone or how to work with people in ways that increase their capacity to change without a 'fix' imperative. This is where they felt learning about coaching had something new to offer social work education. Their deliberations concluded that the integration of coaching into social work education should go beyond qualification level and should be re-visited during career progression through continuing personal development. The key motivation for training social workers in coaching was not only that they would have a more dynamic range of skills to draw upon, but that service users would have an increased sense of agency and control in the direction of change:

Megan: if I had a job where I didn't have to, work, I did it because I wanted to do it, I would definitely be pushing the coaching model in social work. You know, I would make it my sort of, Eileen Munro, sort of, 'this is how we are doing this from now on. This is how everybody is gonna be trained' because I see the merits and I see the bigger picture. And I think if we were to invest a little in training everybody I think cases would very, quickly start to come down, because we'd supported and coached people in making the right choices, as opposed to dictating what we think are the right choices for them. And that they would own the change of their life, as opposed to us dictating the change.

Aligning social work outcomes with the service users' goals (facilitated through a coaching approach) was seen to be the ideal method for increasing engagement in change behaviours,

although it was agreed that externally imposed change would always incur resistance so it could be a hard ambition to realise. Paradoxically, despite agreement that coaching should be voluntary, young people and parents subject to court-ordered interventions were still considered in the mix of service users who could benefit from a coaching *approach,* as it was felt that the authenticity of interactions during coaching could lead to engagement that went beyond superficial requirements. Even if the outcome was fixed, using coaching techniques in mandated relationships was described with optimism due to the possibility that service users would feel that the process was fairer and more respectful, as social workers would be behaving as more empowering and anti-oppressive practitioners.

Finding the right model for social work and coaching to overlap and co-exist was repeatedly debated. The possibility of social workers incorporating *separate* formal coaching sessions for those *on their own caseload* was discussed at length and dismissed. Complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed for the service user, which would inhibit disclosure and the social worker's stake in the outcome, and prior knowledge would make it very difficult for them *not* to manipulate the goals developed. An impossible and confusing scenario was painted where the social worker had two separate but simultaneous roles with the same parent; acting authoritatively one day and setting out clear expectations for change in line with procedures - and coaching the next day, facilitating self-awareness and self-determination but without the requisite trust and rapport. The practitioner stance and use of power would be very different in each scenario and it was not felt that this could be reconciled. However, it was felt that a coaching *approach* could be used with *some* families on their caseload, and on

assessment and duty visits to new families, that utilised coaching questions, empathic listening and paraphrasing. This would make it possible to focus on a family's change potential without diluting the safeguarding focus or having to manage a contradiction of intention:

Danielle: So you, you couldn't do it on every family that you worked with. Because a lot of the time they don't want you there anyway, they certainly they're not gonna, wanna spend any more time with you than they have to . . . I think you can use it when you're doing your assessments. To . . . look at someone's capacity to change. So when you, you know, you have to do your history stuff in your assessments. And then looking at what they want to be different, what, what they've got available to them to get them to that place, practically or emotionally or whatever. It tells you a lot that.

Utilised in this way coaching training was described as a positive support to social work with a safeguarding mandate, which was in tune with contemporary social work developments around relationship-based and restorative approaches:

Sophie: I think it's a huge complement to practice, because the more you can get people on board or at least understand - they are in control as well and you are looking at capacity to change and things like that and people look at themselves as part of that solution. It's absolutely key.

Distinct benefits in extending the future use of coaching were cited for newly qualified workers to help build their autonomy and confidence in decision making. The data indicated that receiving coaching supervision during the study and/or using coaching techniques with others during supervision had been a penetrating and powerful experience, and this was viewed as a key area where coaching training could add future value. Integrating coaching theory and skills into the training of managers and senior social workers with a supervisory role (practice supervisors, advanced practitioners, practice educators) was widely supported to improve the current transmission-like quality of supervision and put the focus on process aside:

Esme: I think for supervision, it'd be really good. Um, cos that can be very directive as well, can't it? If a manager's very busy, and you've got a caseload of 30, it's 'right you need to, right boom, boom, boom, do this, do this, do this, do that. What do you think?' 'Well, I'll just do what you said.' [laughs]

The idea of social workers having the opportunity to coach service users *independent* of their caseload (akin to the study design) provoked a range of opinions, with some feeling that this was a possibility but with understandable reservations about the stability of the workforce, time limitations and the dogmatic mindset of some social workers. Added to this was the difficulty of operating a separate coaching service given the strength of the efficiency and accountability culture and the absence of a coaching culture within children's social work:

Ben: But you'd have to get rid of the process, driven, culture and the numbers, and the, turnaround of x, y and z and I think you'd have to, you'd have to remove some of the pressure, from people. Erm, because I don't think, like I say I found the coaching session that I did very liberating, erm because there wasn't an agenda, and there wasn't that pressure. And there wasn't that outcome driven, erm sort of process in place, but I think there is for social workers. So I think until we do, something about that, then coaching is just, it's a tool that people can use but it's not something that's embedded in the culture and practice.

From a service user perspective, introducing yet another professional where there is existing multiple service involvement could be experienced as overwhelming and confusing. The data does suggest that scheduled coaching sessions with an independent social work coach would be especially useful for looked after young people, care leavers and vulnerable service users and families who have had long term or repeated social work involvement and require a totally new approach.

5.6. Summary

The goal of this chapter has been to thematically convey the rich experiences of social workers as they began to practise as social work *coaches*. The chapter has drawn together the important findings within five key themes relating to the differences in thinking and behaviour that occurred at the intersection of social work and coaching practice. The findings are data driven and are supported by interviewee accounts that expose how the social workers made

meaning of their experiences of coaching. The themes set out the *internal* psychological tensions and benefits of trying to practise in a new way in formal coaching sessions and the *external* tensions of trying to manage this practically. The data reveals that the social work environment contained cultural and institutional blockers to coaching that comprised time scarcity, competing priorities and a lack of accurate understanding about what coaching meant. These blockers were abruptly magnified by an atmosphere of high organisational anxiety, uncertainty and chaos generated by a failed Ofsted inspection during the study. Paradoxically, this urgent burning platform (Washington, Hacker & Hacker, 2011) for change, combined with newly acquired coaching skills, provided opportunities for some of the social workers to respond in new ways towards colleagues and help those they managed.

Using coaching prompted the interviewees to question the efficacy of their routine social work strategies of telling, advising and fixing and caused them to fundamentally innovate their professional behaviour. Recounting their experiences of coaching, the social workers revealed how they used their newly advanced communication skills to employ empathic listening and paraphrasing alongside the use of coaching language and questions. The evidence points to the social workers developing greater psychological flexibility as a result of their experiences of using coaching approaches. This was due to their direct engagement in alternatives to authoritarian, authoritative and transmission-based practice with service user coachees and with parents and young people in their social work roles.

Whilst the data contains many examples of a coaching mindset infiltrating and shaping their social work practice, it also indicates instances of discomfort and challenge when participants

needed to silence and separate from some of the attitudes and behaviours indicative of a social work mindset. Suspending their focus on procedures, process requirements, controlling outcomes and persistence of contact proved to be a considerable ask when coaching volunteer service users. This initially produced a conflict in identity for participants as they tried to juggle the live dilemma of who they were prior to a formal coaching session, who they were during it and who they were after it. As they became more adept at switching roles and found applications for coaching within their everyday social work practice, this conflict was felt less acutely, although changes in how some of them responded to negativity and the new language and questions they used marked them as being somehow different to those they worked with. The social workers compared and welcomed the trade-off from asserting power and control in social work to the more egalitarian stance in their coaching relationships and concluded that being history and agenda-free resulted in greater empowerment and agency for those being coached. Examples of achieving a greater sense of mutuality and breakthroughs through using coaching approaches in safeguarding scenarios added to the idea that it could help them to work more collaboratively with service users, although it would not be suitable in all situations. This invoked a positive energy and commitment to the coaching approach despite the challenge of finding the time to do it and the crisis-riven service backdrop against which they were operating. This enthusiasm was fuelled by the rapid perception of small but transformational changes in service users and those they coached informally that reconnected the social workers to their social work values and their aspirations to make a difference in the world.

The assimilation of informal coaching approaches into their practice also spilled over into how they communicated in their relationships outside of work, which was an unforeseen consequence of the study. Extending coaching into their personal lives quickened their growing belief that coaching could enable people to articulate the choices available to them and devise their own solutions to help them move forward. The social workers' psychological investment in coaching was further demonstrated through their frequent envisioning of how formal coaching could be utilised as an independent companion to social work support in the future. Integrating coaching training into social work education and continuing professional development was viewed as having the potential to revolutionise the way social workers communicate with service users and with each other, although the dominance of an outcome and process-saturated culture was felt to be a considerable barrier to this.

The themes in this chapter have set out a compelling and original account of how the use of coaching shaped the practice of children's workers and have highlighted the cultural framework within which this took place. The next chapter presents the themes derived from the experiences of service users who received coaching from these social workers and connects these findings in their totality.

Chapter Six - Findings Part Two: Service Users

Introduction

This chapter shifts attention to what service users in formal coaching sessions derived from their coaching experiences. In doing so it explores the research questions from a different angle; the intersection of coaching and social work practice and behaviours is explored and compared through a direct, lived experience of having engaged with both. Before turning to the themes evoked by the findings it is important to note that, akin to the social workers in the study, service users had very little understanding of what coaching would be like before they engaged with it, and had no real vocabulary or concrete frame of reference for it in their own lives:

> **Angela:** Um, at first um, I was a bit - cos I didn't know what coaching *meant and things like that*, um, and er . . . . and I, I actually found it alright in the end. . . I didn't know until, Jane came . . . When you came, and we talked about it afterwards, and, um, and none of us actually really knew what it was about.

> **Olivia:** So I kind of agreed to go ahead with it without really knowing what it was. And I think Danielle didn't understand that when she first came. So we kind of had the first session with me not really, knowing what it was about.

Despite explanatory leaflets and posters using accessible explanations, conversations with familiar professionals who placed their referral for coaching forward and face-to-face

meetings with me to explain the research and what coaching was like (I met with three of the service users), the lack of an experiential frame for coaching meant that service users felt confused and vague about what to expect from it - as an experience generally and for themselves. The few pre-conceptions they described were based on counselling or another version of social work, without being clear what this version would look like. During initial meetings with service users to identify potential study participants it became clear that although all the service users had heard of the term 'coaching', none of them could describe how this might translate into a form of help. The frames of reference I used to make coaching of interest to young people centred on famous people who used life coaching, such as the U.S. reality TV family the Kardashians, or premiership footballers and Olympic athletes who used coaching for performance. This association helped them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge and see it as an aspirational and not a deficit-based intervention. However, as no-one they knew personally had any experience of taking part in coaching, it remained an unknown, a risk, and opting to be coached therefore required a courageous leap in the dark:

> **Olivia:** I really didn't have a clue what it was about, and I've never done anything coach, like related to coaching. I know there's like life coaching and stuff. I've heard of that - there, you know, things like that. And I felt, well, you know, I've no idea, but I thought, 'Well, why not? Just give it - give it a go.'

Thus, whilst all the service users had experiential knowledge of social work and a clear understanding of what to expect in a social work encounter, they were unencumbered by preconceptions about coaching and did not articulate any concerns about how it was possible

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for social workers to practise as coaches as well. Arguably, being free of social constructions about coaching and 'people who are coaches' enabled the service users to volunteer for coaching and construct change through collaborative conversations more easily than through conversations with social workers, a point worth keeping in mind when considering the voices of service users in this chapter. Two key themes emerged from the analysis; '*Half Way in the Box:* Embracing Coaching & Rejecting Social Work Approaches' and '*I Wouldn't have Done That Before:* Iterative Steps & Small Transformations'. Commonalities across these themes and those derived from the social workers are drawn together at the end of this chapter.

6.1 Theme 1. *Halfway in the Box:* Embracing Coaching & Rejecting Social Work Approaches

The clear differences that service users drew between receiving coaching and receiving social work interventions are set out in this theme. Perceived dissimilarities between the attitudes, demeanour and focus of social workers and coaches also surfaced. Sub-theme 1. highlights the relational qualities in coaches that service users valued, which led to them muting their overt negativity towards the social work part of their coach's dual identity. Sub-theme 2. compares service users' direct experiences of agenda and checklist-led social work to the judgment and instruction-free focus of coaching encounters.

6.1.2. *I Don't Look at Her as a Social Worker:* Recasting Social Workers as Coaches

The data indicated that the service users quickly reconstructed their antipathy towards social workers when describing their experiences of being coached by someone who was both a social worker and a coach:

> **Mason:** Well, I don't I - I don't really like social workers, I don't think anybody likes them, but, I didn't look at her as a social worker.
>
> **Interviewer:** How did you look at her?
>
> **Mason:** Just like a normal person. It was not like, I mean she told - she told me about how some things happened, like what social workers do and things like that. But, yeah, I didn't look at her as a social worker, I just looked at her as like, just a, life coach . . . I mean social workers had talked to me like patronising, kind of like that. Like they're talking down to me. Like I'm - you know - like I don't know anything. Kind of.
>
> **Interviewer:** And so how did Danielle speak to you?
>
> **Mason:** Just like a regular person, like how a normal person speaks. Just like a normal conversation type of way.

The coaches were described by the service users in positive terms, such as 'nice' 'lovely' and being personable and relatable. Their dislike of social workers and the likeability of social work

coaches were based on differences in their communication styles, the language they used as well as the attitude they conveyed:

> **Daisy:** Like the way like she was speaking and - it didn't feel like - it didn't feel and it didn't sound like she was a social worker.
>
> **Interviewer:** So what does a social worker sound like?
>
> **Daisy:** Like when they're just like nagging at you. And they just, don't stop! And you just walk out of them, walk out. . . Like, it's that - social workers, they make out that they'll listen to you and they put your voice forward and they'll say that your voice needs to be heard and, your voice will be heard, and I will listen to you. They don't. . . But like, she was professional but the way she spoke to me, it was like she was speaking to me in like, a nice, like a nice tone, and we - every time she came, I'd be straight in here. Do you know what I mean? I won't like miss like 5 minutes or whatever. I'd be, in.

These perceived differences in the tone, atmosphere and quality of interactions with social workers and social work *coaches* were picked up by all the service users. This was articulated through a compelling sense of being heard and understood, which led to the social work coaches being seen as 'non-social workers', in spite of knowing that this was their primary identity. This connection was particularly important for Daisy, who was at high risk of child sexual exploitation and had a history of non-engagement with services, violence towards staff and going missing. Suspending the social work identity of her coach meant that she could set her apart from the negative associations she had with the other professionals in her life. This

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motivated her to show up and commit to coaching in ways that she would not commit to with other interventions.

Woven into the accounts of the service users is the sense that, as *coaches*, a more egalitarian, less superior bearing was communicated in their approach compared to social workers. This was founded on a refreshing feeling of being accepted and not being judged by their coaches, which led to greater openness:

Emma: But she didn't have the social worker, attitude. She didn't have that. She hasn't got that, she hasn't - got that attitude. She hasn't got that stance about her, as a social worker. . . I felt comfortable. Yeah, very comfortable. She made me feel at ease. She didn't make me feel as though I didn't want to tell her anything, and change, what I actually I feel, if you know what I mean? . . . It's how she spoke. She didn't look down at me. She didn't, ever, make me feel, as though I weren't, doing it right, if you know what I mean? That were the difference with Danielle and a social worker. I know she were a social worker. But, she was completely different to any other social worker I've ever met, and I've been through a lot of social workers! . . . So to have Danielle telling me she were a social worker, and then doing this coaching. She's completely - it's two different people to me.

Interestingly, Emma expressed that just the title of 'social worker' was enough to trigger bad memories and a bristling defensiveness towards anyone with that designation. Immediately distinguishing and defining the identity of the person in front of them as a 'coach' was

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therefore an important part of a recasting process where their social work persona was willingly suspended - which was then reinforced by the social worker's coaching stance and behaviours. This is an exciting finding as it suggests that any enduring rancour towards social workers, based on negative lived experiences, can seemingly disappear if coaching skills are utilised and being a 'coach' is an obvious and named part of their role.

6.1.3 *You Have to Do it This Way:* Comparisons Between the Received Experience of Social Work and Coaching

The content of social work discussions was compared unfavourably by service users to the content of coaching interactions. Service users commonly spoke wearily of social workers dominating the conversational agenda and of being instructed and reproached by them, whilst contrasting this favourably with the differences in a coaching approach:

> **Emma:** coaching to me is listening to me and what my, my feelings are. Social
>
> worker is just, plonked there, to tell you, what it is, and you have to do it this
>
> way. If you don't this way it's not the right way. That's the difference.

The discourse between social workers and service users was revealed to be somewhat shallow and stunted by the limits of transmission-based behaviours such as telling and directing. The agenda-free approach of the social work coach and the absence of surveillance in the coaching interaction also featured prominently as positives in the data:

> **Gabriella:** it's very set and they pick – and you have to do this and this and this or there's so much in the plan, and you've gotta follow it. But in coaching it was a bit more flexible it wasn't - if you didn't wanna do something you didn't have to do it . . . An, erm, like they were telling - they - they would tell you what to do and you would do it, but it was not like that it was more me led so if there were something I wanted to talk about we could and there were no, restrictions . . . social workers more . . . they come to check up. Sophie she were there to listen to me, she wasn't checking up, she weren't writing owt down, she weren't saying, "oh well have you done this? Have you done this?" so that were good.

Gabriella described being so accustomed to social workers going through documentation that she thought something must be wrong when her coach broke this convention by listening, asking questions and not noting things. Experiencing complete choice and control over the trajectory and topic of discussion during coaching was key to service users' sense of agency in the process:

> **Mason:** cos I can talk about what I wanna talk about, kind of, but when a social worker comes they'll talk about what they wanna talk about.

For the parents in the study, the shift in focus from their children to them was also a unique and welcome change:

Emma: I've had social workers come in, and they talk to you as though you're - you're basically looking after four kids and that is it. Do you know what I mean? They've- they've come in-in here, and they've said, "Oh, we need to do this. We need to do that. We need to, you know, change this and change that." And I'm like, hold on a minute, it's me who is raising the four kids. You come here, into my home. Do you know what I mean? You're not raising my children. I am. Whereas, Danielle never did that. She was just all about - it weren't so much the kids. It was all about me, asking how I were.

An important finding is that the rapport and productivity within the coaching relationship were not diminished by thought-provoking challenges and questioning that social workers employed in relation to service users' goals. This is evidenced in the recollections of 17-year-old young mum Gabriella (whose goal was to be more confident in making decisions), who sometimes felt overwhelmed by being pushed to explore uncomfortable subjects in coaching but could also recognise the benefit of this:

Gabriella: It was, it was, *it's good* to be challenged. It did feel a bit much sometimes but, it, I'm glad or else I wouldn't have been able to, make decisions properly. So I am glad.

The supportive challenge and independence of coaching was viewed as a method to reveal new ways for the service user to understand themselves without feeling negatively motivated

toward resistance by feeling criticised, instructed or judged, as they often did with social workers:

> **Emma:** she actually asked questions and she made me *question why I actually thought about things*. And made me think about stuff, you know? Before I *start losing Boris [getting angry]. . . .* And that were the difference between Danielle, and someone coming in - and trying to tell me what to do. She never did that. *Ever. . .* it's very difficult to find someone that you can actually relate to, or someone that you can talk to. So to have someone, out of the box, if you know what I mean. Even though they're half way in the box with being social services. But to be outside the box and talk about - and not being judged, because you feel judged by social services. You really do. Everything you say, you worry about what you say. So to have someone, there that's not going to judge you, or look at you with, down eyes and stuff like that it's nice.

The experience of a coaching relationship also allowed them to seek new vantage points from which to view their life choices so far and to consider new ways of going forward:

> **Angela:** Well I think in a lot of ways, it's . . . to help you, look at life differently, from all the points, not from other people's points of view, but, from, actually, your perspective, of doing things differently, and helping to make life, for you better.

A key contrast in service users' descriptions of social work and coaching was how the coaching relationship enabled them to define the change they wanted to see in themselves or in their situation and to galvanise their internal resources:

> **Emma:** it's like having someone there who knows the situation. And you're just saying, 'Right, I need to do this with myself.' And I'm just sat there listening.

