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Contact supervision with Looked After Children: A psychosocial exploration into role construction, negotiation and wider implications.

Portfolio Doctorate

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The work presented in this thesis is all my own:

Eva Crasnow, September 2015.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the lived experience of contact supervisors in the contact encounter. Contact supervisors and managers from five London local authorities participated in ten semi-structured interviews. Data were thematically and discursively analysed paying attention to issues of performativity of text and disciplinary power. A psychoanalytically informed analysis was also applied to add further complexity to the psychosocial investigation of the 'warp and weft' of the psychological and the social in contact supervision.

Two core themes were identified. **The Cinderella Service** core theme postulated that the role of the contact supervisor is necessarily fractured and conflicted, as manifested in mutually enforcing and destabilising subject positions active in storylines of *Rags to Riches* and *Doing the Dirty Work*. Supervisors maintained panoptic systems of enclosed discourses, and concurrently resisted these through taking up alternative relational positions with regards to the triad of social care system/supervisor/family. The themes of rivalry and exclusion were voiced through the metaphor of early oedipal psychic functioning which enabled an understanding of the dynamics of unresolved mourning and loss at the heart of the contact encounter. The **Gut Feelings/Fine Lines** core theme presented the role of contact supervisor as a meeting point for competing moral dilemmas that are created and maintained through shifting relational experiences. These were articulated through the storylines *Here-for-a-reason*, *Same-as-us* and *Parent-as-child* that positioned and counter positioned supervisors in relation to families. The first order positioning of blame drew on neoliberal discourses of parenting, class and gender. The moral dilemmas faced by contact supervisors were formulated as being generated in part by a struggle to integrate dynamics of ambivalence.

In discussion of the findings, contact was characterised by degrees of paralysis, active in structural, moral and emotional interrelated dimensions. This aspect of supervised contact enabled an exploration of the present challenges in contact and the implications of this research project on supervised contact design and practice.

It is argued that because of the growth of contact supervision resulting from the increase in children in care it is urgent that this under-researched area should be studied and understood as a distinctive field of practice. This study offers a contribution of lived experience, psychosocially theorised to meet the lag between policy and practice. It stands as a call to focus on the contact encounter as the site for policy development derived from experience, respectful intervention for families rooted in relationships with supervisors and a validation and recognition of delicate and dedicated contact work.

Table of Contents

Title Page	p.1
Declaration of work	p.2
Acknowledgments	p.3
Abstract	p.4
Contents	p.5
Chapter One <i>Introduction</i>	p.6
1.1 Context and Research Base	p.7
1.2 Contact with Curiosity	P.11
1.3 Questions about Contact	p.12
1.4 Outline of Thesis	p.13
Chapter Two <i>Methodology: Landscapes: Locating the intellectual field of contact and routes to knowledge</i>	p.15
2.1 Ontology and Epistemology: Setting the Intellectual field	p.15
2.2 Methodology: Routes of Research	p.18
2.3 Core Theme and Data Analysis: Investigating the Terrain	p.24
Chapter Three <i>Data Analysis: The Cinderella Service</i>	p.25
3.1 Royalty in Rags	p.27
3.2 Doing the Dirty Work	p.31
3.3 Power and Resistance	p.32
3.4 Rivalry, Desire and Loss: Ugly Sisters	p.34
3.5 Concluding the Cinderella Service: Unending Tales	p.38
Chapter Four <i>Data Analysis: Gut Feelings/Fine Lines</i>	p.40
4.1 Tangled Tales: Patterns of Relating	p.42
4.2 Moral Parenting	p.46
4.3 The Fine Lines of Gut Feeling: Conflict and Ambivalence	p.51
4.4 Moral Constellations; Relational Refractions	p.55
Chapter Five <i>Discussion and Conclusions</i>	p.57
5.1 Findings	p.57
5.2 Degrees of Paralysis	p.58
5.3 Implications of Research on Practice	p.61
5.4 Psychosocial Research: Researcher Shifts	p.63
5.5 Limitations of the Project	p.64
5.6 Recommendations for Future Research	p.65
5.7 Conclusions	p.66
References	p.67
Appendix One <i>Individual interview coding</i>	p.72
Appendix Two <i>Full data set coding</i>	p.73
Appendix Three <i>Full data set subthemes</i>	p.74
Appendix Four <i>Data set subthemes</i>	p.75
Appendix Five <i>Information sheet for participants</i>	p.76
Appendix Six <i>Consent form for participants</i>	p.77
Appendix Seven <i>Interview schedule</i>	p.78

Chapter One

Introduction

They get to know too much about you...I mentioned this to my social worker and I said ‘you know there’s something not right here about this case’. The following week, exactly a week to the day, I picked this kiddie up, took her down to contact and I’m reaching in to get the kiddie out the back seat and all of a sudden there’s somebody here. I’m now penned literally in and I can’t move and I’ve looked ‘ooh, where did you come from’... It’s the Mum and I can’t work this out, I can’t do anything and I just sort of said to her, ‘oh try not to disturb her because she’s just fallen asleep’ So as we were walking down the road which luckily wasn’t far, I’ve got my finger on this kiddie and I’m sort of playing with her nose and making little noises and as we’ve got to the contact centre, as I’ve pushed the buzzer, before the door even opened, Mum’s run. I slung the door, I pushed, I chased her. I’ve carried on running and as I did I glanced across the road and there’s Mum over there. She now thought she was safe. She’s got the little girl on the floor ‘cause she’s what, two this little girl, and she’s walking along and she’d just gone down a side street. I never even looked, I just ran. I was going to get this child. So I flew down this road and as I did mum heard me coming up behind. She picked the kiddie up and she turned and looked at me and I said ‘come on look this is silly isn’t it, look this is ridiculous isn’t it, this isn’t going to solve anything, you know, we really ought to go back. Let’s go back and sort this out, think of the poor Kayleigh’¹. With that she pulled a 12 inch carving knife on me and said ‘back off’, she put it into my face and said ‘back off’. Okay. What do you say to that? Not a lot. So she turned and ran so she’s now got the poor baby in, in one hand and a carving knife in the other hand running down the road. So I was on her tail again and as I’m running down the road I just shouted out ‘someone get the police, get the police. She’s abducted this child’. I wasn’t giving in. Job description. You look after the children in your care. And she was going to jump into this car, she begged him to take her somewhere. We’ve stood there and I’m sort of waving to the little girl through the window, making little faces and things, and the police now have surrounded her. They’ve asked for the child. She won’t give the child. A policeman, reached in and I remember he must’ve picked the knife up from the well of the car and he had that. They kept talking to her. She wasn’t going to liaise. She wasn’t going to respond. She wasn’t going to give the child over. She had her reasons. When she came out with her reasons why she was sitting there I understood why she did what she did... It didn’t make it right but I understood why, because this child was going to be given to the father... the mother was never going to see the child again.... she did draw people to look at the case again and in some ways it slightly paid off because she kept saying in the back of this car that the father was a drug baron and all the rest of it and that’s not what she wanted for her child. Eventually she got out this car and she ran with the baby, and the police just surrounded her and then said ‘right you give us the baby, or we’re going to take the baby off of you’ and they did in the end have to take the child off her and they gave the child to me and then we walked back to the contact centre. But poor little thing bless her...the one thing I can remember and it sticks in my mind, is I looked through this back window, this little girl was sitting on her mum’s lap facing her and I remember at one point the mum crying, this little girl was looking into her mum’s face and looking

¹ All identifying details have been changed to meet standards of confidentiality and anonymity

*into her eyes and she put her little hand up and she wiped mum's tears away with her hand. I just thought that was so sweet... You know, a little girl of that age.*²

Marianne's dramatic account of one of her experiences as a contact supervisor introduces this psychosocial research project into supervised contact between children and their birth families. The object of enquiry is the contact supervisors themselves, their experiences of the contact encounter and how their role is constructed and negotiated. Marianne's narrative draws attention to the systemic, relational and emotional complexities faced by contact supervisors. It highlights the dilemmas they face: how to meet conflicting demands of care for children, parents and the assessment system of statutory services.

This introductory chapter begins by outlining what supervised contact is and the existing research on the subject. I then turn to a presentation of how my interest in supervised contact developed, and how this interest informed by current research developed into particular research questions for this project. The final section introduces the psychosocial framework of the thesis.

Context and Research Base

The 1989 and 2004 Children's Acts gave statutory responsibility to local authorities to enable birth parents of children in care to have contact with their child whilst the child was in the care system. 20% more children were taken into the care of local authorities in the last five years³. Rates of families entering into supervised contact have risen considerably since the Children's Act of 1989 (Miles and Lindley 2003 p.237). This presents a significant demand on local authorities resources to provide adequate provision for these children, in a political landscape of funding cuts to state provision.

Contact is either "indirect", letters or phone calls; or "direct", face to face meeting. Direct contact can be either supervised or unsupervised in the family or foster home or community settings. Supervised contact is more likely when the child is under five and there is concern in the professional network about the parent's capacity to keep the child from harm (Sen 2010, Sen and Broadhurst 2011). The person who supervises contact can be the foster or kinship carer, or a local authority representative. Historically, the local authority social worker supervised contact. This has changed in the last fifteen years, due to the increase in children accommodated by local authorities and the change in emphasis on the role of the social worker to an increasingly risk assessment focussed position. Contact between children and their birth families organised by the local authority is now mostly supervised by people who are not social workers. There are no statutory requirements, other than police checks, for qualification of contact supervisors; each local authority has its own employment criteria for recruiting supervisors (Farmer 2010). Contact workers in the UK are usually not highly qualified (Maclean and Mueller Johnson 2003 p.129). I find the contrast between statutory demand for contact between children and their birth parents and the lack of guidance on who can supervise this contact and what form it should take striking: it appears to me as an imperative to **do** without the support to know **how**.

² 'Marianne' p37-43 As above, all names have been changed.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption>

The form of supervised contact that this project focuses on is that provided by five London local authorities. For the main part, contact supervision takes place with families in child protection proceedings, children having been removed from their parents care while a series of assessments take place to decide if the child will return home or a placement (foster or adoptive) has to be found elsewhere. Supervised contact also takes place with families where decisions about the child's placement have been made, and the arrangements for retaining supervised face to face contact with birth family members have been agreed longer term. Throughout these processes the court, rather than the local authority, retain the authority for ordering changes to contact (Miles and Lindley 2003). Generally speaking, the longer a child is in foster care, supervised contact decreases, with contact happening in the community without the presence of a local authority representative. This is dependent on the needs of each child and the context of their removal and present parental health and capacity to meet requirements of safety and care.

The complexity of contact between children in care, their birth families, and the foster or adoptive placements is significant (Terling 1999, Maclean and Mueller-Johnson 2003, Neil and Howe 2004, Loxterkamp 2009, Atwool 2013, Coen and Kearns 2013). Emotional and behavioural factors such as safety, loss, identity and placement stability in addition to logistical demands on parents, carers and children make supervised contact a multi various and even controversial aspect of child welfare (Quinton et al 1997, Ryburn 1999, Harris and Lindsay 2002, Miles and Lindley 2003, Loxterkamp 2009) . Research into contact has been directed into three main areas: reunification, placement stability and children's well-being and views.

Reunification The relationship between contact and reunification – that is children returning to their birth families - has been the focus of much of the relevant literature (Owen and Pritchard 1993, Maluccio et al 1996, Williams 1996, Terling 1999, Leathers 2002). Contact between the child and their birth family is seen as an important, though not the sole, factor in enabling the eventual move of the child back to their birth family. Indeed, the duty of enabling contact with a view to seeking family reunification is part of the Local Authority's statutory obligation (Bainham 2003 p.26). The assumption that reunification is the ultimate goal of child welfare is a powerful one evident in the legislative language, specific cultural 'norms' and developmental psychology discourses such as Attachment Theory (Bowlby 1969). The literature addresses rates of re-entry into the care system following the return of a child to their birth family (Williams 1996). The aim is to reduce re-entry to the care system, therefore contact takes on an important role with regard to contributing to assessment of birth family capacity to parent consistently over time to enable decision making by child welfare professionals (Terling 1999). With the realistic potential for children to return home in mind, a broadening of the term "reunification" has been suggested to encompass a "planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their families", which means not necessarily living or even directly seeing the birth family (Maluccio et al 1996 p.288).

Placement Stability When a child is placed away from the family home, research has been conducted to explore how contact with the birth family affects the child's placement with a substitute family (Farmer 2010, Neil and Howe 2004, Schofield and Beek 2005, Loxterkamp 2009, Cossar 2013, Grotevant et al 2013). Children in care have to negotiate 'dual identities', living with one family and being born into another. When there is cooperation between birth and foster or adoptive families, and supervised contact, the child's placement in their substitute family appears to

be more stable (Schofield and Beek 2005, Farmer 2010). There are notable differences in the different sorts of placement a child might be in; for example in kinship care, where a child is placed with a family member, the placements appear to last longer. However, contact with inappropriate family members is more of a risk and increased conflict within the wider family network more likely (Farmer 2010). Foster carers and other professionals often report increased behavioural and emotional disruption around the looked after child's contact with birth family which can place pressure on the placement.