The comparisons service users made between the quality of social work and coaching encounters were unambiguous in the findings and demonstrate a philosophical gulf in approach. Coaching conversations provided a move away from being *told* what to do to being empowered to *choose* what to do. They prompted reflection, self-awareness and opportunities for the service users to explore and tune into themselves psychologically. In contrast, conversations with social workers implied judgment, a close oversight of practical tasks and a predictable, bureaucratic rigidity.

6.2 Theme 2: *I Wouldn't Have Done That Before:* Iterative Steps & Small Transformations

This theme reveals the service users' self-defined experiences of personal growth and change that took place during the coaching process. Sub-theme 1. explores the impact of the modest and partial changes made by service users. Sub-theme 2. details how social work coaches were viewed as influential co-creators of the change made by service users, which resulted in service users discounting their role in the change process. Sub-theme 3. sets out how the

changes service users undertook were noticed by and/or had positive repercussions for others in their worlds.

6.2.1 *Time for Me:* Disrupting Stagnant Patterns

A common experience that surfaced in the data was service users making small changes in areas of their lives after a very short number of coaching sessions (between three and four sessions in total for all but one service user). This was particularly evident in the case of 65-year-old grandmother Angela, who had been in receipt of family support services for ten years with little discernible change in her self-care behaviour, according to Angela herself and the workers who referred her for coaching (with her agreement). After four coaching sessions focusing on the goal of stopping, slowing down and making more time for herself, Angela had started to see her family much more often, enjoyed two mindfulness and meditation courses, re-engaged with a local Women's Centre group and was making time during the day to read a book. All of these were described by Angela as "a different way" of doing things which had "made a big difference" to her day-to-day life and to her feelings of self-worth:

> **Angela:** I feel better now I've got a bit of more time for me, I don't feel, I don't feel as stressed. I'm glad that I did it [coaching]. Because I do feel now as if I'm more human. Because I were doing so much. Because I've learned to do things for me . . . I didn't love myself at all. I had got to that point.

By the time I interviewed her two months after her coaching had ended, Angela's progress had continued and she had also signed up for a year-long college course in a subject she was interested in. Whilst the outcomes the family support workers were looking for remain unknown, this demonstrates that, compared to ten years of social care interventions, four sessions of coaching accelerated her motivation and enabled her to successfully achieve a self-defined goal. This was a small but important shift for Angela; finding time to prioritise her needs in one area of her life set in motion the creation of time for other areas. As a result she no longer felt quite so isolated, stuck and frustrated by the grind of repetitive domestic tasks. She was also able to utilise the relaxation techniques she had learned to help her deal with angry confrontations between her grandchildren (both of whom had learning and physical disabilities and lived with her on a special guardianship order) and reassess how she wanted her relationship to be with her drug-dependent daughter (the mother of the grandchildren, who also lived with her). This, in turn, led to a quietly transformed sense of wellbeing and calm.

The ability to manage anger more effectively featured in the coaching goals of fifteen-year-old looked after young person Mason and 35-year-old pregnant mother of four, Emma. For Mason this translated into an increased sense of awareness about what triggered his anger and a greater control over his behaviour when it erupted:

> **Mason:** I control my anger more. Hmm. that's it really, all I did basically is anger
> management. But I do control my anger a lot better.

Interviewer: Okay, have you had anything to do - have you had anybody talk to you about anger management in the past?

Mason: Yeah, and it never worked, used to work. I mean, I still get angry now so, I still sometimes get angry, so it hasn't like worked completely but I can control it a lot more if I do something bad. Rather than just stand there kicking off.

Comparing previous attempts at teaching and telling him how to control his anger, with the strategies he developed himself during coaching Mason mentioned coaching as something that he felt had "kind of" been successful in equal measure with his growing maturity. He stated that he was no longer trying to fight people or "smashing stuff". Thus, despite his anger not being eradicated, the simple strategies he devised, such as walking away from situations, calming himself down, "trying to be nicer to people" and "being more open-minded", disrupted his habitual response to an emotion, which was impacting on his relationships with peers, staff in school and at the children's home where he lived.

For Emma, the small steps she made to control her anger through coaching conveyed a more remarkable transformational experience. Emma referred to her anger as her alter ego or 'chimp' 'Boris', who was prone to unpredictable rages over trivia that could last for whole days:

Emma: *That's how bad, Boris can be*. And I wouldn't only take it out on the four [children], I'd take it out on him [Emma's husband]. I'd take it out on me kitchen. Do

you know what I mean? I take it out on me food that I cooked. That's how bad Boris

could be. Do you know what I mean? It's awful, isn't it, when you know that? How

can I explain it? You know that, you are this person on the outside here, but there's

something in the pit of your stomach, that gets you angry, and the moment it's

unleashed, you have no control over it. You have no control. So, Boris would be out,

causing hell, and he would not, stop, causing hell, all day. . . I'd never learnt to take

myself out of the situation.

A self-described "control freak", Emma spoke of her anger as stemming from her need to

assert control over the environment and behaviours of her partner's daughters' four young

children who lived with her (subject to a special guardianship order). Prior to coaching Emma

described how she would "flip over the silliest littlest things", would rant endlessly about what

she was angry about and had minimal self-awareness about the repercussions of this pattern

of behaviour on her family. During coaching Emma conceived some modest steps she could

manage to relinquish control, starting with allowing the children to make their own breakfast.

Whilst she experienced this initially as a source of high anxiety and trepidation, going through

with this was revelatory, as the children proved capable of making their own breakfast (*and*

unexpectedly tidying up after themselves afterwards!). This led Emma to give the children

other minor responsibilities in the home that she would not have previously allowed and to

reflect on how coaching had prompted this:

Emma: I can't just be, in control all their life. You know, there are certain aspects

that I've got to be in control, but there's other things that, they can do on their own,

can't they? I wouldn't have done that before. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't have just let go, so it's worked in that sense. It's hard, [laughs] it's hard.

Comparing her experiences during the long school holidays before and after 3 coaching sessions, Emma commented on a considerable and concrete reduction in her stress levels and outbursts:

Emma: I can get myself into a state. I can lock myself in the bathroom and cry. That's how bad it can get. I haven't done it for a while. Last six-week holiday, I had a mental breakdown, because it was very stressful. And I got to the last weekend, and then, I lost the plot. That very last weekend. On the Saturday. And I lost the plot. Screamed, shout, cried, dragged the dog out with me. Cried, sat in a park for three hours crying . . . He [Emma's husband] had to step in only once this six-week holiday. Whereas the last six week holiday it was, every other day. I'd be hanging off the edge of cliff, by my fingernails. He's only stepped in once. . . But that's only one incident we've had this six week holiday.

These excerpts demonstrate that whilst the strategies developed by Emma during coaching to remove herself from triggers that provoked anger and to cede fractions of control were relatively minor, they also imply an elevated self-awareness and monitoring during moments of anger, a quicker understanding of where her reactions could lead and a significant change in self-management.

The accounts of seventeen-year-old young mother Gabriella and fifteen-year-old looked after young person Daisy indicate that more iterative and subtle changes took place during their coaching. Gabriella chose to work on her low self-confidence and her over-reliance on others to make decisions for her and her baby daughter. After three sessions Gabriella made sense of her coaching experience by talking about an increased internal monitoring of when self-doubt occurred, coupled with a new but quiet self-belief:

> **Gabriella:** Erm, I learnt - I don't - I just stopped asking for help, I just - well I get, when you first think of something, an idea comes into my head of what I would wanna do and then I second guess myself thinking, 'oh maybe I'm not right.' I'll ask my mum and double check. So I just stopped double checking and I sat and I'd go with the first answer that came. And that's how I - that's how I did it, I still do it sometimes, but not as much.

As for Daisy, (a young person at high risk of child sexual exploitation and abuse who moved placement against her will during coaching) whose goal was to improve her self-esteem, the iterative nature and sustainability of any changes achieved through coaching were more questionable:

> **Daisy:** Like, there was like, it [self-esteem] was stable here, like really, really low. Like it was like it was at zero percent, I had *none* whatsoever and like - and now, it's like - like a - it's like a loose screw, it's now going up and down!

6.2.2 *She Made Me Realise:* Attributing Change to the Influence of the Coach

An interesting dynamic that ran through the service users' accounts was of them seeing their coaches as being equally responsible for bringing about the changes they made, rather than seeing themselves as the sole change architects. Daisy was eager to attribute her success in increasing her confidence to her coach, whereas Mason described that his better anger management derived from him being willing to act upon advice from his coach in ways that he hadn't from others:

> **Mason:** I never used to take any advice . . . Danielle gave me advice and I took it, so. And I tried to work on myself, like talking about anger and things like that . . . I just kind of took her advice, that's it really, what she said, you know, but.

Knowing Mason's coach, Danielle, and her personal mantra of "don't not give advice" during coaching, I asked him to remember any advice he had been given. This proved to be a false trail as Mason could not recall the detail of any advice he had been given, and he struggled to explain what it could have been about coaching that had caused him to change. For Angela the coach's influence was housed in a sense of congruence, which then led her to an internal recognition of her needs:

> **Angela:** I think Jane made me realize in some ways that I was not putting myself first at all. I know that I have to . . . Jane she was very understanding. You know she was really - I think - I think Jane understands people in life.

Emma unravelled her coach's influence as helping her to think more reflectively and cueing her to come to new decisions that she wouldn't have ordinarily made:

> **Emma:** Do you know, my mind is - I'm basically, I'm not a deep thinker, I've don't over-think things, I don't-I don't over-think things. What I think is what I say and that is what I'll, I'll do. It's, it's - that's just me. So, no one's ever said, to me, "Well, just let them do it," because I wouldn't ever think of well letting them do it, do you know what I mean? Because I want control. I don't think she - I think probably that's what I've thought and think I've heard from her. And she's most likely just looked at me and I've gone, "Well, I, could, do, the cereal thing. I could try that". Do you know what I mean we both sat there and had a conversation, and it's like when you're talking with your best mate in't? And they'll just say one word, and you'll go, "Oh well, yeah I'm gonna do that". You know, and they've not really suggested anything, but you've actually thought about it yourself and thought, "Well, yeah I'm gonna give it a go." So, that's probably most likely what we've - the conversation's consisted of is her just looking at me, and that it's *me* who's thinking it. I'm going, "Nah, I'm gonna give that a go".

It is clear from the data that the collaborative nature of the coaching relationship had a powerful effect on the service users, which swayed how they viewed the source of motivation for their change. Changes were seen to be jointly constructed through different elements of the coaching encounter, where a look, a feeling, suggestion or a question was instrumental to their agency being activated.

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6.2.3 *You've Not Shouted!* Reflecting on the Ripples from Change

Some service users' accounts highlighted how even the modest and personal changes they had made were recognised by others:

> **Emma:** Polly says - Polly is my daughter. She says, "Oh, you've not shouted'. And she can be here for a few hours. She'll say, "You've not shouted" She'll notice that I've not shouted. 'I'm proud of you mum!' Jesus, it's not major thing you know, me not shouting! And she went 'it is!' You know, she'll laugh, and Simon will say now, "You don't shout as much." I don't lose the plot as much. . . My friends say I'm calmer, I'm not as stressed. Alice come last night. She comes regular. She comes really regular. And probably three, five times a week. She'll come. And you know, and she'll-she'll notice. And she's said to me a few times, 'Hey, look at you, not shouting!'

> **Daisy:** My old school, they, two teachers from my old school, they came to see me and they said that I've like matured a bit and like, they've seen that my confidence is a lot, better now.

For Emma, the new domestic control she allowed her four children resulted in them taking initiatives to please and assist her:

> **Emma:** I come home the other day, from shopping, and I took little one with me. And - one of the twins, the girl and the nine-year old - I come home I could smell Flash! I'm like, and the kitchen were like, spotless! I were like, woah! She'd picked all fluff off the carpet and tidied the cushions and put washing in the wash basket

and everything. And I walked in, and I were like 'Amy!' I says 'Have you done this for me?!' And she were like, "Yeah." I were like. I'm emotional like I am at the moment, cry at an advert at the moment! And I were like, "Oh, thank you for doing this!"

Respondents also reflected on how their individual changes had generated benefits for those close to them. Feeling more confident about making decisions about everyday minutiae, Gabriella relayed how this translated into a less reliant relationship with her mother:

Gabriella: My mum definitely, yes, there's a lot less stress on her shoulders, cos I used to be going to her for a whole lot – of advice

Interviewer: Did you?

Gabriella: Yeah, all the time, when it got to dinner time

Interviewer: What, everyday?

Gabriella: Aww a few times a day. It got to 12 o'clock and I'm thinking, shall I make Layla's dinner now? Shall I wait till 1 o'clock? And it were just, so it just really felt like - I didn't know what I were doing!

Outwardly insignificant personal changes - feeling a higher sense of confidence and self-worth, feeling less dependent on others for guidance, having strategies in place to deal with unpredictable angry emotions, giving up small areas of domestic control, making time to stop and relax – were noticed by those known to the service users and suggest a beneficial ripple effect and feedback loop in which their changes were validated.

6.3 Commonalities in Social Work Coach & Service User Findings

The presentation of themes from both data sets in this chapter and the previous chapter cohere around specific areas:

- Ceding the power and expertise they would normally hold as social workers conveyed a more equitable relationship during coaching that was discerned by service users as a change in attitude and stance from what they had learned to expect from social workers. Indeed, service users saw social workers and coaches as "two different people" and knowingly compartmentalised their social work identity. This shift in persona and mindset echoes the themes of 'head swapping' and 'head transplants', highlighted in the previous chapter, in which social workers separated their coaching identity from their social work identity and were perceived as being different or at odds with their usual selves by others in their worlds.

- Coaching service users to articulate and fulfil their *own* self-development enabled them to achieve the kind of customised, soft outcomes that would have been peripheral to a social worker's rigid outcome agenda. This process brought fresh thinking to old behavioural patterns and blind spots, which is evident in both data sets. For service users this was evidenced through their increasing self-efficacy, moves away from being stuck and moves towards small changes in their lives; for social workers it was exhibited in a less process-driven and more flexible approach, which located choice and agency firmly with service users.

- Through experiencing the small but rapid changes coaching made to the way service users, students, colleagues, friends and partners thought and behaved, both social workers and service users held a mirror up to the well-intentioned logic of 'fixing' others and the default of telling/transmission-based interactions and found them to be flawed and counter-productive to initiating change.

- The ripples from coaching went beyond both the social workers and the service users' limited interactions. For social workers, using coaching approaches penetrated and positively affected their personal relationships and was referred to as enhancing their development. This is highlighted by Sophie, who describes being a 'better human being" when integrating coaching into her life. For service users, the benefits of their coaching also reverberated and were noticed by those around them. Akin to Sophie, Angela talked simply of being "more human" as a result of coaching, which suggests that coaching also subjectively affected their growth as people.

- Both service users and social workers experienced different degrees of transformation through engaging in coaching. For social workers, this translated into feeling like they had a revived sense of meaning in their work; for service users, this manifested as an evolving self-belief in their ability to make the changes they defined. Both sets of findings underscore a *mutual* benefit from using coaching with service users in social work.

- Coaching broke the conventions and rhythm of the social work encounters service users and social workers in this study were used to. Demonstrating enhanced listening and communication skills whilst utilising coaching behaviours caused the social work coaches' identity to be re-arranged inwardly and outwardly. The different persona they presented were quickly intuited by service users and altered how they were perceived, accepted and treated. This reciprocal effect is encapsulated in this response from Esme:

  Esme: It's different. It's a different way of doing things and it's a different way of them seeing you.

- The foremost finding here, endorsed by the evidence of modest change from service users, is that when social workers feel and practise *more like coaches* they can facilitate the positive difference they want to make in the world.

Bringing together the themes from social workers' and service users' data exposes important parallel findings in the study and reiterates the motivating potential of using coaching in social work for social workers *and* service users. The thesis' findings are the first to examine the use of coaching with service users within children's social work and seem to infer significant applied implications for a social work practice that includes coaching training and skills.

The next chapter moves on to discuss and thoroughly contemplate the crux of these collective findings in the context of the literature. In doing this, I hope to posit this preliminary research

as an entry point for a new hybrid coaching and social work practice, and to further advance

the case for the study's original contribution to the social work and coaching fields.

Chapter Seven - Discussion of Findings

Introduction

This unique study was designed to explore the experiences of facilitating and receiving coaching from the perspectives of children's social workers and service users. The primary messages of this research are those that are most pertinent for real-world application and are the subject of this thesis discussion. As my interrogation of the literature revealed in Chapter two, there is a dearth of empirical research and conceptual work on the application of coaching within social work, as it is an area that has not been studied and only given scant attention before. As a result, I have increased the reach of my search and have looked beyond the scholarship of social work and coaching to find insights from interdisciplinary literature when locating the overarching themes of the study findings.

The structure of this discussion is divided into three main sections that address the three research questions:

- Does engagement in short term coaching lead to new thinking and behaviours by social workers and service users?

- How do social workers and service users experience the intersection of social work and coaching practices?

- Can accredited coaching training and practice help social workers to feel like they are able to make a positive difference to the lives of service users?

In the first section I develop the argument that using coaching approaches promotes behaviours and a way of being as a professional that can facilitate small but transformative changes in short-term statutory and non-mandated social work/service user relationships. I locate coaching as a short-term, attuned, relational practice in which deep listening has a crucial role to play and contend that coaching skills have a valuable place in a child protection social work. The second section considers the research context in relation to theoretical explanations of how fixed paradigms are upended and change is galvanised in organisations in crisis. I propose that the social workers' professional identity became conflicted whilst they were coaching until they were able to adapt to the challenge and construct a hybrid social work coach identity. I situate this finding alongside the literature on the construction of professional identity, which argues that it is an evolving, dynamic entity. In Section Three I argue that the 'fixer' mindset of the social workers in this study is aligned with the compelling cultural frame of 'making a difference', which is prone to being interpreted through directive and transmission-orientated practice that can invoke reactance and resistance from service users. Finally, I contend that coaching offers social workers a 'how to' skill set to make the concept of empowerment a reality in their relationships with service users, which includes being comfortable with a 'not knowing' stance.

7.1 Becoming a Social Work Coach: A Chance to Think & Behave Differently

The use of coaching, in this thesis, can be viewed as a pro-active attempt to respond to the challenge of integrating a form of relationship-based practice into social work, whilst attempting to square it with the ideological contradictions of performance management and a safeguarding mandate. As a microcosm it illustrates the tensions facing social work

nationally, as it jostles to stay true to its values in an organisational landscape threatened by the "anti-relational forces" (Cooper, 2010, p. 241) of targets, audit regimes, inspection standards and accountability. Empirical research has demonstrated that it is not the practice tool, theoretical position or methodological doctrine that is important but the qualities and interpersonal skills that social workers possess and how they use them in relationships, that leads to improved outcomes in child protection (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Lee & Ayón, 2004; O'Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013). Shemmings (2017) believes that a renewed focus on enhancing capacities such as asking open questions, active listening (see Section 7.1.2 below) and personal congruence are more likely to promote a beneficial working alliance. Improvement in these capacities can be distilled to what de Boer & Coady (2007) describe as a more humanistic style that "stretches professional ways of being" (p. 35) and a better use of *self as* relational resource when working face-to-face with service users (Ward, 2010). Building such qualities into the workforce can 'future proof' child protection against unsustainable and transactional practice norms shackled to "box-ticking, endless risk assessment and perfunctory statutory visiting" (Shemmings, 2017, p. 202). This study indicates that coaching training cultivates the mindset and 'how to' skills posited by Shemmings as essential for relational practice. The partial adaptations social workers made to their child protection practice to include informal coaching also indicate a softening of the grip of the social norms of practice (Sunstein, 2019) described above. Moreover, it suggests an increase in professional autonomy and a confidence in their use of self in relationships when they were at their most beleaguered and when anti-relational forces were at their zenith.