The Child Children's views are reported as being in favour of direct contact. Children in care want to see their birth families and often experience being locked out of contact arrangements and decisions (Fitzgerald and Graham 2011, Sen and Broadhurst 2011, Atwool 2013). The impact of contact on children's wellbeing is harder to assess. Behavioural disturbances can reduce when there is *meaningful* contact (Grotevant et al 2013). The literature is acknowledged to be mixed when gauging the impact of contact on children's well-being (Sen and Broadhurst 2011). What helps encourage children's positive emotional health and decrease subsequent behavioural disturbance appears to be adults that help the child develop more secure attachment patterns of relating – i.e., safe, consistent and reliable caregivers (Neil and Howe 2004, Andersson and Arvidsson 2008, Atwool 2013).

Complexities in contact The existing literature acknowledges an inherent assumption that contact between a child and their birth family is a 'good thing'. The knowledge of one's origins and background as a key part of identity formation and personal satisfaction is the major justification for children having a form of contact with their birth families (Harris and Lindsay 2002, Schofield and Beek 2005). Challenges to this are present in the existing research. In a research review, Quinton *et al* suggest contact is a "social experiment" and not supported by research evidence to date. This view has been robustly challenged (see Ryburn 1999). Lorne Loxterkamp has suggested that although knowledge about one's birth family is key for identity formation, in maintaining contact with birth parents who were neglectful or abusive, professionals deny reality to the child about the real reasons they do not live with their families. He posits that by removing a child but retaining contact (in some cases) the child is left in a tantalising position, not able to be with parents but not knowing why from the adults around them. Loxterkamp argues the child does have an idea about their removal but this knowledge is not verified externally, which leaves them unable to fully acknowledge their range of emotional reactions and identity formation with regard to their relational patterns. Jo Miles and Bridget Lindley voice caution regarding supervised contact from the perspective of the parent, drawing on some parent's experience of the contact encounter as "hostile" (Miles and Lindley 2003 p.246). They assert that supervised contact should be ordered only when absolutely necessary and when there is the presence of the supervisor they should be as "unobtrusive" as possible (ibid p. 247).

The complexity of each family case is highlighted throughout the literature, alongside a call for nuanced, thoughtful planning of contact arrangements (Williams 1996, Harris and Lindsay 2002, Miles and Lindley 2003, Atwool 2013, Cossar 2013). The attention to contact arrangements as needing to be flexible, to reflect changes in relationships over time and the shifting needs of the child/ren involved is most coherently and comprehensively offered by Neil and Howe (2004), who have produced an assessment framework for considering how contact can work whilst taking

multiple factors into account. The fact that such a framework exists, yet is not in consistent use in practice strikes me as significant: for over a decade there has been accessible, sensible guidelines on how to plan, conduct and adjust contact arrangements over time yet these do not appear to be known or used by the contact services I encountered via this project or in my professional life.

Further gaps appear in the literature with regard to policy recommendations and actual practice. The call for more support and training in supervised contact has been made (Maluccio et al 1996, Hobbs et al 1999, Terling 1999, Harris and Lindsay 2002, Leathers 2002, Maclean and Johnson 2003, Andersson and Arvidsson 2008) and the underused potential of contact as an area of child welfare work highlighted (Sen 2010, Sen 2011). What the literature does not provide is how to make these recommendations a practical reality. Contact research identifies stakeholders in the field: children, parents, foster carers and social workers (Sen 2010, Atwool 2013). Contact supervisors themselves are not explicitly identified as an area of research interest, despite the assertion that: "the people who have frequent contact with a child will get to know a child and family more quickly...child minders, nursery staff and school teachers may know more about a child than the social worker" (Own and Pritchard 1993). Contact supervisors are, again, absent from this list. I am surprised again by this gap, if contact supervisors are said to 'know' the child the most, then why are they not identified as an object of research focus and practical system for change? A notable exception is a Swedish study that does focus on the "contact worker", claiming that the presence of a contact supervisor is beneficial in contact because they help the child feel more secure when having contact with parents (Andersson and Arvidsson 2008). Turning to the contact encounter itself, there is a small research contribution on what supervised contact should offer to families. There is an acknowledgement of the "balancing act" between parental conflict and the needs of the child (Andersson and Arvidsson 2008, Sen 2010). Contact is said to require: "skilled, vigorous and disciplined supervision" (Hobbs et al 1999 p.1248) and supervision, structure, role modelling and a "respectful and caring attitude" (Leathers 2002 p.615). Supervised contact is identified as an intervention to aid the child's changing developmental needs (Neil and Howe 2004). Broad statements about what contact could or should be are evident, but the following through of this into actual practice is harder to evidence. Another gap is the lack of a research base for exploring the process of contact supervision itself. The contact encounter has been described in passing as "the strangeness of the event itself" (Cossar and Neil 2013). The lack of research into the *process* of supervised contact as opposed to the outcomes, is acknowledged in that there is: "little research on managing contact per se" (Sen 2010 p.425).

There is one exception to this trend in the literature, provided by Hindle and Easton (1999). In their paper drawing attention to the benefit of observation skills within social work tasks they refer to Easton's unpublished 1997 MA dissertation on social workers' experience of supervising contact. Easton studied the experiences of social workers and social work assistants when they supervised contact with the view to see what could be learned from the observations they produced regarding the family interactions and the workers reflections on the task of contact. Easton's focus on social workers and *social work assistants* rather than 'contact supervisors' shows the changes in social care over the last eighteen years. Today, social worker's high caseloads and risk assessment focus mean that they very rarely get to supervise the contact of families they work with; and social work assistants are engaged in carrying out more of the social work tasks that social workers used to do historically. In this shift, a new role has emerged, that of contact supervisor. This reflects the growth

of contact as an increasingly differentiated field of social care practice due to the volume of families entering the care system. Easton’s study found that social workers and social work assistants were uncertain about their role. There was confusion about whether they should initiate interactions with the family or be a non-participant observer. This confusion was linked to a lack of clarity about the task of contact: was it an assessment or there to keep the child safe. Contact is stated as: “likely to be a highly charged emotional situation” (Hindle and Easton p.33), and those supervising experienced feeling overwhelmed and deskilled. Easton suggested workers could defensively detach themselves from this charged emotional situation as a way to manage issues of separation and loss. Hindle and Easton’s paper stands as an exception within the literature base in its attention to the experiences of those supervising contact. It was written 18 years ago, and in that time the field of contact has changed dramatically. The picture today is that many more families are having supervised contact ordered through the courts, and local authorities are having to meet this demand which has resulted in contact supervision becoming an increasingly discrete area of social care practice. This is seen in the emergence of the named role ‘contact supervisor’. These changes mean there is a lack of direct research focus on the process of supervised contact and what the experience of the contact encounter is from the perspective of the supervisor.

Contact with Curiosity

My experience of supervised contact has been through working alongside families who have been involved with contact services. This started when I was employed as a child development worker in a refuge for families fleeing domestic abuse, where contact between children and their father was a key risk factor in abusive behaviours toward children and partners continuing. When I started my clinical training as a psychoanalytic child and adolescent psychotherapist my interactions with contact continued, though from within a professionalised environment – the clinic – which brought me into contact with not only families negotiating care proceedings but the professionals they worked with, social workers and schools. As a trainee therapist working with many looked after children and the networks around them, I heard countless stories about how contact disrupted children and placements, and how it didn’t fit with the actual family or carer context the child was in at the time. Inside the therapy room I saw children attempt to understand their powerful and confusing feelings towards their birth family and carers. Now, after my training is over, I notice that my interest in contact may have been connected to my negotiation of my own training, being in a new setting with a new professional identity to grow into. My anxieties about this could have piqued my interest in other perceived marginal positions in the agencies I worked with.

With this nascent interest in supervised contact, I shadowed a contact session at a local authority contact centre in order to develop ideas about my research. The contact session I observed was a group of siblings meeting with their birth parents and grandmother in the presence of a contact supervisor. The session took place in a dedicated area, not unlike a domestic living room, filled with soft seating, toys and a kitchen. The children had been in care for some months, and the contact was a regular arrangement. My presence in the room appeared unremarkable to the family and the supervisor, perhaps unsurprising considering the family’s familiarity with the involvement of professionals in their domestic life. My notes taken after the session record my sense of the children’s competing demands for the attention and interest of all the adults in the room. I was drawn to the interactions of the children, their use of each other and the adults in the room,

unsurprisingly perhaps as a relatively new trainee child therapist. The family dynamic, the pace and type of activity, the interaction with the supervisor all seemed full of meaning and significance to me. The supervisor adopted a friendly but distanced stance and took notes throughout the session on a large pad of A4 paper. In discussion with her afterwards, she spoke about her sense of sadness for the family. The children had been removed for neglect and due to parental learning difficulties; the return of the children was looking unlikely. The supervisor's empathy for the family was accompanied by her keen attention to her task of writing notes on the session to be passed to the social worker. The summary was expected to contain an overview of what happened in the session, who did or didn't respond to events in particular ways and attention to greetings and farewells between family members.

This shadowing experience enabled multiple differences to become apparent to me. There seemed to me to be a disparity between the tasks contact supervisors had to do, the preparation in regard to qualification or experience for this, and how their task was known or acknowledged externally.

The sense of disparity is echoed in the research base on contact. The literature presents contact as a complex area of child welfare, where the asserted need for individualised and nuanced planning is often contradicted in practice. There has been a focus on outcomes of contact, but no sustained or recent enquiry into the process of what happens in a supervised contact session or the role and experience of 'contact supervisors'. This gap in the research base is very concerning when considering the sharp increase of children entering the care system and heightened pressure on resources of that system.

Questions about Contact

The disparities about contact I encountered through the literature and my professional experience developed into a robust curiosity about supervised contact. I was interested in what happened on multiple levels of experience, both *within* the contact encounter of supervisor/parent/child and *outside* the contact encounter: how contact 'fits' with other parts of social care as well as how external conditions impact on and take notice of what happens in the contact encounter. In particular I wanted to know more about how contact supervisors understood their role, what did they find satisfying and challenging about their work. I wanted to understand more about the qualities and skills supervisors needed, and if the need for these capacities was seen differently by those outside of the contact encounter but still in the social care system. This curiosity led to considering how the role of contact supervision could be understood in the context of challenges facing networks around Looked After Children. These became my research questions, which require attention on both micro and meso levels, that is what happens within the contact encounter and how this links to systemic influences and perceptions of supervised contact. In short I was interested in the connections within and across the levels and aspects of contact supervision. This calls for a psychosocial approach which brings an emphasis on the texture and interface of both 'social' and 'psychic'. The psychosocial call for complexity, to develop understandings that disrupt previously held assumptions about what is 'inside' and what is 'outside' is vital in undertaking a research project of this kind, one which is concerned with an area of human activity that has not been the direct focus of recent research interest.

Outline of Thesis

The thesis is structured into five chapters including this introduction:

Chapter Two: Intellectual position

This chapter details the conceptual and methodological framing of this project and the stages of the analysis. I first employed a Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) to identify patterns in the data which were developed into initial codes, then to subthemes, to candidate themes, and finally to the two core themes: The Cinderella Service and Gut Feelings/Fine Lines.

The two core themes were subsequently analysed using discursive and psychoanalytic modes of enquiry. I undertook detailed attention to the performativity of text drawing on Positioning Theory (Harre and Van Langehove 1998). This enabled understandings about how contact supervisors positioned themselves in the social phenomenon of the contact encounter, and the multiple and often conflictual actions available to them. At the meso level, the examination of what social discourses were active in the contact encounter evidenced the boundaries and regulation of social actions and moralities (Foucault 1973). The final layer of analysis considered the core themes and their discursive characteristics from a psychoanalytic perspective, contributing an 'out and wide' understanding of complex and confusing scenarios emerging from the contact encounter (Frosh and Baraister 2008).

Chapters Three and Four: Data Analysis

The Cinderella Service (chapter three) illustrated and discussed how contact supervisors take up three mutually supportive and disruptive positions via the storylines of Royalty in Rags and Doing the Dirty Work. The storylines and positioning they enable are examined in the light of supervised contact as a site of disciplinary power relations and an enclosed social discourse. Psychoanalytic perspectives contribute a 'thickening' of these micro and meso discursive analyses to consider the subjective dynamics of rivalry, desire and loss as present in the contact encounter.