The debates social workers had in this study about using coaching techniques in mandated relationships also mirror the argument of Murphy et al (2013) - that person-centred relational work based on clients being their own authority on what change is possible is fundamentally at odds with the requirements of statutory child protection (de Jong & Berg, 2001; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). In the view of Murphy and colleagues, this requires utilitarian relationships with service users to inform professional judgment, enact surveillance and coerce or enforce external change. At the heart of relationship based social work is thus a conflict between bureaucratic managerialism, with its intense risk focus, and person-centred non-directive practice, which is premised on the principle of supporting and growing clients' capacities for autonomy and self-determination. Therefore, whilst contemporary social work may *value* Rogerian relational skills such as empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 2007) as the basis for a productive client-centred working alliance, it cannot pretend to be anything other than 'State-centred' as its relationships are instruments to achieving change on its own terms. In their critique of strength-based practice Oliver & Charles (2015) have similar reservations. They contend that strengths-based practice may be too difficult to translate into the statutory context and that more research is needed into the types of scenarios, service users and social worker characteristics to ascertain a more nuanced understanding of its shortcomings. Ferguson (2011) contends that approaches with empowerment at their centre are limited due to their failure to focus on the detailed and mundane aspects of practice that protects children.

In his forensic examination of the media response to the death of 'baby Peter' Connolly, Ray Jones (2014) highlights media concern with the solution-focused brief therapy approach being

used with Peter's mother before he died due to abuse and neglect. The hindsight, rational judgment was that empowering approaches are not compatible with an authoritative style of intervention as there is a danger of social workers losing sight of their requirement to protect children in their desire to support parents. Ferguson (2011) contends that some social workers may be so overly focused on the ideological rights of parents and carers as empowered partners that their priorities become distorted, which pulls their attention away from being child-centred. Parents can then use this tactically to mis-direct and manipulate professionals to disguise harm and abuse: "this desire to collapse hierarchical power relationships sits uncomfortably with the need to use authority in child protection" (Ferguson, 2011, p. 33). An over-emphasis on agency and empowerment may also lead to social workers failing to acknowledge structural inequality and the way this restricts relationships and choices (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). The life-long disadvantage and unjust circumstances of many marginalised service users pose a quandary for social workers who wish to construct power with service users. They must recognise the limitations of family poverty and poor communities *and* balance these with mobilising individual resources, strengths and hope in the service users' everyday lives. Getting the balance right during brief visits is a challenge for social workers, who may have narrow conceptions of the complex impact of deprivation, social isolation and adversity (Featherstone et al., 2017).

As the coaching approach draws on and is grounded in solution-focused, person-centred and strengths-based paradigms (Edleson, 2010) and is very much in keeping with the principles of the restorative ethos (as mentioned in Chapter two), this study brings a new contribution to this limited discourse in children's social care (Williams, 2019; Williams et al., 2018). The

findings broadly acknowledge the position detailed above by concluding that social workers should formally coach service users who *are separate* from their caseload to ensure that attention is not diverted by agency agendas and to "start where the service user is, not where we wish them to be" (Ruch et al., 2010, p. 228). However, this thesis has also found that it *is* possible to transfer coaching skills - grounded in a philosophy that emphasises empowerment, assets and rights to self-determination - as a relational practice with parents and young people who are within the child protection system. Explicit skills such as empathic listening, playing back of accurate understanding and asking coaching questions such as 'what do you want?', were frequently used by the social workers during *informal* coaching to uncover service users' goals and attempt to align them with their statutory outcomes. During *formal* coaching these skills made up the constituent parts of a hopeful, agentic, helping relationship. As a result of coaching, the findings suggest, the social workers' practice became mediated through a different tone and was re-orientated towards a more relational interpersonal style that infused their professional roles. The findings are therefore consistent with the thoughts of Ruch (2005) about the potential of relational skills to help social workers overcome bureaucracy in their work. They also gesture towards the literature on practice with involuntary clients in children's safeguarding (Calder, 2008) and the work of Platt (2008) and Mason (2012), whose studies found that social workers' relational skills had a significantly positive effect in the context of formal child protection concerns. Child protection social work can be dominated by an extremely one-dimensional relationship with managerialism (Featherstone, White et al., 2014; Ferguson, 2011) but it is *also* capable of having much richer human connections (Ruch et al., 2010; Wright, 2017) if social workers are given training to develop 'softer' skills such as noticing and commenting on vocal tone, postural changes,

emotional expressions and the other 'back channel', micro communication responses that indicate engagement (Keltner, 2017).

7.1.1 Coaching: An Attuned Productive Relationship Not Designed to Endure

The findings also demonstrate that privileging individually attuned short-term coaching *connections* (Hardesty, 2017), characterised by accelerated rapport, can achieve change without the need for these relationships to be enduring. This study therefore contests the accepted wisdom that meaningful relationships with service users that act as vehicle for change are time consuming and demanding (Ruch et al., 2010). All but one service user completed their coaching in only three or four, one to two-hour sessions and utilised this brief coaching relationship to contribute towards self-defined goals. There are useful parallels here with Kohli and Dutton's work (2010) with refugees 'on the move'. They proposed that short-term relationships offer opportunities if a relational space is found in which social workers use respectful questioning, do not colonise the conversation and where the pace and velocity of interactions is slowed. This enables the worker and service user to co-create a relationally rich, reflexive experience where shared meanings are possible even if service users quickly drop out of sight and the overall number of encounters is brief. In this study, the relational space created for *formal* coaching relationships existed outside social work roles. It was therefore a space protected from the disruption of agency chaos and from the overt intrusion of the social work mandate. It also preserved a distance that enabled social workers to step out of generating data from hasty process and task completion (Rice, 2017) and to be alive to an entirely different relationship rhythm in which the quality of engagement and being in the 'here and now' were at the fore.

Time scarcity is a factor that impinges on social workers' ability to create and sustain relationships, although in this study it was more a product of them having to divide their time between overwhelming workload demands and facilitating coaching as an *extra* task. Brighton & Hove Council's recent evaluation (Lees, 2017) of their 'Team Around the Relationship' social work model revealed that social workers spent 15% of their time with adults in families and 10% with children and young people, which was unchanged from before the model was introduced. Social workers' time was still dominated by the burden of reports, meetings and administration despite an organisational and cultural commitment to relationship-based practice. Given these seemingly intractable time scarcity issues and considering that the immediacy of direct practice is what social workers value most about their roles (Furness, 2007; Stevens et al., 2012) this thesis offers a glimmer of hope for a way of balancing severely limited time with the greater and more productive use of relational skills in the profession. This is a very useful finding as it confirms a meta-analysis into the power of coaching by Sonesh et al. (2015), mentioned in Chapter Two, which suggests that it is the quality of coaching sessions that is more likely to achieve coachees' outcomes rather than the quantity. The brief investment of time it takes to coach service users in a small number of sessions is therefore one worth making in the time-poor context of social work if it is more likely to stimulate positive change and provide greater job satisfaction through face-to-face work.

7.1.2 Listening to Others' Realities

Social workers in the study described new listening behaviours that they had acquired during coaching as hugely insightful and revelatory. Self-appraisals of their listening

skills prompted a conscious awareness of hitherto unnoticed listening habits and led to reflections on poor and distorted listening that had been very common in their practice as social workers and was a skill they felt their social work training had not addressed. Egan's (2014) definition of poor forms of listening is useful to apply here to illustrate the shift to deeper listening levels undertaken by the social workers. According to Egan, poor listening ranges from inattentive 'non-listening'- going through the motions but pretending to listen - to partial or superficial listening that only picks up surface content. Types of listening that distort are outlined by Egan as 'filtered listening', listening through the filter of unacknowledged cultural bias and prejudice, and 'evaluative listening', in which automatic judgments about the speaker or the content of their speech segues uncritically into the response of the listener, often resulting in advice giving. 'Fact centred listening' is also a distortion, where information is gathered through asking questions to try and glean as much knowledge as possible without listening to the person contextually. In his 'Four Fields of Listening' model Scharmer (2018) contends that applying deeper levels of listening results in conversations taking on a different state of engagement. Sharma includes Rogers' (1980) concept of 'empathic listening', listening driven by empathy with another's perceptual world (Egan, 2014), and listening that is 'generative', which holds the space for possibilities and for new realities to emerge. This can have transformative effects on how relationships are experienced; indeed, the literature indicates that feeling heard is foundational in social work relationships that engage involuntary clients (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Drake, 1994) and reduce resistance (Forrester et al., 2012) and is something echoed by social workers and service users in these findings.

After coaching training social workers perceived subjectively that they were using deeper levels of listening and they reported this as pivotal to them having a more empathic presence, where their own interpretations or judgments did not intrude or interfere with being attuned to service users (Goh, 2012; Weger, Castle & Emmett, 2010). As a practice, deeper listening involved social workers taking on a wholly different demeanour to their usual presentation to services users, where the focus was frequently on listening to speak, transmitting concerns and communicating authority through time-limited, procedure-led interactions (Ferguson, 2011). The distractions, demands, paperwork and pressures of their role were put aside in order to be fully *with* their coachee:

> "people still themselves to receive and take in another person. Technology is off, thoughts are parked, attention is given, and curiosity is piqued. People listen for understanding, for emotions behind the words, and for commitment (or lack thereof) to what is being expressed." (Hilton & Anderson, 2018, p. 19).

The process of attaining these new skills involved social workers examining a mistaken assumption they had carried with them about the excellence of their listening. This assumption was based on an unquestioned association with their collective professional identity: social workers give advice *ergo they are good at listening*. The discovery that this assumption was erroneous resulted in 'aha' moments of realisation (Longhurst, 2006) for each member of the group and is conceivably an example of the Dunning-Kruger effect, a psychological bias that blocks self-insight due to an over-estimation of one's abilities and performance. The effect was first discerned in a study by psychologists Kruger & Dunning

(1999) entitled "Unskilled and unaware of It: how difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments" in which they describe the effect as a delusional dual burden in which people:

"make mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realise it" (Kruger & Dunning, p. 1132).

In line with the findings of Dunning and Kruger, improving the listening skills of the participants through coaching paradoxically helped them to recognise their previously self-inflated assessments and recalibrate their skills. Mcleod's (2006) research into different understandings of the concept of listening in children's social work is also apposite. She highlights qualitative differences in how social workers understood listening as 'paying attention', as compared to young service users who felt that listening had happened if action was taken about what they had expressed. Maiter, Palmer & Manji's (2006) research with parents also highlights not listening and workers being preoccupied as key frustrations in their relationships with social workers in child protection. This has implications for practice as without critically defining what listening means and looks like, it is likely that social workers and service users will not hear each other and poor listening habits will remain ingrained and undetected (Goh, 2012). It also makes the case for further research into strengthening the listening abilities of social work students and the social work workforce.

Reflecting on his experience of conducting insider research in a children's social care service, Gavin Swann, a senior social work manager, stated that the emotional bombardment of child

protection work resulted in a working environment that "prevented thought" (Swann, 2016, p. 149) and led to pseudo versions of listening. Surprisingly, the social workers in this study cultivated their listening skills against a similar but more turbulent, demoralised backdrop where cultural blockers to empathic listening were intensified and where distorted listening was rife. In the light of such challenging obstacles the social workers' commitment to transforming their listening behaviour is both commendable and hopeful. It reveals that the pseudo and distorted listening of institutions need not hinder the practice of empathic listening in individual social work/service user coaching relationships.

7.1.3 Being Coached: A Different Connection Constructs Different Behaviours

This research contributes to the bank of service user studies in social work where the voices of users are heard (e.g. Dale (2004); Doel & Best (2008); Maiter et al., (2006)) but, specifically, it offers service user perspectives on *positive* social worker-client relationships. The recasting of social workers' identities and the compartmentalising of hostility towards them highlighted in this study underscores the work of Ribner and Knei-Paz (2002). When analysing clients' stories of successful relationships they found that clients differentiated social workers from their employing institution and ascribed them a 'quasi-independent status' that emphasised their rarity compared to previous social worker contacts:

"positive relationships with social workers stood out as isolated instances from a long history of social agency contact characterised by unfulfilled expectations, unmet needs, and recurring disappointments" (p. 385).

Again, echoing the findings of this study, clients valued the sense of equality created by the ordinary humanity of their relationships with their social worker (as noted in Chapter Six, social work coaches were described by service users as 'nice' 'lovely' and 'just normal') and highlighted their enabling attitude and non-judgmental stance, which liberated them from previous labels. The evidence of service user coachees taking charge and successfully disrupting their old behaviour patterns illustrated in this thesis also supports Doel & Best's (2008) contention that service users need to feel that social workers believe in their capacity for personal change. To re-iterate descriptions from Chapter Two, coaching is premised on optimism and the "shift from problem to possibility" (Edleson, 2010, p. 59). Utilising a possibility paradigm ensures that belief in personal growth and self-transformation is a given. Synergies with de Boer & Coady's (2007) research into good helping relationships within social worker and client dyads are also evident. They found that hopeful, authentic 'ways-of-being' that reduced professional distance, formality and superiority were key to relationships that really connected. On becoming coaches social workers in this study were perceived by service users as having a different 'way-of-being' to other social workers, and it is this unique quality and presentation that some of them attributed to the co-production of the small transformations they made. Harnessing the coaching 'way of being' within social work therefore has the possibility of increasing these valuable encounters with service users that help them to determine and deliver their own solutions. Gearing social work towards coaching holds the possibility of bringing a different atmosphere to social work that is experienced as more humane by those on its receiving end.

As referred to previously, there are virtually no primary studies on the use of coaching within

social work, and the literature landscape is even more inadequate concerning the service user coachee's voice. The single study by Moran & Brady (2010) on the short-term use of life coaching with Family Support service users (highlighted in the literature reivew) does offer some very important similarities with this study. They found that life coaching did increase service users' self-efficacy, defined in the study as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their actions" (Bandura, 1997, p. vii) which helped them to identify areas in their life where they wanted to have more control and to reach their short term goals. However, the levels of adversity facing the participants also led them to find the coaching experience challenging and to report feelings of despondency about achieving their goals. Structural issues included a lack of finance, resources, education and support network and the authors highlight how life coaching could be perceived as unintentionally encouraging service users to accept such economic and social disadvantage. They contend that structural disadvantage can reduce feelings of self-efficacy and affect service users' ability to articulate and reach their goals. They conclude by arguing that life coaching should be adopted as complementary to other support services that can take a more ecological perspective on service users' lives. The findings of this thesis concur with and elaborate on this research. Service users in this study also met their short-term goals, to make changes to their thinking and behaviours, and they too indicated a greater sense of self-efficacy as a result. They also reported that others in their networks had noticed the small transformations they had made. Whilst structural inequality was not an issue that was reported by service users or social workers as a feature of the coaching experience, it would be unwise to ignore this note of caution from the frontline and it should be a consideration of any future research on or application of coaching within social care.

The NSPCC's evaluation of its Face to Face service (Fernandes, 2015) for 611 young people aged 5-18 who were in care or on the edge of care also offers useful comparisons. Whilst not describing the service as coaching, the service had a similar relational framework to the coaching service offered to service users for this study, by utilising a short term, solution-focused approach to address the obstacles to change in young people's lives. Akin to this study, (there were three young people in this research) service users articulated goals such as managing anger and increasing self-confidence. Young people identified that leading and taking control of the process was important as it motivated them to make changes without relying on other people. They also valued the space to recognise the small steps they made in their behaviour and their increased awareness of their strengths and resourcefulness. Significantly, the evaluation found around a 60% improvement in wellbeing scores, which were sustained, for 84% of those young people who took part. The qualitative nature of this empirical study throws some additional light on the possible reasons for their enhanced wellbeing scores, as respondents in this research also spoke about comparisons in their wellbeing prior to and post coaching. They enjoyed the distinct differences of the coach's identity and stance and reported valuing their control of the agenda. The core findings also demonstrate that a similar approach can work successfully in a different social care context. The NSPCC research concludes with young people's appreciation of the separate and confidential nature of the service (from social workers) and identifies the need for a brief solution-focused intervention service. A similar gap in formal coaching provision, independent of social work involvement, is identified by this study.

7.2 At the Intersection: How Social Work and Coaching Practices are Experienced

The intersection of social work and coaching practices in this study took place against a unique background characterised by instability, uncertainty and a prevailing sense of low-level panic and regulatory shaming (Gibson, 2016). Whilst the cataclysmic disruption within this social work service represents a specific snapshot in time, the findings nevertheless echo the dynamics in many local authority children's services, which experience upheaval and damaging public criticism as a result of the inspection process (see Shoesmith, (2016) for a particularly traumatic account). The findings may therefore provide a window on the extremely challenging and politicised circumstances which the 63% of local authorities rated as either 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' must manage (Oakley, Miscampbell & Gregorian, 2018). Writing about his experience of overseeing the improvement journeys of five Ofsted rated 'inadequate' local authorities, Ray Jones (Jones, 2017b) describes their disintegrating social work services as being besieged by macho cultures, with plummeting staff morale and the withholding of staff commitment to a 'merry-go-round' of new managers who replaced the ones who had been dismissed. In the inadequate or failing authority a common pattern emerged, in which stress-related sick leave and resignations escalated, along with an increasing reliance on agency social work staff on short term contracts to fill the gaps. Jones encapsulates the negative amplifying effect of what he describes as the 'hit and run' inspectorate rating:

"The demoralising impact, however, of an Ofsted judgement propels a service already in difficulty into the spiral of a crisis in confidence and a collapse of capacity.

Threshold management and triaging of incoming work deteriorates and other

agencies also lose confidence and pile in new referrals which they define as requiring

a child protection response. Workloads increase at the same time as the workforce

is bruised and battered by the Ofsted rating." (Jones, 2017b, p. 11).

Encouraging social workers whose practice has been undermined, labelled unsafe or

unresponsive to introduce a new way of thinking and behaving presents a complex challenge.

They are experiencing a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and self-protection is

amplified to guard against emotional exhaustion (Munro, 2011). Barsade and O'Neill (2016)

contend that organisations have two types of culture, a cognitive culture that is transmitted

verbally and an emotional culture that is expressed through values, assumptions, body

language and facial expressions. As indicated above by Jones, the emotional culture of social

work organisations under intense scrutiny tends to be one that is low trust (Trevithick, 2014),

fearful (Social Work Tutor, 2017) and can severely limit the interventions and approaches at

social workers' disposal.

The cognitive culture is communicated via the policing of practice (Hood, Nilsson & Habibi,

2018) to ensure rigid compliance with process, standards and performance indicators: "what

we measure transforms what social workers talk about, what we focus on and what we

become" (Rice, 2017, p. 141). Whittaker (2011) found that such close monitoring can lead to

a: ''I'll have to talk to my manager about that'' (p. 487) upward delegation culture, where

social work practice is at risk of being infantilised via constant checks and counter-checks. The

reassurance of such checks reduces the burden of responsibility and accountability and

creates a practice scaffolded on standardisation and formal process (Munro, 2010). Leigh (2017b) suggests that such a relentless focus on compliance is de-skilling and can stifle innovation as workers can be afraid to deviate from institutional directives. Her study of organisational misbehaviour in a child protection service (preparing for an impending Ofsted inspection) found that a staged impression of conformity to timescales and competency was performed by some social workers. This masked *how* they were meeting service demands and deflected attention away from the quality of the service families received. Finding ways to get underneath what Leigh terms as a 'just nod and smile' conformity culture is therefore key to unlocking permission for social workers to engage with practice innovations. Moreover, institutional theory predicts that the more embedded existing practice is within the social context, the higher the resistance to change (Reay, Golden-Biddle & Germann, 2006). Being very experienced practitioners, the social workers in this study were highly embedded in the institutional practices of their local workplace and, therefore, making the behavioural changes necessary to facilitate coaching should have elicited considerable resistance.

An argument often cited by institutional theorists contends that institutional crises are necessary precipitators to changes in practice (Reay et al., 2006; Seo & Creed, 2002). Thus an abrupt external shock is required to generate the energy and tension to change established institutional arrangements, dis-embed people from their social context and unlock them from their institutionalised practice behaviours. The sense of urgency this creates to drive transformation individually or collectively is vividly captured in the metaphor of the 'burning platform', wherein a fire threatens to consume those who do not actively respond to the upheaval of institutional inertia (Washington, Hacker & Hacker, 2011). Petrie (2015) similarly

describes disrupting and disorientating conditions as a 'heat experience', which leads to the discovery that one's "current way of making sense of the world is inadequate" (p. 4) and that new ways must be sought to deal with the challenge.   We can theorise that the burning platform or heat experience for the social workers was the sudden rupture caused by their organisation's failed Ofsted inspection during this study. Their embeddedness in the organisation was upended and some of the established behavioural norms, social patterns and thinking traps were being questioned, held up to the light and found wanting. It is conceivable that the Inspection and its maelstrom aftermath abruptly disrupted the collective consciousness of the social workers (Seo & Creed, 2002). This shift allowed them to look beyond existing fixed paradigms and to reconstruct and transform elements of their practice to utilise coaching more readily (Mlodinow, 2018).

The sense of incoherence and estrangement from a familiar practice environment that the social workers experienced is akin to the loss of a 'secure base', as outlined by Biggart et al. (2017) in their study of children's social workers in local authorities in the UK. They utilised Schofield & Beek's (2014) Secure Base Model for supportive teams in child and family work. The model stems from attachment theory and proposes that internalised models of a predictable, secure team enable social workers to sustain resilience and contain feelings of fear and anxiety. Biggart and colleagues found that the loss of a secure base from which to go out into the practice world had a detrimental effect on workers in terms of emotion regulation and resilience:

"Practitioners without a secure base doubted what they were doing, worried about taking action, were indecisive, tried to get others to make decisions, and blamed others when mistakes were made. Unsupported practitioners found it difficult to consider service user or colleague needs, as they were emotionally preoccupied with anxiety and fear about unresolved issues at the interface of self and work." (Biggart et al., 2017, p. 127).

This is a useful model to draw upon when considering the apparent failure of the service to contain and adequately mentalise the wellbeing of the social workers in this study. Mentalization is the process by which we recognise and think about intentional mental states and the feelings they generate in ourselves and in others (Brown, 2008; Fonagy, Bateman & Bateman, 2011; Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). The organisation's failure to mentalize and empathically attune to its staff during and after the inspection judgment allowed it to expect them to continue to operate with rapidly disintegrating security and without anticipating the anxiety this would create in the workforce. Interestingly, the findings also reveal that a secure base it is not a *necessary* condition for experienced social workers to facilitate coaching (the support social workers received through group and individual coaching supervision may have provided an alternative 'secure base' but this was not explored and should be reflected in any future study replications).

Schwartz & Sharpe's (2010) notion of 'canny outlaws' speaks to the inventiveness social workers employed to engage in formal coaching and to incorporate coaching behaviours into

their everyday practice during institutional fragmentation and chaos. Canny outlaws are wise practitioners who:

"have the knowhow to bend or side-step formulaic procedures or rigid scripts or bureaucratic requirements in order to accomplish the aims of their practice" (pp. 174-175).

Through using coaching the social workers ingeniously undermined the calcified practice wisdom of fixing, box-ticking, telling and transmitting and improvised a new practice that accelerated rapport and *turned on* reflective states at a time of high organisational and personal anxiety. This queries Ferguson's (2018) suggestion that suspending or avoiding reflective states as a means of self-preservation during anxiety provoking interactions with service users is the unconscious default of social workers. Such indications of psychological flexibility at a time when institutional behaviour was highly defended and transactional is a cause for optimism and hope. It suggests that coaching may have developed social workers' abilities to engage in what Mlodinow terms 'elastic thinking', thought that is divergent, integrative and less reliant on linear, analytical reasoning (Mlodinow, 2018). It also hints at the potential of coaching to have a positive buffering effect, which could tune out stagnant cultural messages and protect social workers from being overly governed by the institutionalised thought of the local authority machine in crisis.

This study elaborates on both Whittaker's and Leigh's research above as it revealed that social workers cannily used coaching to skirt the dominance of compliance and upward delegation

and directed their enhanced intrapersonal skills towards fostering agency in others. They used their professional discretion to shape the context in which they were situated and introduce *informal* coaching to colleagues and service users without disturbing bureaucratic compliance structures. Delivering *formal* coaching became an opportunity to temporarily kick away the scaffolding of such structures altogether (Whittaker, 2011) and enjoy a short-lived professional autonomy. By their nature, all child protection services exist in a complex adaptive system that is subject to a paradoxical mix of unpredictability and harmony known as 'bounded instability' or being at 'the edge of chaos' (Cavanagh, 2013). Exploring how coaching could be utilised in child protection services *not* at the epicentre of chaotic instability and mired in crisis is a significant gap in our understanding and is thus an area that warrants much further attention.

7.2.1 The Social Work Coach Identity*:* Conflicted, Agile & Enriched

For the social work participants in the study, shifts in their identity were at the forefront of their experience of the intersection of social work and coaching practices. Conceptual frameworks relating to the construction of professional identity and transformation have therefore provided an important theoretical lens to examine the thesis findings. It is commonly understood that social identity is not a static, mono-faceted entity. It is dynamic, constructed through interaction with others (Burr, 2015; Giddens, 1991) and is in an ever-evolving state of becoming (Jenkins, 2014). As such, individuals are not limited to one core identity (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003) but have a repertoire of multiple identities available to them:

"We occupy multiple subject positions and shift, manoeuvre and negotiate within and across these. . . the discursive subject is riven with contradictory pressures, contingencies and contested representations. Identity is neither stable, nor a final achievement" (Dent & Whitehead, 2002, p. 11).

It follows that professional identity is also not fixed (Harlow, 2017), it is provisional and is subject to a continuous process of individual and collective customisation and reproduction through interaction with the workplace (Dent, 2017; Webb, 2017). There is a distinction between how identity is thought to evolve through relational, social and cultural factors, which make up a process of professional socialisation *for work,* for example, whilst undertaking qualifying education, and the contextual influences and experiences *by work,* when we are situated in the work environment (Cohen-Scali, 2003; Webb, 2017). Research by Wiles (2017), which explored how professional registration affected how social work students constructed their identity, suggests that the collective social work identity is acquired through the regulatory discourse and through the internalisation of practice standards (now the HCPC Standards of Proficiency (2017), and the Professional Capabilities Framework (2018) which contain the internationally espoused values and ethics of the profession). Leigh (2017a) suggests that social workers' identities can become unsettled and conflicted when performing roles where there is some discrepancy between the collective social work identity and an individual's identity. The current findings, which highlight issues of identity conflict and separation for the social work participants, align with Leigh's interpretation. The discrepancy of behaving as a social worker *inside* a collectively anxious service culture and being

temporarily situated in an individual coaching role *outside* of it resulted in their collective identity being suspended and held in tension.

There are synergies here with Goffman's concept of 'role distance', wherein we actively create space between one identity whilst we improvise and perform another identity according to our particular audience (Chriss, 1999; Goffman, 1972). Drawing further on Goffman's identity theory, the temporary coaching situations can be likened to a live 'impression management' strategy (Goffman, 1959), where their professional identity was being reflexively negotiated in the moment by social workers (Webb, 2017) to give the temporary impression of being a coach, whilst simultaneously suspending their social work identity. Alternatively, the concept of 'provisional selves' proposed by Ibarra (1999) may provide a more fitting construct to consider the dynamics of professional identity development in this study. Ibarra theorised that we experiment with possible selves as a temporary bridge between our current constructions and our future revised professional identities. The transitional situation of being a social worker, then a coach, then a social worker again (often on the same day) or being triggered by environmental cues to *behave* like a social worker during coaching (recall social workers coaching in children's homes) exerted different role demands on the participants. According to Ibarra, this required them to construct a 'negotiated adaptation' in the moment to fit being a coach with the conflicted aspects of being a child protection social worker.

Alvesson & Wilmott (2002) propose that active and self-conscious identity *work* is necessary when routines are interrupted or challenging situations transpire that disrupt or contradict our sense of who we are:

"Specific events, encounters, transitions, experiences, surprises, as well as more constant strains, serve to heighten awareness of the constructed quality of self-identity and compel more concentrated identity work." (p. 626).

According to Alvesson and Wilmott's 'identity regulation, identity work and self-identity' model, identity work is an interpretive activity that repairs, augments and ultimately transforms our self-identity into a more coherent entity. Daly & Kettle (2017) have utilised Giddens' (1991) exploration of 'fateful moments' in identity formation to theorise that engaging in identity work is more likely when routines are disrupted and when the consequences of transition points have to be reflexively considered. Ibarra (1999) suggests that pivotal moments have the potential to be empowering for individuals' professional identities as they have heightened agency in how they experiment with and elaborate upon their existing roles. In the current study much of this identity work was done in focus/coaching supervision groups, when social workers talked frequently about 'head swapping' and the destabilising effect of coaching on their identity as it made competing claims on their attention (Figure 3. below, 'Head Swapping', presents a model of some the key role conflicts that required identity work). Additionally, the beleaguered 'watch your back' (Leigh, 2017a) and chronically uncertain context in which they were operating (see Table 1, which shows that nearly all the social workers changed roles 2 to 3 times in the course of the study) may

have caused their professional identity to become less secure and more open to being transformed (Beddoe, 2011).

Head Swapping Model:
Professional Identity Conflict & Agility

Social Work Head ← **Choice Point** → **Coaching Head**

- Informed by Case History/Prior Knowledge
- Mandated Intervention
- Agenda-Led
- Expert Stance
- Document & Digital Scrutiny
- Power Over
- Time Scarce

Flexed Identity

- Absence of Case History/Prior Knowledge
- Voluntary Intervention
- Agenda-Free
- Egalitarian Stance
- Free from Digital Oversight
- Power To & Power With
- Time Abundant

Social Work Coach

Figure 3. Head Swapping Model

In Leigh's (2013) study of the professionalisation of child protection social workers some of the social workers talked of flipping their professional and personal identities in order to separate the pressures in their practice from their personal lives. Other social workers were no longer able to distinguish between their professional and personal identity, which leads Leigh to conclude that these workers did "not just do social work, they are social work." (2013, p. 637). The differing identity strategies evident in Leigh's research resonate with the current study, where social workers initially compartmentalised their 'social work head' from their 'coaching 'head' as a means for them to co-exist. These makeshift early constructions were

refined during formal and informal coaching interactions in their professional and personal lives until a congruent hybrid professional identity and mindset took shape and they consciously *became* social work coaches (recall Jane who described coaching as something she no longer had to think consciously about as it was 'a natural thing' and her statement that she was 'not going back' to who she was before coaching training). Significantly, the benefits social workers found from re-fashioning their personal identities and 'job crafting' (Hussein, 2018) their work tasks to include coaching language and behaviours point strongly to coaching as a meaningful and identity enriching experience that has applications for social work education, readiness for practice and continuing professional development. This hypothesis of identity enrichment of social workers through coaching training and practice should be explored further in future research.

Keddell & Stanley (2017) posit that the identity of the child protection social worker is especially complex and contested. It is highly institutionalised and shaped by statutory control roles unique to child protection, which requires the ongoing management of an uneasy dissonance between authority and support and protection, risk and empowerment (Parton, 2014a). Webb (2015) suggests that narrow managerial and corporate objectives can negatively influence and be assimilated into how social workers regulate their identity. I will elaborate later in this chapter on the literature relating to how social workers in the current research self-identified as being 'fixers', but it is not a great stretch to hypothesise a link between the organisational time, task and audit-efficiency directives they were continually required to adhere to and their infiltration into their professional identity. Again, the constructs of the 'social work head', being 'paper work prepared' and transmission-based

practice in the findings are also congruent with Webb's proposition. That interagency staff were also said to categorise social workers as 'fixers' and some colleagues described a social worker as having 'a head transplant' in the study gives currency to the notion that professional identity is self - and other - interpreted and is a dialectical construction (Emprechtinger & Voll, 2017) shaped by institutional relationships.

7.2.2 Co-constructing Social Workers as Coaches

Leigh (2013; 2016) contends that the denigrated reputation of the profession in the media is likely to distort the way social workers' identities are constructed. She argues that hostile public perceptions of social workers and the fear of incompetence being exposed create risk averse and oppressive practices that can penetrate and spoil professional identity. Parton (2014b) has identified two contradictory social work stereotypes that exist in the media; they are either ineffectual 'fools and wimps' who fail to intervene in time to protect children from abuse or 'villains and bullies', over-zealous, State-sanctioned child snatchers (Warner, 2013) who groundlessly interfere in families' lives and invade their privacy (Van der Gaag et al., 2017). This provocatively destructive discourse is thought to predispose and encourage defensive behavioural strategies and decisions from workers who consciously and subconsciously draw from it, a practice which then becomes institutionalised within the culture (Leigh, 2016). This shores up public ambivalence and confusion about what social workers do and entrenches a distance between service user and social worker (Leigh, 2014, 2016).

The service users in this study appeared to be attuned to this negative discourse as they highlighted their dislike of the way social workers collectively communicated, including their tone, the language they used, their attitude, their judgmental stance and the patronising way they looked at them. More specifically, they highlighted social workers' dominance in setting the conversational agenda, their insistence on there being a 'right way' of doing things and the inflexibility and formality of their encounters with them. This echoes the research of Penhale & Young (2015) who found that service users who have had direct experience of social workers often feel stigmatised by their involvement and complain of their problem-focused approach. In a recent study of social workers' experience of public perceptions, just the title of 'social worker' was said to be associated with significant and enduring negativity and historic stigma (Legood et al., 2016). This is underscored by service users in this study who also described feelings of resistance being activated in them just by their social work title. Strikingly, social workers introducing themselves in the role of 'coach' (whilst confirming their social work identity outside of the coaching encounter) and behaving *as a coach* from the outset was enough for the service users to instantly suspend any enduring negativity towards them as social workers and to reconstruct their identity accordingly. This research suggests, then, that engaging a coaching mindset interrupted and stirred up the 'available vocabulary' (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006) of how social workers and service users can behave towards one another. The brief relationships they formed indicated accelerated rapport and ironically seemed to be more aligned with those qualities service users *do* value in social work relationships, those that:

"Inspire confidence, are empowering, enable choice and control, are non-discriminatory and non-judgmental and offer informality and flexibility" (Penhale & Young, 2015, p. 14).

This study suggests that in identifying as coaches the social workers were re-energised and able to connect with and communicate with service users uncontaminated by their professional discourse. Service users experienced this shift intuitively and subjectively and were mobilised to make positive changes on their own terms with little ambivalence or resistance. Whilst the findings do not imply a means to repair the reputation of social workers in the minds of service users (Webb, 2017), they do indicate a way for social workers and service users to circumvent and tune out the discourse in individual short-term relationships. It is conceivable that utilising a coaching discourse within social work has the potential to be both identity enhancing and a means for service users to mobilise beneficial change. However, the weak evidence base and literature in this area must be strengthened by much more comprehensive research before this can be claimed with any certainty.

7.3 Disrupting 'Fixing' to Make a Difference

This study has found that coaching training and practice enabled social workers to develop greater congruence between their vocational drive to make a difference and *making a difference through their practice.* This revived their confidence in their ability to make a positive difference to others as social workers but, paradoxically, this was brought about by re-calibrating their helping intent through disrupting a strongly held drive to fix. Lakoff's

Framing theory and work on metaphor (Lakoff, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) may provide a useful insight into the notion of being a 'fixer' and how fixing fits with 'making a difference' as a universal social work axiom. Lakoff is a cognitive linguist who describes frames as unconscious mental structures that influence how we perceive the world. They are ideas that shape how we act, the language that we use and our assumptions. The enduring and dominant frame in contemporary social work is the meta-construct of 'making a difference'. As a cultural frame it neatly encapsulates a complex range of internal altruistic motives and values and repeatedly comes top of the reasons people draw upon when choosing social work as their 'other-directed' career (Erikson & Price, 2017; Furness, 2007; Leigh, 2013; Radey & Figley, 2007; Stevens et al., 2012).

Being instrumental in transforming the lives of the vulnerable and socially disadvantaged is not only embedded within the social work psyche but it has been used repeatedly over time to motivate and attract people to the profession. According to Lakoff, this repetition is key to the strength of a frame and to its activation. In 2009 the then Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) ran a national social work recruitment campaign entitled 'Be the Difference', which was underpinned by insights from extensive quantitative and qualitative research commissioned by the then government Central Office of Information (COI). This research included social work students, current social workers, ex and returning social workers, employers, career seekers and changers and members of the public. It found that the key motivation for joining the profession was primarily the "chance to make a difference to the lives of children and young people" (Children's Workforce Develpment Council & Jigsaw Research, 2008, p. 83). Utilising this as its central PR message, the campaign

resulted in a reported 41% increase in UCAS applications for social work degrees and 57,000 applicants registered an interest in becoming a social worker (COI, 2011). Interestingly, this research was also used by the local authority in which the study took place in an 'Attract and Support Social Workers' recruitment project in 2011. More recently, 'making a difference' has been a feature of the promotional blurb for the government-backed social work training programme Frontline, is cited as a factor for 67% of social workers entering the profession (Johnson et al., 2019) and the recent blog headline 'Social worker: I work because I believe I can make a difference' (Anonymous) was featured on the online hub 'One Stop Social' (which promotes itself as a social care services platform run by front-line staff for front-line staff). Even when they are leaving the profession, as one in ten are now considering (Cooper, 2019), the meaning their involvement has made to others is on their minds:

> "I'll never regret coming into social work and I hope I have made a difference to some people but the time has come for me to get out of the job I once loved so greatly." (Anonymous).

'Making a difference' therefore epitomises a potent ideological frame that has real meaning for social workers and re-animating this in the minds of experienced social workers *via coaching* helped reboot their connection to the conceptual mainframe of the profession – as Danielle said: *"this is what I always wanted to do as a social worker".* This thesis theorises that inside the 'making a difference' frame resides a rescuing 'hero' archetype, which is enacted through workers trying to 'fix' service users and situations and can result in very directive and task-focused practice. This is known as the 'righting reflex' in Motivational Interviewing:

"the desire to fix what seems wrong with people and to set them promptly on a

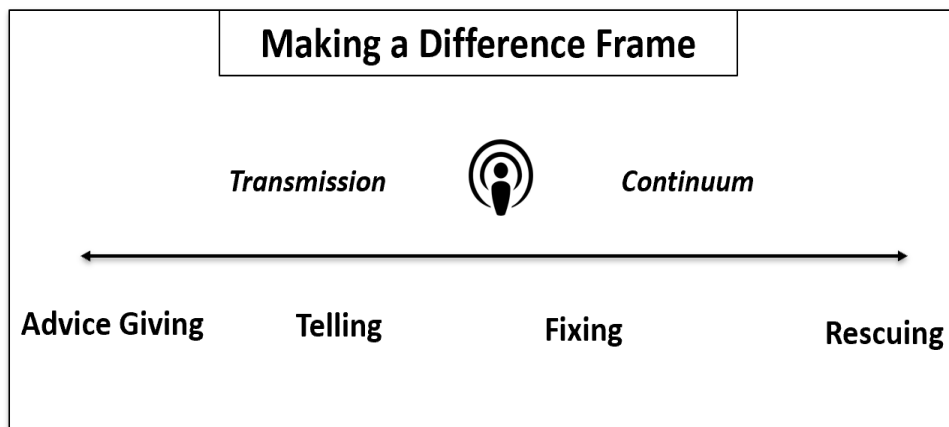better course, relying in particular on directing" (Miller & Rollnick, 2012, p. 7)

The data supports the notion of such a reflex and indicates that the imperative of 'fixing' could

run deep within the profession. Indeed, it crops up in the social work discourse in blogs

written by social workers as something that those in the profession need to strive to 'get

beyond' in their practice (Gawf, n.d.; Olivier, 2017). Writing in 2006, Higham set out a maxim

of 'Critical Thinkers and Fixers' to outline how the role of social work could be conceptualised

in terms of competencies. These roles were not viewed as mutually exclusive, as a

requirement to think critically and reflectively about what is being 'fixed' was perceived as

ideal for skilled practitioners. However, it is easy to see how fixing can come to dominate the

role if you are drawn to social work because you wish to fix injustice and discrimination or

because of personal experiences of suffering or unfairness that you now want to fix for others

(Cooper, 2012). A typical social work 'fixer' is described by Higham (2006) as someone who

absorbs the distress of others and carries an acute sense of responsibility to make things right.