Gut Feelings/Fine Lines (chapter four) employs the same sequence of analysis and discusses three storylines which were constructed from the interview material: Same-as-us, Parent-as-child and Here-for-a-reason. Supervisors drew on these and moved between them to negotiate competing moral dilemmas they faced as a result of being located in contrasting 'vertical' and 'horizontal' relational patterns. Analysis of how these patterns are formed in the context of discourses on parenting, class and gender further highlighted the moral dilemmas faced by contact supervisors and how they experienced these as irresolvable. Dynamics of denial, loss and ambivalence characterised the relational patterns and provided formulations for the power of the affective experience supervisors describe in the interviews.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter revisits the original research questions in light of the data analysis. The key finding stands as contact supervision is a psychosocial site of unresolved loss, ambivalence, moral dilemmas and contrasting relational demands. Contact is presented as characterised by degrees of paralysis, active in structural, moral and emotional interrelated dimensions. Discussion of these dimensions

enabled an exploration of the present challenges in contact and the implications of this research project on supervised contact design and practice. Reflections on the processes of this project conclude the thesis.

Chapter Two

Methodology

Landscapes: Locating the intellectual field of contact and routes to knowledge

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first explains the conceptual and methodological framing of the project; including justifying the employment of discursive analysis and psychoanalytic perspectives concurrently in order to develop a psychosocial understanding of contact supervision. The second part details the development of the research, how participants were identified and the process of data collection. My reflexive practice is examined as central to these research activities.

Ontology and Epistemology: Setting the Intellectual Field

Ontology is the area of philosophical debate about the nature of the world, what there is to know. As such ontological concerns are those about the status of reality. This project takes a post-structuralist position, which challenges the assumption that there is a coherent and unchanging external reality that is ‘objective’ and ‘true’. Post-structuralism as an intellectual movement is understood in relief from the Enlightenment principles of rationality, coherence, universal structures, absolute truths and hierarchical progression of development and culture. In contrast, post-structuralism posits that there is a multiplicity of ‘realities’ that are formed through the specific historic and social contexts they operate within. This social discourse perspective is strongly associated with the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault 1975, 1980). The acceptance of multiple discursive realities brings with it the threat of relativism, which can threaten political action (Edley 2001, Nightingale and Cromby 2002). The critical realist landscape offered by Roy Bhaskar offers a potential solution to this dilemma (Bhaskar 1978). He proposes the classification of two types of object in the world: intransitive objects, which are those not produced by humans and constructed ones, produced by people. Therefore the nature of the object can remain while its function can be investigated as part of human discourse. For example, there are minerals that combine to produce stones (an intransitive object) that have been named diamonds, and these objects are part of a constructed discourse around wealth, status, class, working conditions and significant impact of people’s lived experience. Therefore there are multiple “diamonds” for consideration.

Discourse

Social discourses are complex systems of representation which condition how we create and sustain social practices, beliefs and identities. They govern how knowledge is produced and shared. Levels of analysis take place on micro, meso and macro levels. Micro analyses are focussed on the small units of person to person social interactions, such as speech. Meso analyses target the discourses present in broader categories of social life, such as delineated social groups. Meso analyses also enable a connection from the micro to the macro, tracing the reverberations of social discourses in different levels of social life. Macro analyses consider the construction and operation of social discourse on large scale social activity, such as societal trends and culture. Contact supervision provides the opportunity for all levels of discursive analyses because of the individual interactions it presents; the wider system of social care it is part of; and the cultural resources it encompasses, assumptions regarding family, class, gender and morality. This discursive approach to knowledge enables attention to the range of social discourses alive in the contact encounter and how these sustain,

propagate and at times challenge assumptions about social life, harm and moral action. This project is primarily concerned with micro and meso levels of analysis. The micro discursive approach analysed core themes from the initial Thematic Analysis with attention to the "fine grain" of talk (Wetherell 1998). Taking a closer look at text provides a valuable connection between: "studying talk as it is used for social interaction...with an interest in studying talk as it is employed to "do identity"" (Korobov 2010). This in mind, I employed Positioning Theory as an additional layer of analysis, because it provides an alternative to more rigid understandings of 'roles' and instead draws attention to the multiplicity of positions we take up when engaging in different social encounters (Davies and Harre 2001, Harre and Langenhove, 1999, Harre and Moghaddam 2003, Harre et al 2009). I then looked at the discourses that enabled these positions, thus moving to an exploration of meso discursive patterns in the data from the perspective of Foucauldian power relations and how these framed and influenced the positions taken up by contact supervisors.

Positioning Theory aims to understand how people make sense of and how they manage their social experience. It is rooted in the here and now of human experience and is concerned with how these experiences are constructed (Harre and Moghaddam 2009). Positioning is understood as the process by which speakers discursively construct personal stories which allow them to take up certain positions related to others in order for their actions to be understood and make sense as social acts (Tan and Moghaddam 1995). It asserts that positioning is always relational and takes place in the context of the social realm (Harre and Moghaddam 2003). The social realm is suggested to feature three basic processes: conversations, institutional practices and societal rhetoric. Conversation and 'close-order symbolic exchanges' are the most basic of these and it is this aspect of the data which I use Positioning Theory to understand. Positioning is primarily concerned with interpersonal encounters. Rights and duties are assigned to people in shifting patterns as they engage in performing particular kinds of actions. The meaning of people's actions makes them social acts (Harre et al 2009); what we say and do is shaped/restricted/enabled by the rights and duties we are assigned according to the particular social context of interaction we are in. We co-construct these constructions of social action by accepting, or not, the positions we are ascribed or that we assume. First order positioning is when an assumption of rights or duties is accepted, for example an adolescent having a party when their parent is away can be said to be taking up the first order positioning of teenagers as risk seeking and boundary pushing. Second order positioning is when the assumed rights or duties are not accepted and an alternative posited; for example the adolescent having a party could counter the first order positioning of risk seeking through a second order position of sparing their parents the discomfort of lots of noisy teenagers in their home when they are present, adopting a position of thoughtfulness rather than thoughtlessness. Positioning is therefore a dynamic model of understanding social realities which are constantly in flux.

Conversations between participants and myself were the focus of this form of micro discursive analysis. Positioning Theory understands the structure of conversation as "tri-polar" (Harre and Langenhove 1999) arising from the mutually determining positioning triangle. One apex of the positioning triangle is the *position/s*. This refers to the part assigned to a person within the conversation by themselves or others. The roles assigned feed into the second apex of the positioning triangle, the *storyline*. This is the narrative which is being communicated in speech. The story being created makes sense of the third apex of the positioning triangle, the social force of *speech acts*. These are ideological in that they bring about a change in social activity and go beyond

the evident content of the speech. The apexes of the triad are all mutually productive and determining. Thus the structure of the conversation enables a social reality where people interact in a fashion which is possible to understand and carry out certain activities within the boundaries the current social context allows. The flux of positioning allows for shifts to different episodes. If first order positioning is resisted, there is a change in the form of social activity taking place. There is multiple positioning at work concurrently, drawing on diverse discourses and specific cultural contexts. The multiplicities of positioning allow for the freedom and depth of human experience, and are coherent with lived experience; in social interactions we cannot predict precisely what is going to happen next.

Psychoanalysis

Discursive epistemologies alone are not sufficient to develop thorough understandings of the processes and experiences of contact supervision. The embodied experiences of those involved in the contact encounter eluded a firmer grasp of understanding when presented only in the frame of social discourse. An additional approach to how and what we can know about the world was offered in this project through contemporary psychoanalysis, namely the British object relations perspective that shaped my clinical training and present work as a child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist. This allowed for unconscious dynamics and individual experience to be utilised as ‘ways to know’. The psychoanalytic angle was not used as a tool in a ‘regime of truth’, there are no claims made for access to individuals internal experiences, motivations or desires. Rather than a rigid paternalistic application of psychoanalytic thought, this project used psychoanalytic ideas to signpost collision and conflict, to areas that don’t match up or ‘make sense’. Psychoanalysis as an epistemological tool in this sense contributed a flexible stance for understanding contact supervision, bringing with it the principle that multiple ways to know are possible concurrently, and the tolerance of difference is the foundation of understanding. When used alongside discursive models to ‘know’, dynamic ‘knowings’ from psychoanalysis provided depth and richness to thinking about experiences and what meanings they provoke.

Psychosocial

A psychosocial epistemological position enables socially constructed factors, psychological and emotional states, biographical factors and the subjective capacity for agency to be considered whilst maintaining attention to the dynamics that operate between these domains (Seu 2013 p.4). It is this nuanced attention to connections and ruptures which allows for understandings that reflect the complexity of social life. The psychosocial approach of this thesis enables meso and micro readings of data. This two-fold approach, ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ acts as an illustration of the psychosocial endeavour to have a multi-dimensional approach to knowledge, where the social and psychological domains are not understood in parallel rather in connection. The contribution of the psychosocial is in its resistance to make these connected understandings causal or even correlational, but to encourage expanding horizons of understanding in attention to the mismatch and rhythm in the field of research.

Methodology: Routes of Research

I turn now to detail how I identified and recruited people to participate in the study and the process of the subsequent semi-structured interviews. These processes are framed reflexively, with attention to how I positioned myself and the other. My reflexive stance was informed by the understanding that I and those I interviewed had an impact on the versions of experience and knowledges that form the research ‘data’. Psychosocial research understands the ‘subject’ not a pre-given entity but a site, where “crisscrossing lines of forces” enable subjectivity to emerge (Frosh 2003 cited in Seu 2013 p.23). Both researcher and participant meet and deflect along some of these lines. Throughout the processes of this study, I have endeavoured to “make strange” the experiences and knowledges brought about by the actions of the project (Frosh and Baraitser 2008 p.350). This practice of learning to notice and question assumptions, formulations and experiences brought my role as researcher into the frame of ‘data’ and therefore engendered opportunities to develop richer, more complex and more provoking conclusions regarding contact supervision (Jefferson 2008).

Identification and Recruitment

I discussed the project with friends and colleagues who either worked in social care or had links to people who did. These conversations gave rise to suggestions of particular contact supervision services in different London boroughs, and particular individuals (the managers) as potential leads to interviews. I communicated with these ‘soft contacts’ directly by email, my work NHS email which I thought lent me an air of institutional authority, mentioning the connecting person and outlining my interest in contact supervision, my training as a child psychotherapist and the study as part of my training. I therefore positioned myself as within the broader child services field. This self-positioning provided legitimacy from the shared work context with my NHS public sector work setting and the joint relationship with the connecting contact. All of the contact supervision centres I contacted agreed to take part in the study, five London boroughs in total.

I arranged to meet with contact managers first, to explain the study and interview them. The decision to interview managers and supervisors was made in discussion with my doctoral supervisor and was fuelled by the interest in exploring potentially different perspectives within the same organisation – providing potential access to the meso level of discursive analysis. I went to the contact centres to carry out the interviews. I dressed as I would for my work in the clinic, tidy and ‘put together’. I was on time, armed with information sheets, consent forms, spare batteries for the recorder. On my initial visits, the manager would collect me from the waiting area, and identify me quickly, though this was our first meeting. My appearance as a White, professionally dressed woman in her 30’s with a large ‘work’ bag no doubt announced me to them very clearly. On one occasion when ‘signing in’ I was mistaken for staff. I was never asked if I was a “service user”. Nine of the ten interviews were in contact supervision centres, the exception took place at my place of work, because it was geographically convenient for the contact supervisor I was interviewing. I understand my approach to the setting of the interviews as an attempt to position myself as capable and trustworthy. It is highly likely this positioning was more for my need than those I was interviewing. The need for me to position myself as such emerges when I remember my apprehension on the way

to those initial meetings, checking the route and going over information I felt important to pass on. Throughout the data collection period I kept a research diary recording my impressions. I struggled a bit with the signing in books at the contact centre reception desks: how to define myself when outside of my clinical role and new to the role of researcher. I wrote the name of the person I was there to see, and left the business box unmarked, feeling every time the ghost urge to write my NHS ‘pass’ in the form of “CAMHS” (child and adolescent mental health service) which provided me with legitimacy in my non-researcher professional life.

The interviews themselves saw me position myself slightly differently in each, congruent with the context of the unique meeting between two people. I noticed a trend in how I shifted in my interviews with managers and interviews with supervisors. With managers I spoke more, offering examples of my knowledge, mentioning the doctoral level of the project I was working on. There was more attention to system processes in the managers’ interviews, and how contact supervision connects (or not) with the wider body of social care and children’s services. I asked managers about service provision and change, due to my assumptions about their organisational responsibilities. In my mind this meant they had perspectives to explore regarding contact as a system within social care in addition to the experience of being present in the direct contact encounter. In my interactions with managers, I presented myself as an interested party, even a sympathetic colleague who shared some knowledge of the changing landscape of public sector children’s services.