This can lead to fixers creating dependent relationships that disempower service users. As a

style of intervention fixing is anchored in the medical or individual model (Olivier, 2017) and

its rational focus on impairments, disease or illness. It is predominantly associated with the

health professions, and professionals working within this deficit model are "agents of

remedy" (Haegele & Hodge, 2016, p. 194) who use their authority and pragmatic expertise to

determine what fix should be applied to individuals who are deemed deficient or faulty so

that their functioning can be returned to normal:

"Fixing is thought to be the best path toward function and independence, and those who may not want to be fixed are considered non-compliant or unmotivated" (Haegele & Hodge, 2016, p. 195).

Conversely, the social model takes account of structural disadvantage and societal oppression when working with people with impairments to identify how society constructs and imposes disability. Contemporary social work has been shaped by the philosophy of the social model and its scope has influenced practice beyond specialist services. Recently, Featherstone et al (2016) have proposed a social model of child protection as a means of shifting the theoretical framework and reforming the ethos underlying services for families. The findings indicate that the challenge this poses for many social workers is to manage the dichotomy between the pull of their intrinsic motivation to perform the job and the values they subscribe to as professionals. This is consistent with the description given by Ruch (2009) in her account of social workers' default to 'quick-fix' problem solving whilst taking part in a relationship-based group model of reflection.

Fixing is often communicated via advice giving, telling and instructing. If fixing is viewed on a continuum of transmission-based behaviours, with rescuing at its extreme (see Figure 3.), we can begin to see how this can become synonymous with 'making a difference' and can become absorbed within the social work identity. Karpman's Drama Triangle (Karpman, 2011) is a relevant theoretical model to apply here. The Drama Triangle was developed by Karpman as a practical interpretation of Eric Berne's theory of Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1968), a theoretical model of how people think and express themselves when in the different ego

states of parent, adult and child. In the Drama Triangle these ego states become three archetypes: Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer. We are triggered in different situations to behave as if in one or other of these roles, often leaping from one to another in a single interaction, although we have a role that we are most likely to default to. Coach Michael Bungay-Stanier summarises the rescuer's core belief as "don't worry, let me jump in and take it on and fix it" (2016, p. 138). The rescuing social worker, then, is the advice giver, the 'born fixer' of people who are 'broken', the one who takes over others' responsibilities and the one who is burdened and stuck if their fix doesn't work or their advice is rejected by the Victim. It is, arguably, a well-intentioned but unwittingly oppressive model for social work (Adams, 2003) that can be overwhelming for the fixer and prompts overdependence and emotional collusion (McMahon, 2010) with the helplessness of the person being 'fixed'.

Making a Difference Frame

Transmission   *Continuum*

Advice Giving   **Telling**   **Fixing**   **Rescuing**

Figure 4. Social Worker Motivational Frame

The language of rescuing also crops up in the official social work discourse; the 2013 version of the statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' gave it both a moral and

professional legitimacy whilst setting the tone for what it meant for social workers to be child-centred and authoritative:

"A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes" (HM Government, 2013, p. 22).

Given that professional child rescue has been ideologically and politically endorsed in social policy (Featherstone, Morris et al., 2014; Parton, 2014a; Warner, 2015) and that being an instinctive 'fixer' was how all the social workers in this study self-identified and enacted as their behavioural default, it has been surprising to discover that the concepts of 'rescuing' and 'fixing' are so theoretically under-studied in the social work literature. I have therefore looked to other fields to examine the concept further and to find indirect evidence to draw interesting parallels with my findings.

Evidence can be found to support the tendency towards fixing and telling and the behavioural effects of breaking with it more obviously in studies of helping relationships if we return to the medical model. For example, the study 'Relinquishing the Need to "Fix It": Medical Intervention with Domestic Abuse' (Rittmayer & Roux, 1999) found that once obstetricians revised their goal of 'fixing' domestic abuse as a medical problem, they were able to redirect their energies towards offering options, respecting patient choice and raising awareness of the need for societal reform. In the last decade the idea of surrendering the need to fix has been given more explicit recognition through a growing body of evidence on the success of

health coaching. This has been gathering momentum in the UK since 2010 through a series of pilot studies in the East of England and through the NHS Health Coaching Coalition and their 'Better Conversation Better Health' movement (Coulter & Griffiths, 2016). The traditional, paternalistic Dr-patient model, based on an expert advice giver who the patient depends on to fix their health condition, is currently being subjected to a quiet revolution that has the patient's self-determined health goals and self-care motivation at its heart. Health coaching training is currently being accessed by a wide range of health professionals to introduce a radical paradigm shift in their mindset and behaviour. All coaching is grounded in a philosophy that warns against advice giving and taking responsibility for fixing others as it risks denying the client their ownership of the issue and its solution. It also risks them ignoring the advice altogether or blaming the fixer if the advice or imposed solution does not work (Rogers, 2016). Bungay Stanier (2016) highlights that jumping in to fix things often results in the presenting problem being fixed and not the real issue underlying it. It may also be that the "solution is not necessarily related to the problem" (De Shazer, 1991, p. xiii). However, fixing surface issues can feel more comfortable than the ambiguity of exploring what the real issue is. As the social workers in this study attest, the pressure to 'fix' - to find and action a solution as quickly as possible in a time-poor environment - can feel unbearable and irresistible.

A recent report on the promising impact and application of health coaching revealed an uncanny resonance with the findings relating to social workers in this study, reporting a shift from "fixer" to enabler and the adoption of a more flexible consultation style with clinicians:

"Using more silence, listening, challenge and open questions, and resisting the temptation to come up with solutions 'stopping trying to fix everything'" (Newman, 2014, p. 22).

Through health coaching, a more empowering interpersonal dynamic is being promoted in the consultation process to encourage improvements in lifestyle and ownership for people keeping themselves well (Newman, 2014). It is plausible that the shifting dynamic between health staff and patients mirrors the shift between social workers and service users in this study. As coaches, both health staff and social workers abrogated their need to control and fix and were better able to tolerate the equivocal. Finding themselves free of this self-imposed tyranny created space for a new, more motivating relationship to emerge with clients.

7.3.1 Coaching & the Responsibilisation Agenda

Actively stepping away from the perceived responsibility for fixing others and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own freedom (Bungay Stanier, 2016) by asking questions like 'what do you want?' is not the same as the neo-liberal individualist ideology of 'responsibilisation', although there are superficial similarities. Responsibilisation uses the principles of the economic market to advance individual self-governance and self-direction along with autonomous self-care. As a practice approach it displaces the responsibilities of the State and confers them onto the individual, who is perceived as rational and accountable regardless of social and contextual factors and economic inequality. The main thrust of responsibilisation is, therefore, to valorise the individual and favour more transactional-based

interventions as answers to the symptoms of systemic social problems (such as neglect arising from experiences of generations of poverty and deprivation), where individual choices are viewed as being enacted in isolation from the dynamic context in which they are taken (Featherstone et al., 2017). Liebenberg, Ungar & Ikeda (2015) argue that the shift in focus towards more active patient management of their illness in health care may signal empowerment as its driver, when reducing the financial burden on the system is its true aim. This, then, provides justification for the scaling back of government funding and government accountability.

In this sense neoliberalism may be marginal driver for health coaching or the future use of coaching in social work, as enabling clients to make the changes they need to make to live better lives *will* save the State money. There is, therefore, a danger that the wider use of coaching within social work and health services could become co-opted by the neoliberal project for economic reasons and unwittingly lead to responsibilisation becoming more culturally tolerated. It could also be argued that coaching is a way of enabling service users to live better lives of poverty and misery, by focusing on individual, micro-level change and not on change that counters the structural and socio-economic inequalities that can overwhelm their lives. But this would be a wilful misinterpretation of coaching's interest, which lies in how the individual consciousness interacts with its environment to create a particular reality. This reality can be reconstructed in the space of one coaching session, therefore its *immediate* potential to effect change is very attractive, whereas societal, political and structural change can take decades to filter down to individuals and is often only perceived in hindsight. If coaching in health or social work had its own version of 'responsibilisation' its focus would be

on the motivating energy derived from freedom of choice and the daunting sense of agency that taking responsibility for one's actions and responses engenders, whatever the context. This is exemplified in the memoire of psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (2004), oft quoted within the coaching literature, who said of his experiences of living in a concentration camp: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (p. 75). For Frankl meaning is not related to happiness or pleasure but in an existential change of attitude towards unavoidable suffering. Using coaching, in the current study, amplified the freedom *and* the responsibility of service users, which suggests that doing so provided a more liberating structure to explore change potential (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013) than traditional social work interventions allow for.

7.3.2 Bypassing Fixing, Reactance & Resistance

According to Rogers, virtually all advice giving, whilst appearing well intentioned and benign, is about control and results in people defending their position, thus limiting their potential to learn and grow: "No-one enjoys being told to change something they already know they should change, so all your energy goes into repelling the advice" (Rogers, 2016, p. 28). This is summarised by Rogers in the phrase 'you insist, I resist' and neatly encapsulates the theory of psychological reactance posited by Brehm (1966) in his classic work. This study underscores the importance of Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT), which states that we are aversively motivated to strive to restore lost, restricted or threatened behavioural freedoms. Reactance is defined as:

"an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat

to or loss of their free behaviours. It serves as a motivator to restore one's freedom."

(Steindl, Jonas, Sittenthaler, Traut-Mattausch & Greenberg, 2015, p. 205).

Reactance has become a widely researched psychological phenomenon in the last 50 years and can be used to theorise how undesirable outcomes such as anger, hostility, irritation and disagreement can be arrived at in response to perceived freedom threats. The degree of reactance we experience corresponds to the importance and magnitude of the freedom threat that we perceive. Being advised, being instructed, being made to comply with a 'fix' or being rescued can all result in a perceived loss of agency and lead us to resist the social influence of the 'fixer'. Threats can also be aroused through more subtle, subliminal processes, such as being primed (Steindl et al., 2015) by the negative reputation of social workers, who are perceived as having the power to dictate how you parent, with the ultimate threat of removing your children if you don't comply.

Reactance results in a strong urge to do something - often the opposite of what we are told to do - or to reject the messages we are being given and discredit their source. This psychological phenomenon is well documented in the literature (see Steindl et al., (2015); Rosenberg & Siegel (2017)) and the use of controlling language that *tells* others what to do, containing adverbs such as 'should', 'ought', 'must' and 'need' has been shown to arouse greater reactance compared with less directive language that supports autonomy (Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young & Potts, 2007; Quick & Considine, 2008). Researchers theorise that reactance can be an overt "I'm not doing what you tell me" reactive response or a more

subconscious process, which is not readily surfaced or articulated by those experiencing it. Recovering lost freedoms through reactance can also be increased if the threat to freedom is coming from an 'outgroup', a group that does not align with the social identity of the person who perceives the potential loss (Graupmann, Jonas, Meier, Hawelka & Aichhorn, 2012). As signifiers of State power who have control of the freedoms of others, social workers are very likely to be perceived as an 'outgroup' by service users. Moreover, social workers' use of controlling language could unwittingly be creating reactance to the changes they want to see in service users, which, paradoxically, means that the change outcomes they require are less likely to be realised. The experience of coaching appeared to bypass overt reactance responses in service users because their free choice remained intact. Their involvement in coaching was voluntary, not mandated, and nothing was being asked of them – rather they were asking change of themselves.

The strong motivational effects of this psychological construct may also explain at an individual, micro level why some service users fail to change when it is in their best interests to do so. The subconscious rejection of advice, instructions and coercive language from a social work 'transmitter' can have either an aversive boomerang effect (Miller et al., 2007) of people either trying to regain freedom by doing the opposite of what is asked of them or of people entrenching their positions by purposefully not following up on instructions whilst superficially seeming to do so. This was articulated in focus groups in this study as the 'smile and nod' mentality of some service users in response to demands for change from social workers outside of coaching. It was implied that some service users will appear to agree to co-operate with advice and instructions and requests for information to get the social worker

out of the house as soon as possible and that, as a result, the capacity for change cannot be accurately assessed. It is possible to highlight an interesting parallel to this in the organisational behaviour of children's social workers themselves in Leigh's (2017b) ethnographic research, also in children's social work teams in the north of England. She observed acts of resistance, recalcitrance and organisational misbehaviour from social workers when an Ofsted inspection was announced as imminent. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1959), Leigh posits that social workers used the same 'nod and smile' phrase as a catch-all for impression management strategies they used to deflect attention away from their organisational misbehaviour:

> "The use of a colloquial term such as "just nod and smile" was a powerful signifier as it demonstrated how certain inconspicuous sayings can socialize workers into adopting particular stances within a team: do as you are told or face the consequences." (Leigh, 2017b, p. 618).

Social workers *and* service users, then, find ways and means to resist the social influence of those who tell them they must do something, through conscious or subconscious reactance and acts of concealment to regain behavioural freedom. Reactance is not a concept explored by Leigh but I believe it is at work in her study and is the construct that provides the most apt explanation for service user coachees enduring hostility and defensiveness towards social workers in this research. Conversely, a *lack* of reactance generated during coaching interactions may also explain why the likeability and rapport with social workers was not diminished by the thought-provoking challenges and questioning of behaviours that they employed in relation to service user' goals.
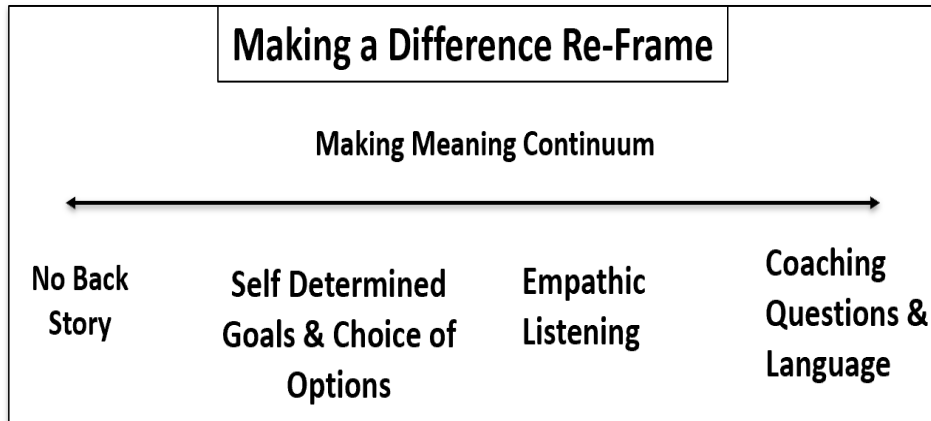
Psychological *resistance* is a close cousin of psychological reactance and together they form the twin psychosocial forces that social workers have to deal with in the main when working with service users. Explaining the biology behind these forces, emergency room physician and improvement coach Mark Jaben states that when we are resistant our brains are being stimulated with the adrenaline of threat, which puts us in a state where we are not able to consider alternatives. We experience an internal conflict outside of our conscious awareness which presents as *their* choice versus *our* choice, which we will defend and cling to against all others, even if it is not in our best interests (Jaben, 2016). Forrester and colleagues (2012) posit a number of potential causes for resistance in the social work encounter, including the social context, fear and shame arising from the child protection circumstances, service user ambivalence or conflicting emotions about the change required and a lack of confidence in their ability to change. Most relevant to this study is their argument that the micro skills needed to work with resistant clients have not been given enough recognition and that this is problematic as the behaviour of social workers can be a significant contributor to resistance during interactions. Social workers whose communication style is confrontational or coercive or who take an expert stance are more likely to create more resistance than those who use advanced listening skills and open questions (Forrester, Kershaw et al., 2008). Social workers in this study cited many examples where they had integrated such micro skills into their everyday practice through using informal and formal coaching. They compared this as an approach that worked more effectively than their former go-to dictatorial style and compulsive, intrusive helping (Heron, 2001). The evidence of minor milestones successfully being reached by those they coached also indicates that reactance and resistance were neutralised by this approach for the sample in this study. It is clearly an area that warrants much further research and attention and which this study has merely touched upon.

In 2012 Forrester & colleagues proposed a theory of Motivational Social Work that incorporates Motivational Interviewing (MI) skills into the social work repertoire as a means of overcoming resistance. As referred to in Chapter Two, MI is a goal-oriented intervention that uses advanced communication skills to facilitate conversations that resolve ambivalence towards change (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). Similar to (and borrowed by) coaching, it is rooted in a philosophy that values the client's thoughts on change over those of the interviewer. In a recent study, Wilkins and Whittaker (2018) put the Motivational Social Work (MSW) model into practice with child and family social workers. They observed the same social workers using the MSW communication model with some families but defaulting to authoritarian, directive styles with others. The explanation for this lack of consistency was attributed by the social workers to them being more suspicious of certain 'types' of parents and to their exclusive child focus. Perplexed, the researchers conclude: "the ability to use such an approach is no guarantee that such an approach will be used" (p. 2012). The current study seemed to have more success in creating the conditions for social workers to straddle the binary position of being empathic and collaborative *or* working with authority and purpose. This is evidenced in the way formal and informal coaching approaches were integrated into the way the social workers related and communicated *globally* - with service users, colleagues and family members. Indeed, some felt using coaching changed who they were as people, so in this sense coaching went beyond being just another model or tool in the kit to apply only when social workers judged those in front of them as appropriate. This assimilation of coaching into elements of their lives beyond their professional roles may explain why this study appeared to be more successful in its consistent application than the MSW model.

Social and Organisational Psychologist Edgar Schein argues that we exist in a culture of 'Do and Tell' (Schein, 2013), that we value telling more than asking and value doing over relating, which diminishes our ability to form relationships that really help. Forrester (2016) refers to this as 'zombie social work', a practice that is hugely occupied with superficial *doing* activities. Its focus is on throughput, documentation and procedural compliance that is disconnected from its purpose and no longer alive to its core values (Gibbs, 2009). These propositions are supported in this study, which found that the default practice mindset of the social workers taking part was agenda-led and dominated by 'telling people what to do' and 'having things to do' as part of being 'social work prepared'.

Disrupting the fixing instinct, the language of fixing and the status of being a 'fixer', achieved by using coaching training and practice in this small study, could be utilised by the social work profession to help inoculate against reactance in everyday interactions with service users. Usurping the dynamics of the motivational frame for social work and incorporating new terms to sit within the 'making a difference' frame is perhaps the starting point. As Lakoff counsels: "new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently" (Lakoff, 2014, p. xiii). Coaching training and practice resulted in a dialogic change in the way social workers spoke to others, spoke about themselves and made sense of things in their personal lives. The story of their practice impact changed, and a wider conceptualisation of 'making a difference' was found in the modest transformations of service users. Figure 4. overleaf presents an alternative, revised motivational frame, using the key elements of coaching, which social workers in this research used to help them feel like they had made a difference:

Making a Difference Re-Frame

Making Meaning Continuum

No Back Story | Self Determined Goals & Choice of Options | Empathic Listening | Coaching Questions & Language

Figure 5. Hypothesised Motivational Frame for Social Work Using Coaching

This model retains social workers' rhetorical attachment to the 'making a difference' frame, but the continuum is no longer focused on transmitting a fix but on social workers finding meaning in their work through co-constructing new meanings with service users. It is based on stimulating an 'I choose to' rather than an 'I have to' mindset (Hilton & Anderson, 2018) to forestall psychological reactance and resistance and up-end transmission-based practices. This model also draws on the findings of Hussein et al (2014) who found that being able to put values (linking to making a difference) into practice was a key motivator affecting 280 newly qualified social workers' job satisfaction and intentions to stay or leave the profession. The conclusions of Amabile and Kramer (2011,) whose research on people's inner work lives involved reading thousands of diary entries of knowledge workers (workers who 'think for a living' as opposed to performing manual or physical tasks) is also relevant. They analysed workers' intrinsic motivation towards their work and discovered 'the progress principle', that making even small progress in *meaningful* work is the single most important motivator. Amabile and Kramer's findings support the sense that social workers had in this study of making a positive difference when service users or colleagues had made only minor changes

or had an 'aha' moment of insight (think of Angela completing two mindfulness classes, Emma letting her children make breakfast for the first time, Gabriella not asking her mother whether to put a vest on her daughter). Thus, it is not the accomplishment of long-term, measurable social work outcomes or the rarity of major breakthroughs that make us feel confident that we have made a difference and that our work has meaning, but what Amabile and Kramer call 'the power of small wins', the softer outcomes (Adam & Green, 2016) that can "evoke outsize positive reactions." (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 6).

7.3.3 Ceding Social Power & Activating Personal Power

In this study, the feelings social workers had of being re-energised to 'make a difference again' was premised upon them ceding social power and control in coaching and social work relationships and activating power in those being coached. These findings therefore contribute to the wider thinking about power and empowerment in the literature. Power is often conceptualised narrowly as relating to the dominance and unequal control of the behaviour of others or of valued resources. This is the construct of social power; those who possess it hold a disproportionate influence over the states of others and their access to the things they need. These can be tangible items such as money, food, housing or less concrete assets like recognition, attention or status (Cuddy, 2016). Those who are socially powerless are reliant on those who are socially powerful to guide them, which can lead the powerless to endorse the unjust circumstances that perpetuate their structural inequality, as demonstrated in the counter-intuitive research findings of van de Torn et al (2015). Operating at a conscious level it can have a transformative effect on our individual psychology in terms

of how we think, feel and act (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). The depleting effects of feelings of powerlessness have been described by social psychologist Dacher Keltner as compromising "our ability to reason, to reflect, to engage in the world, and to feel good and hopeful about the future." (Keltner, 2017, p. 10). It can result in 'goal neglect', the failure to stay focused on performing a necessary task (Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky & Wilco, 2008) and research suggests that it produces a social anxiety that interferes with our ability to mentalise and see the perspectives of others (Todd, Forstmann, Burgmer, Brooks & Galinsky, 2015). Ultimately, it affects our ability to process, act upon and listen to what others are saying to us, an important factor in the often anxiety provoking and power-skewed encounters between social workers and service users.

At a non-conscious level, feelings of power or powerlessness can be turned on by a plethora of non-verbal power cues such as vocal pitch and the rate of speech and interruptions that affect how we engage and respond (Smith & Galinsky, 2010). This was echoed in the current study with service users picking up that the social workers coaching them did not 'look or sound' like social workers they had met before, remembering that they were spoken to in a 'nice tone' and that they did not have the 'stance' or attitude they associated with social workers. A more optimistic body of studies has shown that people moving out of situations or relationships in which elevated power was activated conceptually can feel more hopeful about their future, engage more readily in action and exhibit behaviours that move them *towards* new situations (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003) rather than feeling threatened or inhibited by them: "Power makes us approach. Powerlessness makes us avoid" (Cuddy, 2016, p. 112). Priming feelings of increased power in a specific instance can also continue to

have positive consequences outside of it and have a far-reaching influence that people are equally unaware of in new situations (Smith & Galinsky, 2010). Again, the results of this study resonate here, with service users describing the positive ripple effect from the changes they felt empowered to make (Yalom, 2008). Evidence from this thesis thus suggests that coaching may, in small ways, be able to off-set the negative consequences of powerlessness experienced in social work relationships and its corresponding effects upon service users' psychology, by offering a different subjective experience of personal power and what van der Kolk (2015) calls 'self-leadership', being more consciously in charge of ourselves.

As Hilton & Anderson (2018) state in their Psychology of Change Framework white paper, asking people to change the way they have always behaved and to relinquish their positional authority is difficult. The egalitarian practitioner stance inherent in coaching required the social workers in this research to cede the social power associated with the authority of their social work roles in order to activate a hypothetical personal power in service users through their relationship. This meant making a conscious choice to sacrifice status and to step away from behavioural habits that denote power, such as leading the agenda, dominating the conversation and defining outcomes. Contrary to the power derogation studies referred to above, coaching involved intentionally priming the mindsets of service users by enabling them to experience elevated personal power as they determined and visualised their goals. Personal power is different to social power in that it cannot be rationed or capped, and we do not need to control or compete with others to hold on to it:

"Personal power is characterised by freedom from the dominance of others. It

is infinite as opposed to zero-sum – it's about access to control of limitless inner

resources, such as our skills and abilities, our deeply held values, our true

personalities, our boldest selves" (Cuddy, 2016, p. 113).

Having personal power does not mean we can control all the outcomes in our lives, as these

are mostly subject to variables outside of our control, nor can individual acts of ceding social

power and control address an absence of social, economic and structural power or increase

access to material resources. However, according to Cuddy, we are more *likely* to achieve

social power by our increased confidence in ourselves, which is where coaching approaches

have the potential to offer something new to social work.

A new conceptualisation of power has recently been defined by psychologist Dacher Keltner

(2017), which he calls the 'Power Paradox', which is important to consider alongside the

current study findings. It serves as a warning light for interventionist discourse (Featherstone,

White & Morris, 2014) and for some of the autocratic and managerialist interpersonal

behaviours that surface in the social work profession (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbein &

Rollnick, 2008; Forrester et al., 2012; Trevithick, 2014; Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). Keltner

contends that when we gain the ability to make a difference in the world through accruing

social power, the experience of having that power leads us to empathy deficits that permeate

everyday interactions and relationships. This corrosion in empathy limits our experiences of

compassion, expressions of gratitude and elevation, thus paradoxically diminishing our ability

to make a difference, which ultimately hinges upon our influence on the states of others:

"your ability to make a difference in the world is shaped by what other people think of you. Your capacity to alter the states of others depends on their trust in you. Your ability to empower others depends on their willingness to be influenced by you. Your power is constructed in the judgments and actions of others" (Keltner, 2017, p. 43).

In contrast, social workers in this study appeared to experience this power paradox in reverse. During coaching conversations they temporarily gave up leading and controlling the agenda, which created a more equal and trusting atmosphere. They demonstrated empathic listening and used different language and questions to enable service users to determine their own goals. In doing so the social workers were able to activate their intrinsic motivation to make small transformations in their worlds. In turn this created a more concrete experience of empowerment for the social workers and a reanimation of their aspirational desire to make a difference. At the intersection of social work and coaching, in the current study empowerment stemmed from the confidence to give social power away, as opposed to holding it close and acting it out through prescriptive fixing, coercive power plays or extrinsic motivators to enforce change.

7.3.4 Operationalising Empowerment to Make a Difference

The empowerment paradigm sits centre stage as a theory of practice for social work (Depauw & Driessens, 2017) and within the definition of contemporary social work (International Federation of Social workers, 2014). Adams states that empowerment is a key activity within the profession: "social workers need empowerment to render their practice

transformational" (Adams, 2003, p. 3) yet it is a concept that is often contested and interpreted very differently (see Ibrahim and Alkire, (2007) for a summary of 30 different definitions), in other words, what empowerment *is* and what *it looks like* can be different things to different people. As Fook (2016) has identified, empowerment theory may not apply well to social work practice and may produce disempowering and de-motivating effects, such as service users feeling patronised by the 'help' on offer. In his book 'Helping', Schein (2008) argues that by offering help we automatically raise our own status to that of being more well-adjusted, whilst simultaneously lowering the status of the person we are offering help to. Empowerment in social work must hold this tension and attempt to overcome the inherent contradiction of seeking to empower those we work with whilst simultaneously managing risk and exercising legal duties that may disempower them (Adams, 2003; Parton, 2014b). Karpetis (2015) has identified that there is a paucity of studies operationalising empowerment in social work and this raises practice questions about how empowerment is achieved, which this study has tentatively begun to answer. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) propose 4 internationally comparable indicators of agency that could lead to empowerment and which are pertinent to this study:

1. Empowerment as control (power over) *Control over personal decisions*

2. Empowerment as choice (power to) *Domain specific autonomy*

3. Empowerment as change (power from within) *Changing aspects in one's life*

4. Empowerment in community (power with) *Changing aspects in communal life*

Agency indicators 1 to 3 were all demonstrated in the quiet but fairly rapid changes service users made in their 3-4 coaching sessions. They chose to take part in coaching (power over) had control over the pace, topics, goals and actions they worked on (power to) and chose to

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change aspects of their lives (power from within). The results of this study therefore support the notion that service users were able to exert and expand their agency and empowerment through taking part in coaching. The findings suggest that there were also benefits beyond the self-empowerment of service users, as social workers themselves talked optimistically about coaching providing them with a concrete way to translate their conceptual understanding of empowerment into a practice that was focused on moving 'from doing to, to working with'. They too were empowered by coaching relationships where service users behaved as though they were agency rich instead of agency poor.

Curiously, the findings also contradict the analysis that empowerment-in-practice can only occur if the pre-requisite of social workers *themselves* being empowered is met (Adams, 2003). The social workers in this study were experiencing acute professional powerlessness due to the insecurity of their positions, role overload and the gale force institutional chaos in which they were working. They were not empowered to challenge the oppressive organisational culture with its tight procedural and process adherence. Yet despite this, for just a small window, coaching sessions empowered social workers to place their own lack of autonomy into the background and activate personal power in service users without replicating these experiences. These findings thus offer an insight into how to quickly reduce the structural power imbalance between social workers and service users using a short-term coaching approach, where power is achieved together (Tew, 2006) and is experienced mutually. It also provides hope for coaching's transfer into other less hostile social work environments.

7.3.5 Priming Empowerment in the Study Design

This section would not be complete without re-iterating a striking finding related to the design of the study. When acting as *coaches* social workers were not allowed to know the background history of service users so they had to sacrifice their exclusive, one-sided knowledge power (Fook, 2016) before they met, putting them in a state of 'not knowing' (de Jong & Berg, 2001; Rice, 2017; Ruch, 2009). This was done to mimic the very limited information received by all coaches prior to meeting new coachees, which I had experienced as a coach and which I felt intuitively might be of benefit in a social work coach/service user relationship. The tension between the service user's truth narrative and the truth according to institutional records, digital scrutiny and surveillance is often the problematic basis on which social work relationships are constructed and framed (Gilbert & Powell, 2010; Oliver, 2012; Parton, 2006; 2008). Thus, the deliberate removal of any official case history meant that the objectifying gaze of the State was bypassed. It also meant that social workers were unable to contradict service users' narratives or make judgments about them withholding information. It required them to be open and curious and this led to greater congruence in understanding (Platt, 2007). Service users had control of their private stories, which emerged as an empowering and liberating experience for them and the social workers. Bungay-Stanier (2016) states that the fixing impulse in helpers thrives and depends on detail: "If you're not trying to fix things, you don't need the backstory" (p. 102). Being knowledge and agenda-free on arrival at coaching sessions helped social workers "desist from doing" (Ruch, 2009, p. 354) and prevented them from formulating premature notions of what goals service users *should* be working on according to their social work history.

Theories of narrative identity may be useful to apply here. They state that adults understand their lives through constructing and communicating stories about themselves (Adler et al., 2015). Enabling service users to sequence, contextualise and filter their self-stories into what Gantz (2009) calls a mobilising 'Story of Now' during coaching gave permission for a *different* narrative to be told in the moment. The coachee became the lead protagonist in their own story of change (Vogel, 2012), which could contradict formal social work scripts and interrupt the stories users habitually told themselves about their lives. This is supported by the research of social psychologist Amy Cuddy on the relevance of agency in affirming your story:

"Telling yourself what matters is one thing, but equally important is taking control of how you tell your story – to yourself and to others" (Cuddy, 2016, p. 52).

Putting the meaning of their story back in their control from the beginning set the stage for a more equitable relationship to take shape between service users and social workers, where the service users' self-knowledge and construction of reality was allowed to prevail (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). It can be theorised that the substantial reduction of the social and knowledge power of the practitioner also allowed unthought of or previously resisted or dismissed choices and advice to be glimpsed as new possibilities.

The idea of *not knowing* a service user's 'backstory' is counter-intuitive in social work, which relies heavily on the synthesis of different detailed information sources to inform assessments and professional judgement. However, this study showed that when service users did not have to conform to or compete with a social worker's version of their reality, accessing their

personal power for subtle individual change rapidly became a possibility. Whilst this idea may result in a nervous tic in a profession fixated with knowing (Webb, 2006), this study has demonstrated that there are certain circumstances where purposely 'not knowing' *is* possible and is potentially more beneficial than the comfort of knowing. Furthermore, admitting to subjective uncertainty and 'not knowing' has been mooted by Ruch (2007) as a vital element of the reflective process in social work and this area is therefore an avenue that would benefit from further scholarly attention.

7.4 Summary

Throughout this penultimate chapter the primary messages from this research have been discussed and situated amongst the literature. This is the first empirical research to utilise coaching in children's social work, which is very unrepresented in debates about the future of social work and the kinds of positive relationships it can have with service users. I have argued that increasing the repertoire of social workers' relational skills through coaching resulted in their infiltration into many areas of their professional lives, rippling out and dynamically taking hold in the "messy realities of practice" (Ruch et al., 2010, p. 27). The thesis holds that coaching connections can accelerate engagement and mobilise service users' agency to make small transformations in their worlds. Short-term coaching relationships can achieve this without producing reactance and resistance and without the need for deep relationships with service users. It has also been argued that coaching fundamentals such as empathic listening and being free of an agenda or service user history offer a practical means for social workers to operationalise abstract notions of empowerment and reduce the felt experience of structural power differences in relationships. The study therefore contributes

to the vague and sparse literature on how to realise empowerment in social work, which can be applied within social work education and continuing professional development programmes.

It has been highlighted that this study builds upon the limited but burgeoning professional identity literature in social work. It advances a novel theoretical model to explain how the hybrid role of being a social worker and a coach can cause initial identity conflict that resolves into a more agile and enriched social work identity. Furthermore, this thesis contends that a behavioural holding pattern of fixing, telling and transmitting were the practice default of all the social workers who took part. Extrapolating from this, I have argued that fixing may be symptomatic of a distorted practice orthodoxy for many social workers who enter the profession, which is framed by a 'make a difference' message. An alternative motivational frame is hypothesised that utilises the key factors from social workers' coaching experiences that led them to feel like they had 'made a difference again'. I have posited that using coaching enabled social workers to break free of this potentially oppressive practice gridlock and to reframe and positively realign 'making a difference' with their professional values, ethics and inherent motivation for the role.

Crucially, I have demonstrated that formal coaching and the informal use of coaching skills are transferable to working with mandated and voluntary child protection clients, even within a context of extreme time scarcity and when organisational anxiety, uncertainty and turbulence were at their height. This chapter presents a strong argument to support the use of coaching within social work as a re-energising force and this study has supplied some

empirical substance from which future research can build. Suggestions for further research

have been highlighted throughout and will be summarised in the next and concluding chapter,

where the study's limitations and recommendations can also be found.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Reflections on the Research Journey

I have become immersed in the literature of social work and coaching during the process of answering my research questions. Theories of empowerment and professional identity have really helped me to interpret my data and have enabled me to see what might be missing in how these are applied in the service of practice. This increased understanding, combined with the 'live' research experience, has been a source of great growth and enlightenment for me and I hope it will be for those reading this thesis.

The interaction of coaching and social work has not been addressed empirically before, and I feel I have developed some authority on their synergies as practices, although I accept the contested and provisional nature of all knowledge (Roos, 2017). Specifically, this thesis has demonstrated that formal and informal coaching approaches can coexist alongside the social work remit and enable social workers to better realise empowerment and small-scale change in their practice with clients. Moreover, the study shows that facilitating short term coaching connections produced feelings of professional self-worth for social workers and a revived reconnection with meaning in their role and their vocational intent to 'make a difference'. As a result, I feel that I have made an important contribution to knowledge and hope the findings will have some external transferability to populations of interest (Padgett, 2008) in social care that reach beyond the specific statutory setting of the social workers who took part.

This research has required all those participating to step well outside of their comfort zones to engage in it fully. Without any experience of coaching social workers and service users had no common reference point, which meant that they were cautious and/or ambivalent about the prospect of engaging and it was not an easy task to persuade people to take part. It has therefore been both a privilege and a relief to witness very experienced social workers being excited and energised by an opportunity that they feel has transformed and invigorated their practice. Hearing them express their experiences in emotional and humorous terms, which are far from the rational language of monitoring, performance indicators, systems and outcomes, has been uplifting, insightful and at times profound. In earlier focus groups social workers gained emotional energy from each other to find ways and means to coach within the existing turbulent and riven system (Burns, 2015). Indeed, in later focus group discussions it sometimes felt like the groups were providing a safe space for social workers to feel solidarity in their personal experiences of the ongoing organisational trauma, and to begin to re-experience parts of themselves as helping professionals that the social work system had blunted. Thus, on a small scale, this research has encouraged the development of a repository of tacit knowledge between those social workers involved who shared an embodied knowing of what delivering and receiving coaching feels like and means, which seems to have invoked existing *and* new practice wisdom.

Social workers in the study appeared to have done what happiness researcher Andy Cope (Cope & Bradley, 2016) exhorts us all to do – reset the norm. They reset what was their own default 'norm' of responding to service users as 'fixers' and this also rippled out to those in their professional and personal lives whom they would normally advise and direct. Where

possible they integrated coaching language and questions into their everyday communication and developed a more agile presence and identity built on a greater ability to listen, question and respond. This mirrors my own experiences and transformational journey since becoming a coach and it has been gratifying and humbling to watch others incorporate the coaching ethos into who they are. The coaching lens thus has the potential not only to make an impact in terms of the way social workers relate to service users, but it also offers promising prospects for humanising the process-driven social work culture.

I have also been moved and heartened by the stories of service users who have told me about the quiet transformations they have made in their lives brought about through their coaching experiences. These service user stories were made possible by giving social workers permission to liberate themselves from the hard outcomes evaluated for in social work assessments and to value the softer outcomes defined by service users' goals. I have felt buoyed by the idea that coaching and social work can sit side by side in an enabling empowerment paradigm if social workers can learn how to activate service users' personal power through engaging and listening to people differently. Most significant for me has been to hear social workers describe coaching as helping them to reclaim the idea of a more fulfilling practice, which has made them feel that they have made a difference again. This has given me a sense of hope that with some investment in coaching training, it might be possible to prevent social workers from leaving the profession by helping them to fulfil their vocational ideals.

However, undertaking a 'real world' study with participants who are part of an organisation experiencing a calamitous public crisis has, at times, proved to be frustrating, stressful and difficult. I seriously underestimated the effect of emergent political issues on the social work coach cohort, which arose due to the preparation for, demands of and subsequent ramifications of an Ofsted inspection of children's services that conflicted with the needs of the research project at a crucial point in the project timeline (when coaching of service users was planned to commence). As a result I have often found myself vacillating between despair (for example when communications from me were not answered; when making contact with service users to arrange first coaching sessions was delayed) and excitement (when coaching of service users began) throughout the research project as the dynamic situation and circumstances of the social workers shifted. It did, however, subject coaching to what could be considered extreme circumstances and supports a degree of optimism in terms of the approach's transferability to contexts that are not undergoing such upheaval. Losing all but one of the collaborative management/gatekeeper relationships almost overnight as the service was declared to be failing was disorientating; I no longer had any insider foothold or established credibility in the senior echelons of the organisation to promote the research with social workers and to ensure those taking part were supported. Having two participants resign without jobs to go to and one take long term sick leave the day after coaching training was completed was a particular low point and I worried for the wellbeing of those who had left and those who were staying to take part in the study. I have mostly felt a dispassionate, objective interest in the respondents' circumstances, but the social workers' high levels of anxiety and stress were palpable and socially contagious and did at times affect my confidence in being able to bring the research to fruition.

This peaked when it became necessary for me to find service user participants, due to most of the social workers suddenly losing their caseloads from which potential coachees were originally to be drawn. This delayed the social workers coaching service users by three to five months and generated many uncertainties and questions for me in my multiple roles: Were the service users appropriate? Were they being volunteered for coaching via a service or self-referring? Did the social workers have capacity to coach them now? Were any of the social workers about to leave the organisation? Were any of the social workers on sick leave or annual leave? What could I do to motivate or help them to find the time to get in touch with a new coachee or attend a coaching supervision/focus group? The study has indeed been shaped by the need to 'embrace emergence' throughout (Hilton & Anderson, 2018).