In my interviews with contact supervisors, I became aware I spoke much less, and when I did my accent softened. I showed my interest through noises of interest rather than words, there are lots of “umhmmms” from me in the supervisor transcriptions. This positioning facilitated narratives about people’s experience in the contact encounter. I felt I emphasised my working with children more than the researcher role in my meeting with supervisors, possibly an attempt on my part to be ‘more like’, sharing experience of forms of child care with the supervisors. My shift in accent is also indicative of my positioning of myself as ‘like’. My accent clearly marks me as a university educated middle class woman, the majority of contact supervisors could be categorised as working or lower middle class in terms of formal qualifications. The slight but significant shift in my tone and emphasis on the research or child aspect of my work illustrates my presentation of myself as ‘alongside’ the person I was interviewing. I was unaware of my actions in this regard at the time, but when I returned to the researcher diary I can trace how I subliminally positioned myself and others.

My ‘soft contact’ approach to identifying and recruiting people for the study together with my positioning of myself as ‘like’ what I think the other is could show that I was locating contact supervision services as needing to be convinced to participate; I constructed them as potentially resistant. I am also aware of my assumption, based on my professional experience, of the demands faced by social care and restricted resources to meet them. In this way I positioned the system of contact supervision as fragile in addition to potentially resistant.

Interviews

Interviews took place for the most part at the contact supervision work place. These settings varied from dedicated contact centre buildings to larger settings where other local authority services and activities took place. The dedicated contact centres were familiar to me in my experience of working with children and families in different roles. They were usually one storey buildings located in

residential streets. All have buzzer entries and sign in books. Centres were well heated, with low seating and bright décor. Leaflets on family support, domestic violence, benefits and employment advice sprouted from wall racks. Photo displays and art projects decorated the walls, witnesses to playful and attractive activities. I was often not alone in the waiting areas, joined by those for whom the centre was a more regular destination. I watched young parents, older foster carers, but rarely children. I was aware of managing my experience of being ‘new’ by fitting the contact centres I visited into my pre-existing schemas of experience. People on the whole were warm, offering hot drinks and making small talk about the location, my journey, the weather. One borough, in the process of moving sites, had asked families for their opinions about how to decorate and supply the new contact rooms. My impressions of the general setting of the interviews formed a significant part of my notes taken after the interviews for the research diary. It seems I was positioning contact supervision services through their physical surroundings: the sort of neighbourhood, the atmosphere of the centre, the type of welcome given to families and myself. My impressions formed concentric circles of assumption leading to positioning of contact services as welcoming to families. This is interesting when considered alongside the concurrent hostile/fragile tone at work in my identification and recruitment process. I recorded interviews on a Dictaphone, which was accessible only to me throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality. The recordings will be destroyed following the completion of this portfolio doctorate.

I saw most managers in their offices, with the contact schedules pinned on the walls and an atmosphere of tight coordination – underlined by ringing phones and open email windows on computer monitors. I sat on chairs pulled up to desks, my coat and bags arranged at my feet and often feeling, to start, like the unfamiliar outsider that I was. I perceived the other as busy and facing numerous demands and needs. I saw most supervisors in the family contact rooms. Contact rooms were clean, filled with toys in labelled and child appropriate storage drawers and boxes. Some had small kitchens, sofas, rugs and soft seating. During these interviews I was struck with how the noise of the centre came into the room; for example hearing children play in the garden in one of their contact sessions. People would lower their voices when talking about incidents of conflict. The difference between office and contact room as the setting for the interviews increased my identification of managers with systems and supervisors with the experience of being with children and families. One interview took place in my work setting, and was one of the last. I was the one then to offer drinks, make small talk and it seems ‘host’ in the way I had experienced in the contact centres. Again, I positioned the person I was talking to as a helpful presence, aiding me with my research, and seeking areas of common connection.

My positioning of contact managers and supervisors as helpful, even ‘doing me a favour’ was particularly disrupted in one interview. It was my third visit to the contact centre; the first had been to meet the manager and join the team meeting to introduce the project. The second had been the manager’s interview. I was therefore fairly familiar with the centre’s location and ‘feel’. On arrival, I was directed down a corridor I had not been down before, to a room at the end where I knocked and was shouted in. I hovered on the threshold and explained I was looking for Delores. There were two women in the room, sitting at desks in what seemed to me an average office, papers and files scattered about. The woman who had called me in looked at me directly and told me that Delores wasn’t here. I felt very confused and out of place. After a pause, both women laughed hard together, making me feel excluded, not in on the joke. The woman spoke again, telling me no, she was

Delores. She stayed sitting, the other woman still chuckling. I, still feeling like a fool, explained I was here for the interview, Delores seemed uninterested. She slowly got up and suggested we see if any rooms were free. I followed her down the corridor, until she found an empty contact room, where she sat on the sofa and I sat on a chair facing her. My placing of people who had agreed to be interviewed as helpful and benign figures was interrupted by my now construction of Delores as rejecting, mocking and distant. This continued into the process of the interview. I had an emotional experience of disconnection, which was in contrast to my interview experiences to date. The following extract is an example of my positioning of the accommodating other being challenged, the narrative of help and agreement disrupted:

Eva: Can I ask you Delores, if you've got kids yourself?

Delores: Why's that?

Eva: I just was thinking about this quite a lot about, you know when you talk about that kind of hunch that you have, and that kind of, it seems sense, which you can build up from experience but the kind of empathy and thinking about families and being with families. I think some people really draw on their own family life for that.

Delores: Okay, no, I don't have children. The reason why I said to you, because when the parents ask me that question, I divert, I divert the question back to them, you know, because it's not about me it's about them. So I tend to divert it back to them, mm. But no, I don't have children; I've just got like years of experience. I've got lots of nieces and nephews. I used to always have children round my house all the time, constantly babysitting like my nieces and my nephews and my godchildren, so it's just, it's just experience really, my knowledge.

Eva: Yeah, and yeah, yeah, and also maybe being able to pick up on things that aren't spoken, you know, aren't spoken about, it's more of an emotional communication.⁴

I sought permission to ask a question, despite our interaction being a semi-structured interview. I had assigned us the roles of me asking and her telling, a comfortable power dynamic for researcher/researched which was clearly in operation from my end. Differences in our ethnicity and class echoed the demand/provide power dynamic of ask/tell. My hesitancy therefore was perhaps indicative of this power dynamic being challenged from the start of our encounter (Delores had not been in the team meeting I had spoken at) by Delores's joke. The joke, likely a communication of connection to her colleague and nothing to do with me, had unsettled me; Delores subverted the role I had assigned her of availability and direct access. My assignation of traditional researcher/researched roles was further challenged by Delores flipping a question back to me, and my rather waffling responses showed my surprise at being the one asked something in the interview process. Delores gave me an experience of how she is with the families she works with, explaining why she had responded to my question in that way. This was unexpected, because I had not paid attention to those not in the interviews, but who the interviews focused greatly on – the families coming for contact. Delores provided me with a double challenge to my positioning of the other. She broke my narrative of a research power dynamic of who asks and who tells. She also enabled me to

⁴ Delores p.21

have an experience of finding myself related to as a “service user”, a position which both I as a researcher and a clinician often avoided. The discomfort I felt is valuable in drawing attention to the disciplinary power relations active in how I, unconsciously, positioning the other, both interviewee and absent family.

My reflections on the reflexive practice outlined above can be summarised as placement uncertainty. There was a confusion regarding how to place myself or the contact service. This is seen in my location of myself as ‘like’; part of children’s services and alongside the interviewee. I am unsure of my place: I am not in my work role and not fully settled into a researcher’s role. My positioning of contact as welcoming and accommodating as well as potentially resistant and fragile indicates a confusion or rapid change in how contact is seen. The challenge to presumed placement experienced in Delores’s interview further illustrates just how provisional and shifting the experience of having a place was. The implications of not having a set place are perhaps unsurprising considering supervised contact is constructed around children who have been moved from one place to another. The contribution to data regarding the role of the contact supervisor stands as experiences of placement instability and rapid change.

During the data collection process, participants were given information sheets and consent forms, which asserted their right to withdraw at any point (see appendices 5 and 6).

Transcription

I transcribed two interviews myself and the other eight were transcribed by an agency. Experiencing carrying out the transcription process myself for two of the interviews was immensely valuable. Transcribing the first interviews enabled me to be immersed in the interview process again, from a different perspective from that of conducting the interview or reading the transcript. This was a good start for the study, an embodied lesson that: “transcription is a significant part of the interpretative process” (Bird 2005). The act of listening to the interview recordings gave me an additional experience of the data, which functioned to disrupt smooth assumptions about the material and brought hesitations and ambiguities to the fore. Examples of this were the lowering of voices when talking about threatening situations, and the noises from the centre being part of the total interview experience. Time pressure did not allow me to transcribe the subsequent interviews. Recognising the disadvantage this presented, I developed additional immersion techniques for the transcripts such as reading them aloud and re-reading four times as part of the process of Thematic Analysis.

At this stage I changed names and places in the text to ensure participants and boroughs would not be identified.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis as a defined area of methodology has been brought into focus by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, who characterise it as a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” which acts as a “foundational method” for qualitative research (Braun and Clark 2006 p.78). The field of contact supervision is under-theorised and as such the application of a flexible method such as Thematic Analysis gives the possibility to: “reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality” (Braun and Clark 2006 p.81).

Patterns in Individual Interviews: Initial Codes to Subthemes (Appendix 1)

I began the Thematic Analysis by coding each interview separately. There were two layers to the process of identifying initial codes. The first layer consisted of immersion in the data: reading the text aloud and then re-reading four times. I then went through the text again marking phrases of interest, curiosity, and connection to research questions. The second layer of initial coding consisted of drawing the first layer phrases of interest into descriptive themes. These formed the initial codes for that particular interview. The initial codes were then constructed into subthemes, moving descriptive themes into more conceptual categories (see appendix 1 for examples).

Coding across the data set: Individual to Data Set Subthemes (Appendices 2, 3 and 4)

The subthemes from individual interviews were collated to make a long list of subthemes. There was repetition of conceptual categories, detailed in appendix 3. The subthemes from across the data set were examined and drawn into 12 data set subthemes, representing the individual subthemes and further refining the move from description to conceptual (appendix 4). I then re-read every interview using the data set subthemes as conceptual 'filters' to test if they remained coherent with the text.

Candidate Themes (Appendix 2)

Having satisfied the validity of the data set subthemes with regard to the transcriptions, I moved to refining them into candidate themes. Candidate themes must "capture the contours of coded data" whilst acting to "tell the story" (Braun and Clark 2006 p.91). The candidate themes I established were: Cinderella, Breech and Danger, Gut Feelings and Fine Lines. I returned again to the transcriptions to trace the robustness of each candidate theme within and across the data set. This process helped clarify the candidate theme of Breech and Danger primarily as part of the other candidate themes rather than as a 'stand-alone' core theme.

Core Themes (Appendix 2)

I concluded the Thematic Analysis with two core themes: The Cinderella Service and Gut Feelings/Fine Lines which communicate key aspects of contact supervisors experience and understanding of their role.

The Cinderella Service

The Cinderella Service core theme is constructed from the data set subthemes of: *The Value of the Field*, narratives from the interviews that promoted contact supervision as a valuable resource for social care and for families; *Active/Passive Ambivalence* which referred to the confusion over whether contact supervision did or didn't 'do' anything; *The Overlooked 'Worker'* articulating the position of contact supervisor as unseen by other parts of the social care system; *The Unique Position*, where the contact supervisor is portrayed as accessing families in a way no other part of social care can or does; *Danger*, the unacknowledged or externally identified threat that accompanies the contact encounter. An illustration of The Cinderella core theme is visible in Rose's statement:

"We are in a unique position in that we form a different relationship with these families that social workers on the whole don't "⁵

Rose presents contact supervisors as able to form unique relationships across the social care system of families and social workers. The speciality of this place is dependent of the boundaries of the system. The boundaries permit and prohibit different forms of relationship, visibility and value.

Gut Feelings/Fine Lines

The core theme of: Gut Feelings/Fine Lines is the articulation of the data set subthemes of: *Gut Feelings*, presenting contact supervisors as 'just knowing' about families or outcomes; *Skills*, in apparent contrast to 'just knowing', emphasising nuanced and subtle qualities; *Moral Dilemmas*, the conflictual experiences expressed in deeply personal narratives; *Multi-Level Tensions*, the ongoing juggle of different expectations and demands within the system. An example of the latter is given by Samantha:

"Families find it difficult because they're always battling with us 'cause obviously we represent the local authority, the ones who took their children away...when you come here, us girls that work with you want you to have your baby go home. We're actually here to help you do that...So you need basically...to pull your socks up, stop being proud, jump through the hoops that they're telling you to and listen to what we're saying"⁶

The tensions between social care, contact supervision, and families is articulated here and the concurrent demands on the contact supervisor – to both be the face of "the ones who took their children away" and "want you to have your baby go home". The appeal to 'common sense' is seen in "pull your socks up" and also the need for careful attention – fine lines – is evident is: "listen to what we're saying". The element of threat is present in the 'battle' and lack of clarity about who is on which side.

Core Themes and Data Analysis: Investigating the Terrain

As a psychosocial project this thesis aimed to develop intricate understandings of the social phenomenon of supervised contact. The hope was not to provide neat answers but to outline the complex contours of contact and highlight points of my curiosity as well as formulations about what processes are in effect and how they relate to each other.

Hence, the in following data analysis chapters I interrogate each core theme using discursive analysis and psychoanalytic perspectives. Discursive analyses are employed on micro and meso levels. The micro discursive analysis examines participants' statements, with attention to the performativity of their speech and the positions available to contact supervisors. Meso discursive analysis provides a link from text to the operation of power relations and discourses on class, gender and the family as active in the contact encounter. Psychoanalytic perspectives enable an additional level of understanding in meeting the contrasts and challenges the data presents.

⁵ 'Rose' p.13

⁶ 'Samantha' p.16

Chapter Three

Data Analysis

The Cinderella Service

The term “Cinderella Service” comes from manager Alex’s presentation of supervised contact as:

“A Cinderella service really”.⁷

The idea of a Cinderella Service captures a contradiction – someone or something of value that is hidden, even debased, yet retains moral authority and a special status. In the specifics of this study, the fairy tale of Cinderella⁸ stands as a metaphor for gradations of visibility that characterise the narratives of contact supervision in the interview material. That is, the prominence of the figure of the contact supervisor moving in and out of vision. As such, I chose ‘The Cinderella Service’ for the title of the core theme discussed in this chapter, which is built of five subthemes.

Thematic Analysis produced subthemes, which were developed into the core theme of the Cinderella Service. *The Value of the Field* is the subtheme relating to the divergent opinions regarding the activity of contact as a whole. *Active/Passive Ambivalence* speaks to the question of what happens, or not, in the contact encounter. *The Overlooked Worker* describes narrative threads of how the supervisors are seen by the rest of the system. *Unique Position* is the subtheme that voices the supervisors’ view of their role. Finally, the subtheme of *Danger* traces the historic and potential harm within families that supervisors see in different ways. I will briefly explore each of these to illustrate the complexity and ambivalence inherent in the role of contact supervisors represented as Cinderella.

The value of the field exemplifies the perceived complexity and worth in supervising contact. Manager Mia’s description of supervised contact below is one example⁹:

“It’s such a limbo period ... of contact...when assessments might be ongoing, and I think it’s...about doing the best that we can without taking on the full responsibility of whether or not this contact succeeds or whether people get their children back, which is a quite difficult place to sit in... but also being able to roll with...the peaks and the troughs...because we’re seeing people...at the times when they’re having probably the best time of ... their daily lives. But also when they’re at their most vulnerable, when they’re having to say goodbye each time...you just have to be open to the fact that people are not going to be able to manage

⁷ ‘Alex’ p.25

⁸ There are many version of the Cinderella story. The two most known in western culture today are the Perrault version, familiar to millions of people in its Disney form; and the Brothers Grimm account, which differs in certain features, notably the planting of a hazel twig given to Cinderella by her father on the dead mother’s grave, which grows into a tree which provides wishes, gifts and assistance from magic birds that allows Cinderella to flourish. All stories share the misfortune of Cinderella, followed by triumphant success beyond hope. In most versions, Cinderella’s mother dies, and her father remarries a woman who proves to be malicious and unkind, favouring her daughters above Cinderella and Cinderella taking the role of a servant to the family. A period of hardship and persecution ensues, presenting Cinderella as pathos figure who is unfairly treated. Magical help appears in the form of a fairy godmother or animals. This enables Cinderella to access the Prince, who after a number of attempts and mistakes, identifies Cinderella as his chosen partner, and she becomes royalty. There follows the ‘happily ever after’.

⁹ All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity

*that on a consistent basis; there will be times when they can do it fine and there'll be days when they can't.*¹⁰

Mia presents human experience as the heart of the contact encounter: the uncertainty, joy and pain of families in the care system. The supervisor's capacity to be alongside families in this emotionally charged experience is significant, requiring flexibility and empathy. The strong emotions Mia describes underline supervised contact as an important area of social care practice. I understand the 'limbo period' Mia describes as a frame for both the family's and the supervisors experience, which appears to present contact as a valuable resource for families going through such an uncertain time; as well as being of value for the social care system of assessment and protection. However, the subtheme of *active/passive ambivalence* highlights the complexity of the contact encounter and the social care system around it; shown in how supervisors struggle with being the figure in the middle of that complexity. This struggle was voiced as a conflict between what was done, what could be done, and by whom:

*"I do try and explain...most children see their parents no matter what they have done, or who they are...and they go "but that's not right is it" but (lowered voice) ... "he's seeing his dad and he's....a paedophile or something like that...." but what the court have said that dad is actually is entitled to see, to see the child."*¹¹

My impression in the interview was that manager Angela agreed with the idea of contact in some cases not being "right" but the authority for that decision was beyond her and lay with the "court". The distance between action and agency, what happens and who decides was a recurring narrative across the interviews. It remained unresolved, and was often presented as a dilemma for the supervisor themselves: did they 'do' anything or not? On the other hand, a seemingly contrasting experience of how contact supervisors saw their role was voiced in the subtheme of *the overlooked worker*. Many participants presented contact as misunderstood by those outside of it:

*"I don't think it's understood. I think a lot of people do see it as babysitting"*¹²

Manager Lucy articulates an idea of contact being seen as straightforward and safe, yet does not accept this, asserting it is not understood for its complex and demanding nature. The experience of not being understood reverberated across the interview material, supervisors and managers often speaking about other parts of the social care system as well as the general public as not seeing the (full) demands of their role. In stark relief to the idea that contact is overlooked, *the unique position* speaks of specialist access and position of the contact worker:

*"We are in a unique position in that we form a different relationship with these families that social workers on the whole don't"*¹³

Supervisor Rose states clearly that contact supervisors see the families more than other workers in the social care system. The sheer amount of shared experiences between supervisors and families enable a unique relationship to develop. This sets contact supervisors aside from other social care

¹⁰ 'Mia' p.7

¹¹ 'Angela' p.18

¹² 'Lucy' p.34

¹³ 'Rose' p.13

workers - they have a privileged access to families because of the time they spend with them and the setting in which this takes place. Threading throughout the accounts was the subtheme of threat and *danger* which was often implicit, rather than based on actual episodes of violence or harm:

"Having removed the child from parents who are dangerous or are unable to prevent harm or danger...during contact we then expose that child to those parents again...That makes it dangerous".¹⁴

The frightening aspect of this subtheme is in the implied threat of what could happen when the child is 'exposed'. The supervisor is the one who is tasked with seeing the potential threat, and preventing further harm.

Following the statement that contact is dangerous, Alex goes on to say:

"but contact as a whole...is very much pushed to the back into the shadows, keep it cheap and cheerful"¹⁵

Alex brings us back full circle to the invisibility of the Cinderella Service and unacknowledged status of supervised contact. The refusal to see contact as dangerous and even promote it as "cheerful" brings a somewhat 'shady' picture to mind.

These subthemes illustrate the centrality of a metaphor of sight, which is present in different forms across the different subthemes. Contact supervisors see more than others with respect to families but what there is to be seen is subject to change. Those outside of the contact services do not see supervised contact for what it is. What there is to be seen in the contact encounter is difficult: emotionally charged and potentially dangerous historically or presently. And, most basically, the whole rationale for supervised contact to take place at all is to make sure that someone external to the family can see what happens when the family meet. Gradations of visibility also mark the fairy tale of Cinderella: a potential princess in rags, a mouse turning into a man, a pumpkin to a coach. Hence, I will strategically use details from the fairy tale to analyse The Cinderella Service as I turn to developing a psychosocial understanding of the contact supervisors role, through a layering of discursive and psychoanalytic approaches.

Royalty in Rags

Royalty in Rags is a storyline where the true value of the supervisor is obscured by the perception of an external gaze. This storyline functions to define supervised contact in contrasting ways: a definition of contact via negation - where contact is defined by what it is not. At the same time, this storyline resists negation through asserting the 'royalty' beneath the 'rags'.

The definition of the role via negation is achieved through the first-order positioning¹⁶ of supervisors as negated/unseen. Here, the role is seemingly defined by absence. The role of contact supervisor is presented as invisible to the outside world:

¹⁴ 'Alex' p.20

¹⁵ 'Alex' p. 20

¹⁶ As discussed in the preceding chapter, first order positioning is when an assumed duty or discourse is upheld by those involved in the social activity.

"There is no such thing as a contact worker... it's not a career structure, there's nothing there, er, no one leaves school thinking I want to be a contact worker"¹⁷

It is interesting to see how Alex uses repeated negative language: "no such thing....it's not...there's nothing... no one". Contact is defined by what it is not. He creates an image of contact supervisors as separate and unseen by the wider system. These absences appear as stark areas of undefined and therefore unknowable experience, promoting the presentation of contact supervision as a role which can only be defined through its negative. The clash between a "career" and the "nothing" of contact is continued from a different societal perspective with Alex's claim that "no one leaves school thinking I want to be..." The image of leaving school carries with it an intimation of aspiration and ambition, which have been negated by Alex in his prior assertion that contact is: "not a career structure". Alex is constructing a narrative where the role of contact supervision is overlooked from a range of social and personal angles. These concurrent allusions to aspiration and denial appear to reinforce the contact supervisor as in a disrupted and marginal position.

The disrupted and marginal positioning of contact appears to be located externally and internally by supervisors, as supervisor Linda comments:

"They won't allow you, because I am only a contact, and I'm only on, we're not on a proper contract"¹⁸

Linda presents her agency as dictated by others: "they". The negated role of contact appears to be taken up as an aspect of self: "I am only a contact". The definition of contact through what it is not is voiced not just through the perceived view of an external observer, but also through the presentation of herself as in some way 'lesser': "not on a proper contract".

This can be understood as an acceptance of first order positioning. Supervised contact is negated by 'them' but also by the supervisors themselves and thus can be understood as an identification and internalisation of lowly status. Contact negates itself. The complication arising here is powerfully seen in Alex's statement when talking about recruiting contact supervisors:

"They just want a little job. It suits them."¹⁹

Alex's speech act changes the social activity within the storyline. Alex has acknowledged, at length, the complexity and value of supervised contact, yet with this speech act denies and belittles it as a "little job". These complications inherent in the first order positioning of the supervisor as negated/unseen present a form of systemic resistance to acknowledging the full status of the role. Both managers and supervisors express this systemic resistance. It is not only the gaze of external observer that negates contact supervision, but contact supervision itself; Cinderella dressing herself in rags. This position affords little space for the supervisor to manoeuvre in regard to seeing contact more clearly. This is due to the acceptance and maintenance of positioning that obscures the full role of supervisors, with little recourse to alternative positions than enable a more complete understanding of the role.

¹⁷ 'Alex' p.15

¹⁸ 'Linda' p.22

¹⁹ 'Alex' p.41

The *Royalty in Rags* storyline resists the definition of contact via negation through a second order positioning²⁰ of the role as privileged/valuable. This provides an alternative vision of supervisors, a way to see them rather than negate them. A key element of the storyline is the implied authority and status afforded to contact supervisors through the positioning of them as having unique access to families which provides them with information no one else can hold.

“A darn sight more than the social worker...or a guardian of the court or any of them will have seen or been privy to”²¹

Supervisor Marianne’s colloquial phrase: “darn sight more” places her as the direct and personal authority on the topic. Her use of the term “sight” is significant when considering the previously discussed gradations of visibility as an organising dynamic in the construction of the supervisor’s role. ‘Sight’ here is ambiguous, alluding to both a form of measurement and of visibility. Marianne positions herself as an authority to rival the “social worker...guardian of the court”, she is both unrecognised by authority figures and yet superior to them. The significance of visibility is repeated: “will have seen”. Marianne’s phrase: “been privy too” takes the unique position of the contact supervisor as beyond merely ‘seeing’ what happens but as in a relationship with the families that is unique. “Privy” creates an impression of privacy, intimacy, and trust. To my psychoanalytic ear, “privy” is also an old-fashioned slang word for toilet. The dirty work the contact supervisor may have to carry out, which is unseen by their superiors, could be a contributing factor to the potentially latent aggression signalled by “darn sight”. Echoes of Cinderella are present here; a figure with value that has to clear up the mess of others yet has a ‘secret’ experience of privilege. Marianne’s argument is decisive: the contact supervisor has access to families that no other role within the system, not even traditionally elevated ones (“guardian of the court”) can share. This positioning locates the contact supervisor as a unique figure, with a type of knowledge that is not accessible to the more visible authorities, by virtue of the special relationship they have with families.