Thus my position as researcher, from the outset, has been a mixture of conventional researcher identity, social work-coach identity, and long-arm coaching project manager. I have needed to embrace being in the liminal position of being both a former 'native' of the organisation, with the accompanying inside knowledge of organisational structures, processes, procedures and hierarchical relationships, and simultaneously being an external researcher. My position as a *former* 'insider' made this position even more nuanced; ideologically I was no longer an 'insider' within the organisation in which the social workers were employed, and I no longer had first-hand experience of the socio-material context; it's systems, culture and staff had changed dramatically since my exit, one year before the research began. Combining this 'practice-near' status (Cooper, 2009) with being a registered social worker and a qualified coach has, on occasion, proved to be a contradictory, conflictual and contested role:

"researchers may be insiders, outsiders, and a shifting combination of both identities" (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014, p. 110).

I was often aware of choosing between conflicting roles (Farquhar & Kitzinger, 1999) or questioning which 'hat' (Robson & McCartan, 2016) was influencing my decisions, actions and perspective - and trying to ensure that this was communicated clearly in my relationships with research subjects. I was aware of sometimes needing to occupy both the insider and outsider roles simultaneously during and after the same focus group. For example, at times it was necessary to step out of my 'outsider' facilitator role in hybrid focus groups and into my temporary coaching organiser role, to give minimal but necessary guidance, answer questions, give encouragement and/or consult their opinions on coaching 'referrals' or newly developed coaching documentation, as deliberately not doing so would have been unethical and left the social workers lacking in confidence or direction. By taking my internal processing and 'researcher as instrument' (Creswell, 2014) responsibilities seriously, I feel confident that I minimised my vulnerability towards distortions or circularity in my thinking that the role fluidity produced. I feel assured that I presented primarily as an 'outsider' researching the familiar (Padgett, 2008), which carried legitimacy with the participants.

On reflection, my enmeshed role identity also resonates with the conflict that participants were experiencing in their social work coach role. Perhaps we were all occupying our own version of a 'hyphen-space' together (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013) foregrounding one role and then feeling the counter-cultural pull of another.

8.1 Limitations

As a first foray into the use of coaching within children's social work this research will inevitably have blind spots that it needs to address into order to improve (Bachkirova, 2009) and, like all research, it is important to recognise that its claims are limited. The interpretations I derive from the findings therefore are tentative, although having an eye on their real-world application in other teams and with other users has never been far from my mind. Firstly, the results of the study must be considered in the context of the unique micro-culture and historical context in which the research took place. To reiterate, the research was conducted at a time when the child protection and family support context within which the social workers were located was ruptured and in flux. The urgent service transformation catalysed by Ofsted and the crisis it triggered intensified the pressure on participants, which meant that numbers in focus groups fluctuated and they did not always contain consistent participants. The themes I developed are therefore the story of *my* subjective constructions, derived organically from such inconsistencies, and my interaction with the data, against a backdrop of unusually heightened social work stress. This limits its applicability and it remains to be seen whether coaching would have the same transformational effect on social workers in other authorities undergoing similar or different change agendas. It is also important to acknowledge the homogenous nature of the sample. This precluded engagement with ideas about intersectionality and its impact on how the coaching encounter was shaped and experienced. An intersectional lens would be a useful analytic tool with which to view future research and the interrelationships of a potentially bigger and more diverse sample.

Since the completion of this study the social workers and service users who took part will have moved on and changed. Therefore, the transformative effects of coaching that participants described may have been short-lived and without a follow-up study a more sober view may need to be taken of the sustainability of the small changes achieved. A final limitation is that the study does not consider less experienced social workers, such as those who are newly qualified, which would have provided exciting parallel perspectives on the adaptability of coaching to a significant tranche of the social work workforce. My initial thoughts were that new social workers would be preoccupied with avoiding mistakes and learning about and sticking to directive agency norms and that asking them to engage in coaching would have been too difficult. Whilst I still believe that this would be a searching and challenging experience for a new social worker, on reflection I now feel that facilitating coaching could help them to reflect on the socialising influences of their new role and construct their repertoire of practice 'know-how' differently from the outset. I now see the absence of newly qualified social workers in the study as missing data, as some of the recommendations for practice outlined below sit with this cohort.

Key aspects of the study that I would do differently are premised on social workers having a stable environment in which to work, such as management agreement at the outset for allocated time for coaching and a recognition of this on electronic workload management systems so that coaching activity could be officially recognised, to reduce the pressure on participants. I would also ensure that service user participants were recruited during the social workers' coaching training. This would ensure that social workers could commence coaching immediately on completion of their training, which would minimise the forgetting

curve, maintain confidence and help prevent default 'fixing'. Lastly, I would ensure that social workers and service users explicitly agreed their communication arrangements at the outset of the coaching relationship, and expectations about the social workers' persistence in following up missed sessions would be documented in the coaching agreement. This would prevent confusion between the tenacity of communication required in the social worker role and the voluntary nature of coaching engagement.

8.2 Recommendations for Further Research:

This research contributes an embryonic first step towards the use of coaching within social work. Much more knowledge needs to be created for an evidence base to develop, from which a more recognised hybrid practice can be derived. In the previous chapter I highlighted areas for research that could follow from the study findings; these are set out below alongside other questions that were raised for me during the process. To summarise, the following are areas that I would encourage future researchers to explore:

- The links between the 'make a difference' frame and the deeper sense of purpose people bring to the social work profession and how this is translated into their practice ethos

- The prevalence of the 'fix' mindset within the profession and within undergraduate and newly qualified social workers

- The relationship between social workers' self-appraisals of their listening capabilities and service users' sense of being heard by them

- Service users' negative pre-conceptions of social workers' identities and a consideration of how these might be counteracted through a coaching approach

- The use of coaching with service users in a stable social work context to ascertain if the culture and environment in which social workers are situated affects its application

- If coaching is better placed with some groups of service users more than others.

- The role of group coaching supervision as a support to social work coaches

- The sustainability of the impact of coaching-related changes

8.3 Suggestions for Policy and Practice

There are many attempts currently to explore how relationship-based practice can be developed in contexts that often seem inimical. Coaching offers potential in this context. Foregrounding a coaching culture in the future of social work could help if the profession is to move away from reactance-provoking transmission-based practices. Creating space for brief, consistent coaching relationships that accelerate rapport and produce meaningful and mobilising *connections* may be far more catalysing than longer term relationships that may create dependency. The learning from this thesis could therefore be applied to other local authorities also trying to find ways of operationalising the drive towards relationship-based practice in time-famished social work services. I hope to therefore posit this research as a possible entry point for a new hybrid coaching and social work practice and the following are suggestions for how this could be done.

8.3.1 Education, Training & Readiness for Practice

These build upon the suggestions put forward by the social work participants themselves, that coaching could be:

- Taught as a foundation module in undergraduate and postgraduate social work education (ASYE). Emphasis would be placed on strengthening deep listening skills, playing back empathic understanding of the perspective of others, developing micro skills and use of self. The focus should be on observed practice and on critiquing the differences between directive and non-directive approaches. How to manage coaching conversations with service users and the practical and ethical issues that will arise in coaching assignments versus social work relationships would also be key.

8.3.2 Continuing Professional Development

Coaching training could be Integrated into continuing professional development plans for the experienced social work workforce.

- Coaching could be integrated into the training of supervision skills for managers, practice educators and senior social workers with a supervisory role

- Once trained, social workers could be given the option of coaching a small number of volunteer service users not on their caseload. This would require a recognition of the *time* needed to prepare, coach and reflect along with a recognised minor reduction in their own workload

- Group and individual coaching supervision could be provided as a necessary support for social work coaches

8.4 Concluding Thoughts

Carnegie Fellow Julia Unwin (2018) contends that the challenge that dominates all public policy initiatives is that of behaviour change. According to Bevan and Fairman's (2018) White Paper 'The New Era of Thinking and Practice in Change and Transformation: A Call for Action for Leaders of Health and Care', we need to provoke change by activating disrupters, heretics, radicals and mavericks, to transform from the edge of practice, encouraging those that "rock the boat but stay in it" (p. 40) . I identify with this description of unorthodox but constructive rebellion and this study, achieving small changes in a short space of time in an organisation in freefall, also seems to fit this brief.

I hope the thesis I have produced will have an appeal to an audience broader than a social work one and will hopefully provide a challenge for coaching to further detach itself from its role as a mainly elitist management intervention. This promise of this research is in its demonstration that coaching can get out of the private and corporate domains and situate itself in the social and public spheres with clients who harbour a ready resistance. What is now needed is to situate coaching within the social work lexicon and to develop a wider, positive understanding about the potential of coaching within children's social work. The following concluding quotes signal that this study, against all the local odds, has made a significant start:

"I think I can be a better social worker. Still with that bottom line. And kind of a better human being almost alongside it. If there's the coaching approach integrated into it"

Sophie, social work coach.

"to have someone, there that's not going to judge you, or look at you with, down eyes and stuff like that it's nice. So, I think what - what you've done is really good to help people, i.e., like me or people worse or people, do you know what I mean, with just mild problems? I think it's brilliant. I think it is absolutely brilliant."

Emma, service user coachee.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

School Research Ethics Panel Approval

From: Dawn Leeming
Sent: Friday, June 10, 2016 3:34 PM
To: Kirsty Thomson; Suzanne Triggs
Subject: RE: Amended SREP Application - Suzanne Triggs (PhD) - DAWN TO GIVE DEPUTY CHAIR FEEDBACK - From Transmission to Transformation? An Exploration Of How The Use Of Coaching Interventions..... (SREP/2016/040)

Hi Suzanne,

Thank you for sending us the amendments to your SREP application. **You now have full SREP approval for your research.**

We would advise however that you think about another couple of points with your supervisors, though we leave these to your and their discretion and there is no need to reply to SREP regarding these:

-    At present, because all the statements on the consent form begin 'I' it could be confusing for a parent as to who will be interviewed (especially where parents have limited literacy), and either point 2 or point 3 will not be relevant for each person completing the form. You may therefore like to consider creating a separate consent form for parents, or rephrasing the current form.
-   There seems to be a typo on the info sheet: 'but not *take* part in my research'

Good luck with a very interesting project.

Dawn

PS It seems that I am also your progression reviewer, so I look forward to hearing more about the research

Dr Dawn Leeming
Deputy-Chair, School Research Ethics Committee (HHS)

Appendix 2

Information Sheet for Social Workers

Coaching Research Project

Social Work Coach Information Sheet

As a social worker and a qualified coach you are invited to take part in a research project on the use of coaching in social work. This will take place from September 2016. It will involve:

Being available to attend regular coaching supervision and focus groups for the next 6-12 months to discuss your experiences of delivering coaching to service users

AND

Being interviewed individually when your coaching assignments have ended

"Where will coaching supervision/focus groups take place?"

• They will take place at the university

"How often will they take place?"

• They will take place every 4 to 6 weeks.

"What if I'm too busy and can't get to a group?"

• It's ok to miss a group – you can always come along to the next one if you can

"Who will be in the groups?"

• The other social work coaches who have agreed to take part, the researcher (Suzanne Triggs) and a coaching supervisor

"How long will the 'end of coaching' interviews take place?

• About an hour

"Where will the interviews take place?

• You can decide the venue and the time for the interview

"What if I want to deliver coaching but not take part in the research study?"

• This is fine! You can deliver coaching but **not** take part in the focus groups or be interviewed after coaching has finished

• **"What if say 'yes' to being in the research but change my mind?"**

• This is fine too! You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time

"Will people be able to tell who I am in the research report you write later?"

• No, everyone taking part will be given a false name

Appendix 3

Email Text to Children's Social Workers

(Circulated by the Principal Social Worker)

Headline: Young People and parents wanted for Coaching and Research project

Dear all

Please find attached 2 flyers containing information about an opportunity for young people (aged over 14) and parents involved in Child Protection and Family Support services to be coached. 10 social workers in our service have taken part in a 6-month training course to become professional coaches as part of a PhD research collaboration with the University of Huddersfield led by Suzanne Triggs.

The next stage of this project is for the newly trained coaches to start coaching service users from the end of September 2016. **Please read the attached information sheet before** passing on the name of a parent or young person whom you think would be open to being coached.

The flyer attached for parents and young people must be shared with them prior to passing on their details.

Coaches will be taking on limited referrals until July next year, after this time Suzanne will be interviewing those who have been coached and those social work coaches who have facilitated the coaching.

To request coaching for young people or parents: please pass the following information to . . . . and . . . . who will be coordinating names for the coaching project within the service.

Alternatively young people and parents can self-refer for coaching on the attached form

Name and K number:

Legal status:

Contact details of parents and child:

<u>Confirmation that the information leaflet has been shared</u>

Has the coachee (parent or young person) consented to this referral? (for young people under the age of 18 – has parental consent also been given?) If the child is on ICO or CO but the parent has refused consent then *please send the details and consideration will be given to overriding the consent on a case by case basis.*

Are there any personal safety issues?

Does the coachee have any learning needs?

PLEASE BE AWARE THAT COACHING IS CONFIDENTIAL AND NO OTHER INFORMATION OTHER THAN THE COACHEES ATTENDANCE CAN BE RECORDED ON FILE AND SHOULD NOT BE DISCUSSED IN FORMAL MEETINGS.

Please get in touch with Suzanne directly if you have any questions about the coaching process or if you would like her to come to a team meeting to discuss it in more detail during September and October 2016.

Thank you

Appendix 4

Who is this for?

Young people aged 11 and above who are involved in Child Protection & Family Support Services in some way – they could be looked after, on the edge of or have left care, be adopted, subject to a child protection or child in need plan. Parents whose children are involved in Child Protection & Family Support Services in some way as above – they can be coached whether their children are being coached or not.

WANTED!
Young People
& Parents
to be Coached!!

Questions Answered by Suzanne Triggs, PhD student at the University of Huddersfield:

"So, what is coaching?"

- Coaching is a way of communicating with people which does not involve giving advice, telling people the answers to their problems or telling them what to do. Instead, a person who is trained as a 'coach' will help a person find their own answers and solutions to things they would like to change by asking questions, listening and helping them to consider new and different ways of thinking.

"What do you want to find out in your PhD research?"

- I want to find out if engagement in short term coaching interventions leads to new behavior by social workers and service users, and I want to understand how service users experience coaching. I want to find out if coaching helps people to think about and make changes in their lives that matter to them – these may be the same changes social workers want them to make or may be completely different –the person being coached defines their own goal.

"Who will be the coach?"

- Young people and parents will be coached by a social worker who they may or may not know, who has undertaken 6 months of training and is qualified as a coach.

"How will I know what is going on in the coaching?"

- You won't. Coaching is confidential, unless the service user discloses a previously unknown safeguarding concern during coaching - then the allocated worker will be informed. Otherwise, the young person or parent may agree to a very brief report being written by the coach for you, or they may wish for you to sit in on the last session to share their progress with you.

"How long will the coaching take and where will it be?"

- Coaching might last for an hour or 2, and sessions might take place every 2 to 4 weeks. It could be more, it could be less – the coach and the young person/parent will agree how often and where it will take place together. Coaching progress will be reviewed by the coach and the service user (the 'coachee') after 4 sessions.

"What will the young person or parent be asked to do?

- They will be matched to one of the trained coaches who will get in touch with them to set up a first meeting and go through a coaching agreement together. Coaching may involve the use of lots of different types of tools and questions as part of the process which link to various coaching models and theories.

"Can coaching replace other services or be included in assessment information or review meetings ?"

- No. The coaching is taking place as part of a Postgraduate Research project and **cannot:**

- Act as replacement for other existing interventions or an alternative to unavailable services

- Be treated as part of an assessment

- Be viewed as a pass or failure – the outcome is defined by the service user's own goals

- Be used as evidence in court as an example of a service which should be available to others

How do I refer a young person (aged over 11) or parent for coaching?

- First of all you need to talk to the young person or parent and explain in very basic terms what coaching is – another information flyer for service users has been attached to this email which you need to give them. Please make it clear that coaching is not a remedial intervention but should be a supportive experience. All young people (and their parents) and parents taking part in coaching who agree to take part in my research will need to sign a consent form. **The next step now is to email . . . . & . . . . in the Practice Development Team, who will be co-ordinating names put forward for coaching.**

Are there parents and young people who shouldn't be put forward for coaching?

- Yes - coaching is not for everyone and every situation. Young people and parents who should **not** be approached for coaching are:

- Those undergoing counselling

- Those who are not open to and feel negative about the idea of coaching

- Young people in legal proceedings where they are acting as a witness

- Young people for whom there are immediate safeguarding concerns

What happens when the coaching has finished?

I will make contact with them and interview them about their experience for my research.

More questions? Get in touch!

I hope this answers any questions you might have! Just in case you have any I haven't thought of or if you want to speak to me at any time about the research study you can contact me:

Mobile: 0797290989

Email: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk

Thanks!

Appendix 5

Information Sheet: For Parents and Young People Thinking About Taking Part in a Research Study on Their Experience of Coaching.

Name of the person doing the research:

Hi, I'm Suzanne Triggs : -)

I'm a student studying for a PhD at the University of Huddersfield.

What is the research is about?

I want to find out if using 'coaching' with people who are involved with social services can work differently than telling people what to do. This research is about parents and young people aged 11 and above having coaching for the first time from social workers who have been trained to be coaches. The research will involve me interviewing you, for one time only, after you have had some coaching sessions. I will also interview the person who has coached you to find out how it went from their point of view. Everyone in the research is given a false name so no-one will know you took part or be able to figure out that it's you in the final report.

Here's some answers to questions you might have:

"So, what is coaching?"

Coaching is a way of communicating with people which does not involve giving advice, telling people the answers to their problems or telling them what to do. Instead, a person who is trained as a 'coach' will help a person find their own answers and solutions to things they would like to change by asking questions, listening and helping them to consider new and different ways of thinking.

"What do you want to find out?"

I want to find out how being coached feels by someone who has a social worker involved with them or their family. I want to find out if it helps people to think about and make changes in their lives that matter to them, rather than changes that social workers want them to make.

"Who will be my coach?"

You will be coached by a social worker who you may or may not know, who has had training and is qualified as a coach. They will also be interviewed as part of the research so I can find out from them what it feels like to be a coach.

"How long will the coaching take and where will it be?"

Coaching might last for an hour or so for each coaching session, and you might have a session every 1 or 2 weeks. It could be more, it could be less – you will agree how often together. All together you might have around 8 coaching sessions or more – depending on what you and the coach agree is the right amount of coaching sessions for you. These will take place somewhere where you both think it will work – so you can feel free to talk and it's private too.

"How long will the research interview last?"

 Probably about an hour.

"What will I be asked to do?"

After the coaching sessions with the social worker are finished you will have an interview with me to find out about what you thought about your experience of being coached. The interview can be carried out any time and any place that suits you, and would (with your permission) record your voice.

"Do I have to take part in the research?"

No, you don't have to take part, if you would like to try coaching but not part in my research on coaching that's fine! Your decision to take part or not will not have any consequences for the services you or your family receive from social services or from your social worker. If you decide to take part and then change your mind during or after the interview and decide that you do not want me to use what you have said, you can contact me and I will remove it, with no effect for you at all.

"What if I want to have the coaching but not take part in the research study?"

This is fine! Coaching is usually a really positive experience for people so you can definitely be coached but not meet with me to be interviewed afterwards as part of the study.

"What will you do with the findings from the research?"

I want to publish the findings in academic journals and to present them at conferences for social workers. The findings will also be presented in a report to Kirklees Council which will include the social workers who are taking part in the research - those who are doing the coaching. I may also use some of the material and recordings of people speaking in teaching and training for social workers and coaches, but only with your specific consent for this. So, for example you might decide to be coached and be part of the research - but not consent for your voice recording in the interview with me to be heard in training for social workers. This is fine, as your voice does not have to be used.

"Will people be able to tell who I am in the research report?"

No, everyone taking part will be given a false name and this will be used in any publications, conference presentations, media articles or interviews, reports or teaching. Anything that you say in the interview with me that could identify you personally will not be used.

"Will the information I provide be confidential?"