The value of the supervisor’s link to families is the time they spend with them and the relationship they form. Supervisor Delores elaborates on how this is special in her observation that:

“They just let everything out basically, about how they are feeling, and their thoughts”²²

Delores provides a picture of the supervisor as a receptacle for the internal experiences of families. These feelings and thoughts appear to need to be ‘let out’ and it is the supervisor who is in the position to receive them. The concept of interiority adds authority to the specialist position taken up here, in a bid for psychological access to families which carries with it an air of intimacy and trust.

The *Royalty in Rags* storyline defines the role of contact supervisor through first and second order positioning. These positions are in tension, and mutually inform and disrupt each other.

“What we don’t do here is go and sit and be the face in the corner with the notepads...we are more interactive...we will help families”²³

²⁰ Second order positioning is when the assumed duty or discourse is not accepted and an alternative given.

²¹ ‘Marianne’ p.32

²² ‘Delores’ p.3

Manager Lucy acknowledges the first order positioning of negated/unseen: "the face in the corner with the notepads". Her speech act casts supervisors as anonymous and distant observers who have no relationship to the family. She resists this through asserting the second order position of privileged/valuable: "we are more interactive...we will help". The tension between positions is seen in Lucy's use of the negative as a definition for the role, even while asserting the privileged/valuable position: "what we don't do here". The tension between positions articulates the systemic resistance to fully acknowledging the role. Manager Claire, whilst proud of the service she runs, also states:

"Some of the contact supervisors... they've all been here a long time, and I'm pushing them, go and do your social work training, go and do something, because they're very experienced and I think they're undervaluing themselves. You know, I think they're not really stretching themselves professionally...they're more than capable"²⁴

Claire returns to the first order positioning in her sedentary image of the supervisor: "they've all been here a long time" She counter-positions herself as an active individual pushing at a stagnated group force, seen in her use of personal versus collective pronouns. Her insistence to "go and do... go and do" adds to an air of insistence. A conflicting presentation of contact supervisors occurs; they are both "experienced" and "capable" yet "undervaluing themselves" and "not really stretching themselves". Again, there is a contradiction at the heart of the storyline, where in order to be defined and seen, the contact supervisor must become something else; a role with clear definitions and parameters of agency which here is presented as the social work training. No matter how experienced or capable a supervisor might be, the invisibility of their role from within the system means that to be seen they must be other. The systemic denial of recognition continues in the need for change being located in the activity of the individual supervisor themselves, it is them who has to "go and do", rather than the system taking on a different perspective.

At this point the difference between managers and supervisors is significant. Claire was an experienced social worker prior to taking up her role in the contact service. Other managers in the small range of participants in this study were also social work trained. The articulation of a systemic resistance to fully 'seeing' the role of contact supervisor by people who have moved from an experience of being 'seen' in previous roles to 'unseen' within contact enables the operation of systemic resistance to become in part visible. However, characteristic of the Cinderella Service, there is not a solid boundary between the qualifications of managers and supervisors. Participants in this study generally followed the pattern that managers were formally qualified social workers and supervisors were unqualified workers who had much experience in family support roles within the local authority. There were notable exceptions such as a supervisor who had previously been a manager. Many managers also supervised contact sessions themselves. The changing field of contact disrupts traditional hierarchies within social care, as the demand for contact increases and staffing resources contract and shift. This means that a neat division between what managers and supervisors experience is impossible.

In summary, the tensions between positions seen in the *Royalty in Rags* storyline function to narrow the space supervisors have to operate in. This restricted range impacts on the agency supervisors

²³ 'Lucy' p.7

²⁴ 'Claire; p.15

can access in regard to their experience of their role. Supervisors are at once negated and privileged. This leaves them pinned between two positions, due to the systemic resistance that powers the tension between them, the supervisor is left as a Cinderella who remains the drudge, dreaming of the dress.

Doing the Dirty Work

The second storyline of The Cinderella Service is *Doing the Dirty Work*, where contact supervisors do the work that others don't want to do and see what others don't want to see. This positions the supervisor as an enforced witness:

"It is...very difficult... I really struggle with my own feelings because it's ... clear when a child is emotionally distressed... lack of eye contact, no verbal communication... I mean it's amazing that... they actually physically move away from their parent and nine times out of ten, it's not just me it's all the other workers, they come to you for a hug."²⁵

Samantha relays the emotional pain of the contact encounter, of witnessing a child's distress and the source of that distress seeming to be the parent. This experience is complicated further, by Samantha, the supervisor, being the child's source of protection rather than the parent, which disrupts the relationship between supervisor and parent. Within this storyline, supervisors are positioned between parent and child, tasked to see what happens in situations of confusion and fear:

"I can always remember visually ... he had his back to the wall and he literally, he saw his mum's face. I didn't see her face 'cause she had her back to me kneeling down. I didn't have to see her face. I knew by him what was happening and he literally walked along the wall. He was petrified."²⁶

Marianne's narrative shares characteristics with Samantha's description; both are forms of what I am terming 'sensory snapshot', drawing attention to the physicality of the child and emotional reaction of the supervisor: "I knew by him what was happening". These sensory snapshots portray vivid experiences of being present in situations with a child who is "petrified". The positioning of the supervisor between parent and child demands they witness the fear of the child and concurrently have to bear witness to the knowledge that the source of the child's fear is their parent. Supervisors positioned as enforced witnesses do not get the option not to 'see'; indeed they are tasked with seeing too much.

The narrative quality of the sensory snapshot emphasises sensory experiences of sight, movement and emotional experience. These qualities are reminiscent of how traumatic²⁷ experiences become stored as fragmented memory, anchored around facets of sharp sensory details. The *Doing the Dirty Work* storyline functions to express how the intensity of the relational experience of contact is located solely in the role of the supervisor, and they are positioned as the only receptacle to process

²⁵ 'Samantha' p.10

²⁶ 'Marianne' p20

²⁷ "Trauma" is defined here as any experience that overwhelms the psychological functioning of an individual.

often overwhelming scenes. The overwhelming nature of being the enforced witness is articulated through the sensory snapshots such as those seen above.

As enforced witness, the supervisor is the sole receptacle for the 'dirt', a positioning that is overwhelming - the 'dirt' seeps out. As such, themes of exposure and contamination feature within the storyline, seen in manager Linda's description of a supervisor being seen by a parent outside of the contact encounter:

" ... he'd said...he's seen her, out with her children, ... 'I saw you in Tesco's with your children' and she's thinking 'ohh' that's a bit...ummm, strange ...I suppose the thing is if you live in the borough and you work in the borough you are going to bump into clients...she said she hadn't seen them...so, I think that's what put her on edge a little bit, that he'd seen her out with her children"²⁸

Linda describes a situation where it is the supervisor being seen in a context where *they* are the parent with *their* children. The expected roles are reversed. Linda accepts that bumping into people locally is to be expected, but it is the act of *seeing* that is unsettling: "she said she hadn't seen them...that's what put her on edge". The incident reads as a threatening one, where danger is implied but not directly experienced. This was a familiar pattern across the interviews, people voicing implicit threat, but when I asked directly, acts of actual harm were few – for example contact rooms having panic buttons for staff that had never been pressed. The reality of working with families with histories of violence and abuse does provide an understanding of wariness in staff working with them. However, the threat implied in Linda's account is the exposure of the supervisor to a disruption to the usual setting of who and where 'seeing' takes place. The boundaries of the contact encounter are breached, and the act of being seen carries with it a sense of exposure. The threat is not one of actual violence, but an articulation of the positioning of enforced witness and task of being the one to do the dirty work which is too much. The fear and relational damage in families that supervisors are tasked with having to see can be overwhelming, even contaminating and affecting aspects of the supervisors experience outside of the contact encounter.

So far, gradations of visibility have characterised the storylines of *Royalty in Rags* and *Doing the Dirty Work*. *Royalty in Rags* presents different ways to 'see' contact supervision – through what it is not and as the true worth obscured. These different applications of visibility are in tension. By contrast, the *Doing the Dirty Work* storyline presents the supervisor as seeing too much, and the overwhelming and disruptive experience this can be. The contrast between storylines speaks of the resistance, complexity and confusion inherent in the role of contact supervisor.

Power and Resistance

In order to develop understanding about the conditions that frame the contact encounter I will outline the characteristics of systems of disciplinary power and how this furthers the analysis of The Cinderella Service.

Foucault's 1975 work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* presents the Enlightenment shift in the penal system as representative of a shift in dominant discourses of power relations in the

²⁸ 'Angela' p.12

contemporary age. Foucault places the human body at the centre of power relations. His concept of “docile bodies” places the physical human form as the conduit through which power relations are expressed, for example our labour is harnessed within systems of disciplinary power to benefit industrial structures (Foucault 1975). Access to the benefits of labour for the system requires a range of strategies to control and direct the labouring person. The systems through which the control and direction of people and knowledge are expressed are self-regulating; as docile bodies we take on the responsibility for policing our own actions and agency. Foucault points to social institutions such as the army, penal system and medical system as examples of structures of disciplinary power. They operate by setting the terms of definition for how social life ‘is’. This is possible through the mechanisms of normalisation. These mechanisms are evident in the “psy complex” (Rose 1990); the medical, psychological and social systems that create classifications and mechanisms of assessment about subjective experience and behaviour. Contact supervision can be seen as a creation of the psy complex in that it operates from a starting point of assumption on how families should behave according to what is acceptable to the state as well as socially accepted views on parenting, care and safety. Families within the system of social care and engaging in the contact encounter act as docile bodies in their participation within the assessment of what is acceptable and what it not. Contact supervisors too can be understood as docile bodies, being present in the contact encounter and producing reports for use in court.

Disciplinary power relies on the ‘enclosure’ of social activity to create docile bodies that allow the power relations to be sustained and realised. Enclosure is a division of space for certain activities. Enclosures are seen across social life, in prisons, psychological practice and the university. Supervised contact is a strong example of enclosed discourses, providing a meeting point for many facets of different aspects of enclosure. Concrete examples of this are: the child being moved from the family home to foster care. The space a child is permitted to live in has been defined and regulated by the state. The child is moved to the contact centre, to an allocated room where their parents and other family members are permitted to see them. The space where meeting takes place is again defined and delineated from other social spaces. The setting where contact takes place is further defined by the presence of the contact supervisor. Their role is to supervise actions between the family members. Their gaze, representative of the social care system, is an embodiment of the ‘panoptic principle’. Foucault drew on this principle which emerged from Jeremy Bentham’s late 18th century design of a circular prison and highlighted the assumptions it rests on as examples of disciplinary power (Foucault 1975). One of these assumptions is the constant assessment of people/production/activity by a central body. The contact supervisor takes the place of this central body, assessing in person and by the notes they take, the interactions and behaviour of all family members. These assessments inform whether the activity of the family is permissible or not within the enclosed expectations of family life as defined by the state/social care.

Disciplinary power also operates by controlling activity through the process of normalisation. This is the process by which social activity is controlled, one activity is deemed ‘normal’, and activities that are different from this are defined as ‘other’ and cast as the negative to the approved activity. Contact supervision is the site where activity that has been found unacceptable, operating beyond the enclosure of approved family relations, is assessed and bought back within the approved space of interaction. Enclosed discourses are also evident in how many supervisors spoke about the difficulty they had when parents attempted to talk about the legal case with them, and the

supervisor 'having' to assert that speaking about the case in the contact setting was not acceptable. This is an example of Foucault's 'author' principle, the prohibition, division and rejection of what can and can't be spoken about. This function allows groups and social structures to maintain their identity by establishing and policing the boundaries of social space. The contact supervisor actively asserts the boundaries of approved social activity, assessing and intervening in what behaviour and talk are acceptable or not. The supervisor takes notes, which contribute to the system's assessment and intervention into which spaces the family can occupy or not. These notes are accessible to families, but only if requested formally as part of the legal case regarding the child's placement. The contact supervisor is therefore maintaining the boundaries of enclosure and also placed firmly within it, an identity sustained by the positioning of families as outside of that social area.

One result of operating within the disciplinary discourse of supervised contact is the impact of contact supervisors' sense of agency. The *Royalty in Rags* storyline illustrates how the supervisor is the holder of knowledge. This in addition to their gatekeeping of the boundaries of enclosed and normalising structures presents them as the representative of power. The fluctuations of power within the disciplinary discourse can be traced through the first order positioning of supervisors as negated/unseen. The function of supervisors as docile bodies is upheld by the acceptance of this positioning; agency is evaded by being overlooked. Resistance to this is present in the second order positioning of privilege/valuable, supervisors assert an alternative source of power, their knowledge gained through relationship to families. The tension within the *Royalty in Rags* storyline limits the experience of agency the privilege/valuable second order positioning affords, resulting in a delay and interruption to experiences of agency. The systemic resistance to 'full sight' means that the constriction of agency experienced by contact supervisors is constructed within the contact services, as well as externally. The supervisor is therefore operating in a loop of being the holder of knowledge yet unable to exercise the power this affords them.