Yes. This will only be seen by me. However, if you should describe events which could be of concern, for example where you or others may be at risk of harm, I will discuss with you how that information might need to be shared - for example with the social worker for yourself or your child. No person other than myself will have access to the recordings or to the transcriptions (the written, word for word version of what you have said). The voice recordings will be kept on a secure password protected computer.

"I'm not sure about taking part in the research - what should I do if I have any questions?"

I will be happy to talk to you and answer any questions you may have, before you decide whether to take part in this research or not and after taking part in the research. You have seven days from receiving this information sheet to think about it and make up your mind about whether you would like to take part, before I get in touch to find out what you would like to do.

"So, what's it all about again?"

You are thinking about being involved in a research study to find out about your experience of being coached. The study just involves about an hour long interview with me after your coaching sessions have finished.

I hope this answers any questions you might have! Just in case you have any I haven't thought of or if you want to speak to me at any time about the research study you can contact me on the phone on:

Tel: 01484 602076   Mobile: 07972909896

Or on email: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk

Thank you!

Appendix 6

Leaflet for Service Users

Want to try coaching?

Ask the social worker involved with you or your family to email . . . . or. . . . .

More Questions?

You can speak to me at any time about coaching or the research study -
please get in touch on the number or email below.

Thanks! 😊

Suzanne's Mobile: 07972909896
Suzanne's email: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk

University of **HUDDERSFIELD**
Inspiring tomorrow's professionals

Some Answers to Questions for
Parents And Young People Thinking About Trying Coaching

Hi I'm Suzanne!

I'm a Coach and a PhD student at the University of Huddersfield -

I'm setting the coaching project up for my research.

"So, what is coaching?"

- Well, this kind of coaching has nothing to do with sport – although lots of very famous athletes and professional footballers do have coaching to help them! A person who is trained as a 'coach' will help someone find their own answers to things they would like to change in their lives by asking them questions and helping them to try new ways of thinking. Only you decide what you would like to be coached on.

"Why are you asking me to try coaching?"

- My study involves young people aged over 11 and parents who are involved with children's social services. You've been asked because the services involved with you think you might find it helpful and interesting!

Who needs to know I'm having coaching?

- Your social worker and your parents need to know and consent to you having coaching if you are under 18.

"Who will be my coach?"

- You will be coached by a social worker who you may or may not know, who has had training and is qualified as a coach.

"How long will the coaching take and where will it be?"

- Coaching might last for an hour or so for each coaching session, and you might have a session every 2 to 4 weeks. It could be more, it could be less – you will agree how often together.

"What about afterwards?"

- After the coaching sessions are finished you will have a short interview with me to find out about what you thought about being coached. That's it!

"How long will the research interview with you last?"

- Probably about an hour, after all your coaching sessions have finished.

"What if I want to try the coaching but not take part in the research study?"

- This is fine! Coaching is usually a really positive experience for people so you can definitely be coached but not meet with me to be interviewed afterwards as part of the study.

"Will people be able to tell who I am in the research report you write later?"

- No, everyone taking part will be given a false name.

"What happens when the coaching has finished?"

- I will get in touch with you and arrange to meet up with you to ask you some questions about your experience of coaching for my research.

"So, what's it all about again?"

- You are thinking about trying coaching - and - being part of a research study to find out about your experience of being coached after all your coaching has finished. The study just involves about an hour long interview with me after your coaching sessions have finished.

.

😊

Appendix 7

Participant Letter/Email for Parents and Young People

My Research: Can using 'coaching' in social work, work differently than telling people what to do?

Hi,

My name is Suzanne, I'm a research student at the University of Huddersfield. You've been asked if you would like to be involved in my research as the social worker involved with you thinks you might find it helpful.

I'm interested to find out if asking social workers to 'coach' young people or parents involved with children's social services might have a different result from the way social workers normally work.

Coaching does not involve giving advice, telling people the answers to their problems or telling them what to do. Instead it involves helping people find their own answers and solutions to things they would like to change by asking questions, listening and helping them to consider new and different ways of thinking.

So, if you agree to being involved in my research it will mean that you agree to be coached by a social worker you may or may not know who has had training and is qualified as a coach. This might last for an hour or so for each coaching session, and you might have a session every 1, 2 to or more weeks – you will agree how often together. All together you might have around 8 coaching sessions or more – depending on what you and the social worker agree is the right amount of coaching sessions for you. These will take place somewhere where you both think it will work – so you can feel free to talk and it's private too.

After the coaching sessions are finished you will have the option of taking part in an interview with me to find about what you thought about your experience of being coached. This will probably take about an hour. The interview can be carried out any time and any place that suits you and would (with your consent) be audio recorded.

Before you decide whether to take part, please read the attached information sheet or ask your social worker to go through it with you. You will also be asked to sign a consent form to show that you agree to take part in the research voluntarily.
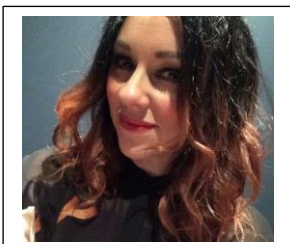
I really hope you will take part in it!

I would be very happy to talk to you, if you want, before you decide whether to take part in this research or not or to explain the information sheet. My number is below.

Thanks very much

Suzanne Triggs

My Contact details: **Suzanne Triggs**

Registered Social Worker, Coach and PhD Research Student

Tel: 01484 602076   Mobile: 07972909896

email: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk

Appendix 8

Consent Form for Social Workers taking part in the Research Study (Focus Groups & Interviews) on using Coaching in Social Work

It is important that you read, understand and sign the consent form. Your contribution to this research is totally **voluntary** and you are not obliged in any way to take part. If you require any further details about it please contact Suzanne Triggs who can explain it further: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk Tel: 07972 909896. **If you are satisfied that you understand the information and are happy to take part in this research project please put a tick in the box at the end of each sentence and print and sign below.**

I have been fully informed of what this research is about ☐

I consent to taking part ☐

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time ☐
and without giving any reason

I understand that my continuing professional development record and ☐
career progression will not be affected in any way by taking part in this research
or if I decide to stop taking part at any time

I agree to be interviewed and for my interview to be recorded with an audio device ☐

I agree to attend regular support groups where I will be observed ☐
and which may be recorded with an audio device

I give permission for my words (taken from an interview or support group) to be ☐
quoted (by using a false name)

I give permission for the audio recording of my words to be used in training (by using a ☐
false name) or events where the research is being presented for others to learn from

I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions ☐

for a period of five years by the postgraduate researcher from the University of Huddersfield

I understand that no person other than the researcher will have access to the information I have provided ☐

I understand that my identity will be protected by the use of a false name in the research report and that no written information that could lead to my being identified will be included in any report ☐

I understand that the researcher will keep my name confidential **except** if I provide information **during the research interview** that indicates another person is at a risk of harm or where the researcher thinks that I am at risk and am not able to seek support for myself. In such situations, this information and my name might have to be shared with an appropriate authority ☐

I understand that I can withdraw my data – what I have said in the interview – at any time during or after the interview without giving any reason, and that this will not affect my continuing professional development or career progression or have any negative consequences for me. ☐

Signature of Participant taking part in Research:	Signature of Researcher:
_____ Print your Name: _____ Date: _____	_____ Print Your Name: _____ Date: _____

(One copy to be retained by participant / one copy to be retained by researcher)

Appendix 9

Consent Form for Parents & Young people taking part in the Research Study Interview on being Coached

It's really important that you read and sign this consent form if you agree to take part in the research study interview. I will go through this with you to make sure you understand it all.

Remember, you don't have to take part in the research interview - no one should pressure you into it. Also, if you do agree and then change your mind and decide you don't want to be interviewed this is absolutely fine! Changing your mind won't have any bad or other effects on how you get on with your social worker or stop any services you get.

Don't forget you can always contact me, Suzanne Triggs, to have a chat about any questions or worries you might have about the research interview with me. You can get me on my mobile on Tel: 07972 909896 or on email: s.triggs@hud.ac.uk I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

If you do understand the information on the sheet and you are happy to take part in a research interview with me, please put a tick in the box at the end of each sentence and print and sign your name at the bottom. Thank you!

I have read the information sheet of what this research is about ☐

I consent to taking part in it ☐

I understand that I can stop taking part in the research interview at any time ☐
and I don't have to give a reason, and this won't have any bad or other effects
on how I get on with my social worker or stop any services I get

I agree for my voice to be recorded in the interview ☐

I give permission for my words to be quoted using a false name ☐

I give permission for the voice recording of my words to be used in training (using a ☐
false name) or events where the research is being presented for others to learn from

I understand what I have said in the interview will be kept safe ☐

for five years by Suzanne, the researcher from the University of Huddersfield

I understand that no person other than the researcher, Suzanne, will be able to ☐
see what I have said in my interview

I understand that my identity - who I am - will be protected by giving me a false ☐
name in the research report

I understand that the researcher, Suzanne, might have to share my name with other ☐
people if I talk about things **during the research interview** that could mean that
another person is at a risk of harm or in danger – or if she thinks that I might be at risk
of harm or danger and that I am not able to get support for myself

I understand that I can take out what I have said in the interview at any time during ☐
or after the interview - I don't have to give a reason, and this won't have any bad or
other effects on how I get on with my social worker or stop any services I get

Signature of Person taking part in Research:	**Signature of Researcher:**
Print your Name:	Print Your Name:
Date:	Date:

(One copy to be retained by participant / one copy to be retained by researcher)

Appendix 10

Coaching Agreement

Name of Coachee:	
Name of Coach:	
Where we will meet:	
Start date of coaching sessions:	
Time we will meet:	
Review Date of Coaching (after 4 sessions):	
Any other things we've agreed (e.g. how we talk to each other, turning up on time, completing your Take Away sheet)	

Things to remember!

What's private and what isn't:

Everything that is said in coaching sessions will stay between us except:

- If you would like me to talk to someone to explain and update them on our work together – this could be your own social worker / the one for your child
- If you talk about things during coaching that could mean that you or another person is at risk of harm or in danger – then your coach will talk to you about who need to know

The coaching you have will NOT:

- Act as replacement for another service
- Be a part of any assessment you or you family is having
- Be seen as a pass or failure – you set your own goals and decide if you've met them or not
- Be recorded on your/your child's file – it will say 'is receiving coaching' but not what about or what has been discussed - unless you give permission

Please tick and sign that you agree following:

My coach has explained what coaching is and gone through this agreement with me **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐

My coach has gone through the research leaflet with me **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐

I agree to having a chat with a researcher when the coaching is finished to talk

about my experience of coaching (you can change your mind about this later) **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐

Signature of Coachee	**Signature of Coach:**
Print Name:	**Print Name:**
Date:	**Date:**

Copy for Coach and copy for coachee.

Coaching Goals

Coaching Focus Example
Goal: To improve my confidence in saying what I think
Things that came up in coaching: I don't like the sound of my voice I think other people will think I'm thick if I say what I think I feel physically ill at the idea of speaking in front of people
Follow up action/activities: To practice disagreeing with my friend just to hear how it sounds
How will we know if the coaching has started to work? ✓ My stomach won't churn when I need to face up to a situation involving something I don't agree with ✓ I will be able to state my view without panicking ✓ Other people will know what I think about things ✓ I will not worry about sounding stupid

Coaching Focus Session 1	Name:	Date of session:
Goal:		
Things that came up in coaching:		
Follow up action/activities:		
How will we know if the coaching has started to work?		

Appendix 11

Thinking Time

Social Worker Reflective Learning Log

Name of Coach: **Pseudonym of coachee:**

Date: Circle: Parent / young person

What were your thoughts and feelings prior to the session?

What was the focus of the session and what goals did the coachee define?

Describe any moments of insight for yourself:

Describe any moments of insight for your coachee:

What relationship changes can you detect?

What have you learnt

About yourself?

About your coachee?

What are your thoughts and feelings after the session?

Appendix 12

Take Away Sheet

My goals and activities for next time are:

Moments of success!

Please try to notice when you have done **something well or something different to how you might normally act** in between coaching sessions - these can be large or small - and remind yourself about these times here:

Why did they go well?

Has anything been difficult since the last coaching session?

Bring this to your next session!

Appendix 13

Focus Group Topic Guide

1. Place of Focus Group:

2. Focus Group date: **Start time:**

3. Names of participants present:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Missing:

Topics

1. What skills do you think you now have as a social work *coach*?

2. As experienced social workers, how does it feel to be a beginner coach?

3. What is the same or different about your practice approach as a coach?

4. How easy or difficult has it been for you to engage service users in the process of goal setting?

5. How do the goals service users are setting themselves compare to the tangible outcomes and tasks you are used to setting as a social worker?

6. Can you describe any changes in service users' behaviour that you have noticed or they have told you about?

7. Describe the feelings and thoughts you experienced throughout *and after* your coaching sessions?

8. Have you used coaching behaviour in any other situations or cases?

9. What do you think service users would say about their experience of coaching with you?

10. Does anything impede using coaching in social work?

11. Describe your commitment to coaching now (after having coached) and before you began coaching?

12. What do you see as the next steps for you and coaching practice?

Researcher Comments

Oral summary at the end of the focus group, which includes any emotions picked up on:

Time Focus Group finished: _____

Researcher to record any thoughts or impressions they have, in writing, regarding ANY aspect of the group communication, dynamic and process.

Appendix 14

Interviewer Topic Guide: *Social Workers*

Section 1: Administrative Information

1. Interview code: ☐☐ ☐☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐

[Interviewee initials (2), date (6), order of interview that day (2)]

2. Place of interview:

_____

3. Interview start time:

_____

4. Interviewee's job titles throughout research project and team names:

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

5. Number of years qualified as a social worker: _____

6. Interview format: (specify and specify mode of interview e.g. face to face, by telephone, by skype/ Facetime etc.

Section 2: Your Practical Experience of Delivering Coaching

_____

7. Can you describe any practical, scheduling or organisational issues you have experienced when using coaching in your role(s)?

9. If you were involved in scheduled coaching sessions with service users, how many coaching sessions did you conduct for each service user?

_____

	Service User 1	**Service User 2**	**Service User 3**	**Service User 4**

Number:

10. Names and Pseudonyms of service users:

Name: _____   _____   _____   _____

Pseudonym: _____   _____   _____   _____

11. Indicate if an Adult/Young Person:

Adult/ _____   _____   _____   _____

Young person?

12. **Referral origin** (i.e. self-referral, professional, team)?

_____   _____   _____   _____

13. How long generally did your scheduled coaching sessions take?

_____

14. Where did the scheduled coaching sessions take place?

_____

Section 3: Your Experience of Being a Coach and

the Impact of Delivering Coaching

_____

15. Looking back on your coaching training and experience, what were the most important moments for you and those that you coached?

16. How do you think these moments will impact on what you and they take from coaching in the future?
_____

17. What kind of feelings does coaching produce in you now to when you first started using it?

_____

18. Can you describe any similarities or differences you experienced in the coach-coachee relationship to your usual social work-service user relationships?

_____

19. Have you found any coaching methods or models easy OR difficult to use with service users?

_____

20. Has using coaching made you aware of any unwanted habits or created any new habits in the way you think or in your behaviour as a social worker?

_____

21. Please describe your experiences of your use of coaching with others *ending*:

_____

22. Looking back, are there any elements of your coaching training that you think all social workers should be taught?

_____

23. What do you see as the next step in using coaching for you?

_____

24. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of using coaching?

_____

Time interview finished: _____

Section 6: Researcher Comments

_____

Researcher to record any thoughts or impressions in writing, regarding ANY aspect of the interview process

Appendix 15

Interviewer Topic Guide - *Service Users*

Section 1 - Administrative information

1. Interview code: ☐☐ ☐☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐

[interviewer's initials (2), date (6), order of interview that day (2)]

2. Interviewee name: _____

3. Date of interview: _____

4. Place of interview: _____

5. Interview start time: _____

7. Any other people present in the interview: _____

(relationship to interviewee and number present)

8. Who was your coach? _____

9. Interview format:

(specify mode of interview e.g. face to face, by telephone, by skype/ Facetime etc.)

Section 2 - Your Experience of Being Coached

_____

1. Can you tell me where your coaching took place and how you felt about it taking place there?

_____

2. When you knew you were going to have some coaching what did you think it was going to be like?

_____

3. Can you tell me about what your actual experience of being coached was like?

_____

4. You had a social worker coaching you that you had not met before. How did this work for you?

_____

5. Can you compare the differences between having a social worker come to visit you and having a coach come to see you?

_____

6. What did you choose as your goals to be coached about?

_____

7. How do you feel *now* about the goals you set for yourself in the coaching sessions?

_____

8. Can you tell me about your experience of doing any things between coaching sessions which you had agreed to do with your coach?

_____

9. Thinking about when you were having the coaching and now - has the coaching had any effect upon how you think about - and do things?

10. Has the coaching had any effects on anyone else you know, (like partners, children, parents or friends) due to you thinking or acting differently?

_____

11. Tell me about your experience of your last coaching session when the coaching ended:

12. Was there anything about the coaching you had that you did not find helpful, or you would have liked to be different?

_____

13. Can you think of any ways that the coaching you have had could help you in the future?

_____

14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your coaching experience?

Section 3 – Socio-demographic information

1. What age group are you in?

- If younger than 20, specify age: _____

- 20 - 29 years ☐
- 30 - 39 years ☐
- 40 - 49 years ☐
- 50 - 59 years ☐
- 60 - 69 years ☐
- 70 - 79 years ☐
- 80+ years ☐

2. What is your gender?

- Female ☐
- Male ☐
- Other ☐
- Prefer not to say ☐

3. What ethnic group do you consider yourself to belong to?

WHITE

- British ☐
- Irish ☐

MIXED

- White and Black Caribbean ☐
- White and Asian ☐
- White and Black African ☐
- Other, please state:

  _____

ASIAN OR ASIAN BRITISH

- Indian ☐
- Pakistani ☐
- Bangladeshi ☐
- Other, please state:

_____

BLACK OR BLACK BRITISH

- Caribbean ☐
- African ☐
- Other, please state:

_____

CHINESE or OTHER ETHNIC BACKGROUND ☐

- Other, please state:

_____

4. Where do you live at the moment? (an area or postcode in Kirklees will do, or another town if applicable)

_____ **5. Time interview finished:**

Section 4 – Researcher comments

Researcher to record any thoughts or impressions they have regarding ANY aspect of the interviewee taking part in coaching or the interview process.

Appendix 16

Record of Focus Group Attendance

Date of Focus Group	Numbers of Participants Present
20 September 2016	7
20th October 2016	5
14 November 2016	2
13 December 2016	3
9 January 2017	2
9 February 2017	4
27th March 2017	3
3 May 2017	3
7 June 2017	3

Appendix 17

Table Linking Data Segments to Theme Development & Magnitude (Extract)

Themes & Descriptive Summaries	Categories/Sub-Themes	Supporting Datum
Chaos, Black Holes and Cultural Blockers to Coaching **Descriptive Summary:** The practical and emotional difficulties of trying to coach in an extremely turbulent, pressurised, and uncertain organisational environment were surfaced where there is no pre-existing language, framework or new time for coaching to be undertaken. **Thematic Reach/Magnitude:** Messo (intergroup, intermediate size organisations and institutions)	*From Cracks to Canyons*: **A Ruptured Work Environment**	**Sophie:** try and introduce something *new to that* - and it all goes. Some people don't like it because *they don't get it.* And then they feel left out and then, you know, amazing you add something new into even what looks like a *well-established team*. And that can, *be like water on cracks, and just suddenly you've got canyons.* **Esme:** how *hectic* it's been and *constant changes in management and senior management and processes, everything's* just been, like a *roller coaster* over the last sort of 12, 18 months. We've kind of not knowing whether we're *coming or going*, and like I've said we've had - I've had five different managers sort of swapping around, *different teams different processes,* so and then to try and *fit* something *on top of that as well*, has *been really hard.* **Megan:** at the time we started we were in an environment where people were *disappearing down black holes.* And coaching just wasn't a priority for everybody because we were so, driven on *ticking the boxes that needed to be ticked, so they didn't disappear down that hole* **Danielle:** it's just *absolute, chaos. And there's people crying, there's people leaving, there's people and handing their notice in left, right and centre.*