The conditions of the disciplinary discourse create a delay within supervisors' experience of agency. They are stalled in the enactment of agency their representative authority implies but does not provide. This is traced in the fluctuations of resistance afforded through tension between the positions taken up by supervisors. The significance of how supervisors act as docile bodies within the discourse is highlighted through the *Doing the Dirty Work* storyline. The 'sensory snapshots' that mark narratives where the supervisor is positioned as an enforced witness emphasise the physicality at the heart of the contact encounter – physical bodies are present in a room together and they react to the unfolding interactions in a range of sensory ways. The immediacy of the physical reactions in the contact encounter draws us to the embodied functioning of docile bodies. Contact supervisors are located as a site of maintaining and resisting the disciplinary discourse they operate within, and the narrow confines of this discourse limit their capacity to act. Their role is far from 'docile', but one constructed from tension arising between contrasting knowledges, delay and constriction.

Rivalry, Desire and Loss: Ugly Sisters

The storylines of the Cinderella Service, *Royalty in Rags* and *Doing the Dirty Work* provide an understanding of contact supervisors occupying positions in tension, fuelled by systemic resistance to a 'full view' of the role; and the disciplinary discourse that contact is a part of furthers the restriction of agency for supervisors. However, discursive approaches alone cannot provide a fuller

explanation for inherent tensions articulated by contact managers and supervisors. To extend a developed psychosocial analysis to The Cinderella Service, the positions detailed above must be considered in light of how the "narrative is related to lived experience" requiring a: "more complex understanding of subjective experience" (Hollway and Jefferson 2000 p.137). The vehicle I am using for investigating complexity is psychoanalysis; which due to its attention to conflict and multiple conscious and unconscious processes and functioning is in tune with the tensions and clashes traced throughout the storylines of The Cinderella Service.

In the spirit of "making-strange" (Frosh and Baraitser 2008 p.350), I turn again to the fairy tale of Cinderella to illustrate some of the relational dynamics and developmental tasks that can help further the understanding of what supervisors negotiate in the embodied experience of the contact encounter.

Psychoanalytic readings of the Cinderella fairytale, from the 1950's to 1970's see it as a story of sibling rivalry and wish fulfilment (Collier, 1961, Marcus 1963, Bettelheim 1975²⁹). The competition with a sibling/s is linked to an underlying anxiety that the sibling/s receive more love and good will from the parents than the child themselves. This is an anxiety not based on external reality, but on the psychoanalytic theory of universal developmental stages regarding relationships between self, other and drive gratification. These 'psychosexual' stages posit that all children possess a fierce desire for their parents, and the direction of this desire shifts and changes over the first years of life (approximately to four to seven years). The negotiation of the Oedipus complex is only resolved, according to traditional Freudian theory, at the end of adolescence, where the young person has a resurgence of strong oedipal ties which are met by the adolescent accepting a mature sexuality and a sexual interest and/or partner that is not their parent. The heterosexist bias to this theory is self-evident, and increasingly acknowledged as such within clinical psychoanalysis as well as outside of it (for example Allen 2011). The sibling rivalry seen in Cinderella between her step-sisters and herself is therefore an expression of a child's fear of losing the parent's love. Cinderella represents a child who is in a situation of rivalry with siblings, and this rivalry reflects a more unconscious level of conflict, that of oedipal desire.

I propose that taking the concept of oedipal desire as a metaphor, rather than interpretation, allows for an extension in understanding the inherent tensions of The Cinderella Service. As a metaphoric concept, oedipal desire enables a wider understanding of supervised contact. I am not making an interpretation on supervisors' internal psychic states or claims to a Positivist universal developmental discourse. Therefore in the spirit of metaphor, developmentally the Oedipus complex articulates the move in relationship from two people to three or more. This shift requires an integration of relational and psychic space, the toleration of not being the only one. It is the struggle to allow the 'third', an exclusionary presence. Considering the storylines of the Cinderella Service, in

²⁹ *An aside is necessary at this point to address the status of Bruno Bettelheim as a reliable source for interpretations. He occupied an important position in public academic life in the United States and was widely respected and feted as a psychoanalyst who contributed to children and society's well-being (Beldoch 1998). After his suicide in 1990, accounts of abusive and disturbing treatment of children in the school for autism he ran emerged. A biography was written: "The Creation of Doctor B" (Pollack 1998) which exposed Bettelheim as lying about his psychoanalytic and other qualifications in addition to plagiarism and dishonest behaviours. These elements of his character were indeed kept 'in the shadows' and overlooked. There is a need to restrain from making Bettelheim either the idealised infantile mother or the wicked stepmother, but to be able to extract what is helpful from his contributions in terms of developing understandings of the experience of the contact encounter. It is salient that the metaphor of being overlooked, kept in the shadows, carries with it a sense of danger and threat.*

light of the concept of the 'third', a refracted picture emerges, where multiple triads in tension are presented in the narratives. The positioning of who is excluded and who is included in these triads changes; integration of the third is problematic. *Royalty in Rags* positions supervisors as excluded through taking up the first order position of negated/unseen. Here the supervisor is the third, excluded by the wider system of social care, as well as the internal systemic resistance. Concurrently, the role of the supervisor can be seen as allied to the marginalised families who are the subject of social care involvement, in the identification with an excluded and unwanted position. This leads to the positioning of supervisors as privileged/valuable, a second order positioning that denies the exclusion of the negated/unseen positioning and retains value for the supervisor in their unique relationship with families that other parts of the system cannot share. The tension between positions within this storyline enables the 'third' to change rapidly from supervisor, families, wider and internal systems. The result of this is a delay to the possibility of integration: the supervisor is either *Royalty* or in *Rags*, there is no middle ground. This is characteristic of early oedipal functioning from a developmental perspective. The anxiety provoked through the risk of losing the exclusive love of the other elicits the defence of 'either/or' functioning that characterises this storyline. The risk of this functioning is that it presents a narrow range of relational dynamics, prevents change, and maintains the ongoing loop of *royalty to rags*; a form of magical thinking.

The developmental task of integration and the systemic delay to this is present in the storyline *Doing the Dirty Work*. Here, supervisors take up the position of having to see what others wish not to. Continuing to 'make-strange', the "dirty" work can be metaphorically understood as seeing the "dirt" of abuse, neglect and harm, all unsanctioned forms of family life within the disciplinary discourse that frames supervised contact. The embodied nature of contact is salient here - there is a physical triad (at least) in the contact encounter: supervisor, parent/s and child/ren. It is the "dirty" knowledge that supervisors hold, about what has (or hasn't) happened between the bodies of parents and children that is difficult to be integrated, in this manner it is the knowledge which is attempted to be denied, yet cannot be, as it is located solely in the supervisor. This knowledge, and the shifting relational demands on the supervisor mean that integrating the third of 'dirty knowledge' is not possible. The 'third' of knowledge has to be defended against, and this is done through the return to positions of negated/unseen. The outcome of this is a the reduction of the knowledge of supervisors through their negated or privileged/valuable status, which erases the wish not to see by a form of 'wiping out' or a focussing on solely of value. Supervised contact can thereby be understood to be operating in a system characterised by early oedipal dynamics, where the task is to balance and integrate the 'third' but this capacity is interrupted by primitive anxieties and defences regarding exclusion. The necessary systemic defences create a narrow field for supervisors to operate within, marked by repetition but not by change.

The use of the metaphor of oedipal desire and conflict enables a direct link to the capacity to mourn and accept loss due to the concept of the third, which scaffolds psychic space in order to allow a relinquishment of love and acknowledgment of a gap. The contact encounter places the supervisor in direct relationship with fractured families and disappointments and losses they endure:

"I find that really upsetting, and I find that quite difficult to deal with sometimes thinking, you know, as professionals, we know this isn't going to work and contact set up initially for five times a week, and then, you know, the mum doesn't come for three days in a row ..."³⁰

Rose presents another triad, identifying herself as the 'professionals', the 'mum' and the unnamed but present child. Her narrative reads as a statement about levels of disappointment: the parent not attending and leaving a child waiting; the supervisor witnessing this loss for both parent and child, both before the event and during it. Rose conveys a sense of inevitability, an inescapable and unending experience of disappointment and loss.

Contemporary psychoanalytic child psychotherapy assumptions regarding children in the care system place strong emphasis on issues of loss and mourning (Hunter-Smallbone 2009, Kendrick 2005). Mourning is understood as the realignment of a person's internal world following loss. It requires the painful acknowledgment of relational truths such as a loved and wanted person is no longer present in the external world, or was not able to be the figure the person wanted or needed them to be. This demands an internal relinquishment and readjustment of object relating. Mourning can only take place if change can be accepted and processed, allowing new relationships and opportunities to emerge. The allowing for an acceptance of change is a developmental achievement which requires repeated experiences of 'good-enough' care that provide the individual with an internal sense of safety from which to enable the risk of change. Many children and families in the care system do not have this internal sense of safety, which contributes to diminished internal resources to manage the sudden shifts and disruptions of social care involvement. The multiple losses experienced by children and parents impact on their capacity to mourn, and the network around them (Emanuel 2002, Ironside 2009). The looked after children that I and other child psychotherapists see clinically are understood to be in disrupted states of mourning. The care system is saturated with multiple losses and fractured processes of mourning. Inter-generational losses are enacted with many parents who have suffered loss and trauma themselves early in life repeating these experiences again with their own children. Children removed from their parents care are more likely to have mental health problems (Hunter-Smallbone 2009) and express their disturbed internal worlds in a variety of ways. These expressions are often puzzling, upsetting and frightening for those who care for them; examples include hoarding food, lack of investment in self-care or acts of self-sabotage through acts of violence to themselves, others and property. Significant and enduring disruptive behaviours are understood psychoanalytically as signs of severe loss that has not been processed and worked through – loss that remains un-mourned, an absence that is unseen.

Looking directly at the contact encounter, the perspective of mourning and loss allows a more comprehensive understanding of common experiences. The Mum that Rose speaks about who doesn't attend contact sessions may be overwhelmed by the loss of their children, and their own identity as a competent and safe parent. She may be expressing her own experiences of loss and confusion by creating situations where the child is the one left waiting and unsure. The contact supervisor is present in the ongoing repetitions of reunification and leaving for the family. The painful currents of loss are often overlooked, seen in the emphasis across the interview material in narratives about a "good" contact session being one where everybody has a nice time. The level to

³⁰ 'Rose' p.25

which loss is consistently denied in this fashion is likely to result in unprocessed loss being unconsciously transmitted among the different actors in the contact encounter. It is possible that an example of this is seen in the unresolved question on the balance of supervisors seeing the same families throughout their contact arrangements, or being moved around the caseload of the service. Mourning and unresolved loss are therefore significant factors in the gradations of visibility that characterise the core theme of the Cinderella Service.

The unprocessed and unresolved aspects of loss enable another layer of understanding with regard to the storylines of the Cinderella Service. Within *Royalty in Rags*, the negated/unseen position when internalised by supervisors defends against loss through the denial of investment. Alex's description of supervising contact as a "little job" is salient here. If the role of contact supervisor is minimised, even negated, the losses it demands supervisors to witness are wiped out. Another facet of this defence through denial is through the privileged/valuable position where the exclusive claim to access and knowledge operates in an omnipotent fashion, refusing to accept loss or disappointment but adopting a superior and distanced stance. In the *Doing the Dirty Work* storyline, the enforced witness position locates the supervisor as the receptacle of the unresolved mourning for families and external systems to supervised contact. Supervisors are tasked to see what others do not want to see, and as such they operate as a container for other's denial of pain and disappointment. In this analysis, none of the storylines are able to support the supervisor in processing the conflict and pain of loss. The interruption of processing is a consequence of the desiring and rivalrous developmental stage supervised contact has been metaphorically seen to be functioning in: an early oedipal state.

Concluding The Cinderella Service: Unending tales

The Cinderella Service is the title given to one of the two core themes established through the Thematic Analysis of interview material. It is a quote from an interview that conveys the spirit of narratives about contact supervisors' experience: variable visions of value and servitude, worth and recognition, desire and loss.

Analysis of the storyline *Royalty in Rags* presented first and second order positions taken by supervisors: negated/unseen and privileged/valuable. The tension of these positions indicated a systemic resistance to 'full sight' of the role of the supervisor. *Doing the Dirty Work* featured positioning supervisors as enforced witnesses to what others do not see. This positioning was rooted in the physicality of the contact encounter, and the 'sensory snapshots' that characterised the storyline articulate supervisor's sense of being overwhelmed by what they witness. This was further voiced through experiences of threat and contamination. Both storylines presented a restriction in discursive range for supervisors due to the limited positions available to them and the location of the tensions arising from this within the role of the supervisor as opposed to within the wider system.

The system of supervised contact was shown to operate within a disciplinary discourse. The supervisor operates as a panoptic representative of normalising power relations and the gatekeeper to the enclosed discourses of contact. The fluctuations of power and resistance expressed through the role resulted in a supervisors having a limited range of social agency in light of their knowledge.

The discursive pattern of loops of limitation were reiterated through the metaphor of supervised contact operating in an early oedipal developmental state, where integration and change were stalled by anxieties and defences regarding loss. Loss and unprocessed states of mourning were shown to colour the experiences of many families in the Care system, and cause the role of contact supervisor to function as the sole receptacle for denied pain and disappointment.

The Cinderella Service analysis suggests that contact supervision is a psychosocial site of experience and practice that pivot around gradations of visibility: who sees, what is seen, and what is wished not to be seen. These oscillations form a fractured role for contact supervisors, marked by positions that support and disrupt each other. The consequence of this is contact supervision being delayed and unresolved: demanding yet eluding clear vision.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

Gut Feelings/Fine Lines

The core theme Gut Feelings/Fine Lines establishes the role of contact supervisor as the meeting point for competing moral dilemmas that are created and maintained through shifting relational experiences. Gut Feelings/Fine Lines was constructed from four subthemes. The first of these, *Gut Feelings*, reflected the ways supervisors spoke about their work in a very practical and 'no nonsense' manner. The subtheme of *Skills* drew on the more nuanced presentation of the skills needed by contact supervisors. The *Moral Dilemmas* subtheme described supervisors' experience of having competing ideas, relationships and opinions with regard to the families they work with. Finally, *Multi-level Tensions* referred to the often conflictual and rapidly changing alliances the supervisor made between parent, child and wider social care system.

All interviewees considered what qualities a contact supervisor had or needed to have to do their job. A dominant narrative was that contact supervisors had an inherent quality, a *gut feeling* for the work:

*"It's quite strange because you kind of do get...a...gut feeling...I kind of know instantly whether this is going to go well whether it's not"*³¹

Even though it seemed difficult for Samantha to elaborate, contact supervisors were presented as sensible, reliable people who by the nature of their personalities were right for the role:

*"Well, see you can't measure common sense, you can't learn common sense, you're born with it or you don't have it"*³²

Rose upholds the idea that supervisors have an innate skill for the work, you have it or you don't. In this context there was acknowledgement that contact supervisors have a very delicate job to do, which requires skilful attention and consideration:

*"... it's a fine line between sort of being supportive and facilitative and not... disempowering them, but being too parentified I think for them."*³³

The supervisor needs to balance their intervention with families, an intervention that is delivered through the relationship the supervisor makes with the family (namely the parents). The *skills* needed by a contact supervisor are diverse and complicated as they are utilised in the context of complex and changing relationships:

"You're both looking for ...the gentle caring nurturing people but you're also looking for people that can put firm boundaries round some very difficult people...And you need a

³¹ 'Samantha' p.15

³² 'Rose' p.22

³³ 'Claire' p.4

mixture of all of those things...because you're not going to get it wrapped up in one person.³⁴"

Lucy speaks clearly about the capacity contact supervisors need for assessing and acting on the required 'fine lines'. Her realistic assertion that these qualities are variable in different people gives an additional understanding of the need for balance in contact supervision, not just within the solo contact supervisor but within the wider team of the contact service.

Both the capacity for 'just knowing' and the need to be mindful and sensitive were required due to the place the supervisor has in making assessments and judgements about families. Contact supervisors have to write an account of the session which is passed to the social worker and can be used in court proceedings. Rose's discomfort with this position is representative of the rest of the interview material when trying to speak about the *moral dilemmas* supervisors felt about being in an assessment role regarding families:

"you have...duty of care to the children and to the parents to give a fair and honest representation of what happened, and the word judgement always makes me feel slightly uncomfortable, because judgement itself sounds very, I'm not here to sit and judge you, I mean obviously if there's an issue that arose which would possibly compromise the safety or wellbeing of a child, you would have to address it in the session, you know, you would need to make reference to that, but I don't really think it's necessary about it judging. It just sounds like such a harsh word for what's, you know, happened... But I do, I see that as being ... for me the most critical point of... making a summary of what's happened in the session."³⁵

Rose presents an apparent dilemma between 'caring' and 'judging' that provokes discomfort. A tension arises between what happens in the contact encounter and how the supervisor manages their relationship with the child, the parent and the system of social care via the written report. This tension speaks of a moral dilemma as it involves an assessment of people and how they conduct themselves – a moral statement that concerns not only the parents but the supervisor themselves.

The contact encounter brings supervisor and families together in room, but the social care system is always present, essentially because it is the involvement with social care that makes contact supervision happen. Participants frequently made reference to the complexity of negotiating the *multi-level Tensions* apparent in the triad of social care/supervisor/family, and how this generated a tension between the supervisor aligning themselves with the family or with the system:

"We need to be a friend as such because we're asking these people to trust us...but we... have to make it clear that we are a professional and we work for the local authority so –don't expect basically any, any favours so to speak"³⁶

Samantha expresses the tension between supervisors having to relate horizontally to families, alongside them as a 'friend' and a more vertical form of relating, where the supervisor is "professional" and the holder of authoritative power over the family. This tension was expressed in

³⁴ 'Lucy' p38

³⁵ 'Rose' p.10-11

³⁶ 'Samantha' p.23

all the interviews in terms of clashes between these horizontal and vertical forms of relationship that find their apex in the role of contact supervisor.

The emerging picture of contact supervision is one of impossible relational balance. This imbalance appears to be felt within the contact supervisor's individual experience as well as voiced externally through the triad of social care/supervisor/family. The title *Gut Feelings/Fine Lines* was drawn from interview material, in an attempt to capture the ongoing and conflictual struggle between these aspects of knowing and consequent relating.

Tangled Tales: Patterns of Relating

Contact supervisors are asked to do two things at once. Their official task is to 'keep the child safe' and produce reports on family interactions that add to social care assessments on parental capacity to care for the child. The other task they take on, though this is not stated explicitly, is to negotiate the relationships they build with families as a result of being with them over time in the heightened emotional setting of the contact encounter. Supervisors are therefore the holders of two types of knowledge in different systems of relationship. The first I name a 'vertical' pattern: the formal assessment, report writing and partnership with social care, those *outside* the contact encounter. The second I call 'horizontal', referring to the relationships and interactions that happen *within* the contact encounter with parents and children, which is not formally documented but powerfully affective. The tension in holding both these poles of knowledge will be shown to be located in the personal experience of the contact supervisor. The analysis that follows will detail the systemic experience of the contact supervisor in their production of storylines to both comprehend and act in the moral landscape their work places them in. Horizontal and vertical relational patterns are interwoven with the positions taken up by contact supervisors in regard to their concurrent and conflicting moral orientations at work in the contact encounter.

Throughout the interview narratives, there appeared to be a lack of clarity about the qualities required for contact supervision, reflecting perhaps the haziness that surrounds the role of supervisors. In Angela's words:

"A lot of it is quite common sense, and they've got that kind of sense cos, the ones that haven't got families, have got this kind of sense"³⁷

There is a blurring and contradiction in participants' description of the qualities needed by supervisors, appealing to: "common sense" which on the one hand Angela implies is provided by family life, and those who are not parents 'just have it'. The implication is either you have the gut feeling for the work of contact supervision or you don't. The qualities of the supervisor are innate and mysterious, even authoritative in that they escape criticism by being positioned as objective 'facts'.

The appeal to a 'gut feeling' appeared to give speakers a pool of authority to draw on when considering the more challenging area of what qualities a contact supervisor should ideally possess. This topic is challenging, as there is no shared definition of what exactly the contact supervisor

³⁷ 'Angela' p.10

should be doing, a lack of formal role definition, which presents some confusion in being able to articulate the qualities required by the role. Mia voices this:

*"It's all the obvious things like being warm, being open but I think there needs to be a certain degree of being able to be detached from what's going on...being able to manage that kind of frustration"*³⁸

Mia again appeals to an innate sense, the unlearnt knowing of the gut feeling: "all the obvious things". Her narrative moves from innate and relational descriptions of the work, the emphasis on supervisor to family; to a more formal, assessing and observational stance, the emphasis now from family to supervisor. The terms: "certain degree" and: "detached" show Mia positioning contact supervisors as precise and adopting a role where they are the recipients and translators of the information they receive about families in the contact encounter. This provides a contrast with the 'warm and open' positioning in the first part of her narrative. I was alert to the double meaning of "able": to have the *capacity* to perform a task and to do it *well*, asserting that supervisors have to have both competency and skill in engaging with their work which according to Mia generates "frustration". The responsibility for this appears to be solely placed with the supervisor; they are positioned as having to "manage" an experience which causes disruption within the individual.

I understand Angela's and Mia's narratives as speaking about an unresolved tension between innate knowledge and applied experience and skill. This tension is located within the personal experience of the contact supervisor. The knowledges held by supervisors allow them to act and to orientate themselves in the relational systems they inhabit as part of the contact encounter; these actions are moral ones as they are concerned with person to person activity. This moral positioning will be investigated through the analysis of three storylines: 'Same-as-us, which hinges forgiveness and understanding, the psychological storyline of 'Parent-as-child', and one of blame: 'Here-for-a-reason'. The various positions that are made available by these storylines will be explored with regard to how moral judgements are generated and maintained by the contact encounter and how these inform and shape relational experiences of the contact supervisor.

The 'Here-for-a-reason' storyline of blame is a first order positioning of families as responsible for their involvement with social care. Overt statements of this type were rare across the interview material; however it was their very absence in the context of the frequency of the other storylines that establishes the first order nature of the positioning. The forgiveness and understanding and psychological storylines function as second-order positioning in response to the 'here-for-a-reason' storyline of blame. The second order positioning utilised by supervisors is seen in the storyline 'Same-as-us', which promotes a message of forgiveness and understanding from the supervisor towards the parents they work with. I call it 'same-as-us', reflecting the characteristic way people spoke about families in the interviews, voiced below by Samantha:

*"People can do wrong. It doesn't matter, anyone can fall basically on their backside. No one, no one, no one is safe from all this trauma and drama"*³⁹

³⁸ 'Mia' p.7

³⁹ 'Samantha' p.35

That there has been a "wrong" is acknowledged; but the wrong-doing is mitigated by the aligning of parent's place as potentially the same as the supervisor; Samantha's message is that anyone could be in this situation. Marianne also asserts the forgiveness of wrongdoing and distances herself from judgement:

*"That's not for me to judge. Who am I?...I'm no better than them....I wouldn't like to think I'm any worse than them. I'm no better than them...I'm a human being the same as them."*⁴⁰

The 'same-as-us' storyline positions the supervisor as in the same potential boat as the parent, the supervisor powerfully rejecting the position of 'judge'. This counter-positions the social care system, and perhaps wider society, as the dreaded judges (and of course the actual legal judge whose ruling creates the contact situation). The result of this positioning allows the supervisor to avoid the discomfort of the reality of the assessing part of the supervisor's role. By positioning parents as the 'same-as-us' supervisors can relate in a horizontal manner; two similar people who are potentially further bonded together by the creation of a defining contrast: the judgmental other of the social care system. It's interesting to see that the focus of forgiveness and understanding is directed from supervisor towards the parent - the child is missing.

The second storyline is a psychological one employed by contact supervisors. My shorthand for this is: '*parent-as-child*'; it presents intergenerational neglect or abuse as an explanation for families being in the contact service:

*"Some of the mums, they don't have anybody. They've not had any experiences of having a mum, having a mum themselves"*⁴¹

Samantha draws on psychological discourse, according to which people learn from their relational experiences how to conduct themselves in their moral world. The frequency of this storyline across the interviews indicates this form of psychological accounting was helpful to contact supervisors. It positions the supervisor as both the holder of 'expert' knowledge and as the 'good' parent figure; the supervisor can be the parent the actual parent in the contact encounter didn't have. Subsequently the contact encounter becomes a developmental opportunity for psychological growth. The parent-as-child storyline defers judgement, the responsibility for 'wrong' cannot be laid at the door of a person who lacks the capacity for different moral choices. The result of this is that judgement is obscured, deferred to the historical 'failing' parent/social context. What we see here is the removal of agency from the parent and the opportunity for them to be moral actors in the contact encounter. Significantly, the child is again absent in these narratives, obscured by the parents' 'victim' status. A risk of this psychological positioning is the location of morality into the private sphere of the family, and therefore inaccessible for activity or change.

The second order positioning within these storylines are generated by the first order positioning via the '*Here-for-a-reason*' storyline of blame. This storyline takes a moral stance where parents are blamed for failing the child, resulting in the need for supervised contact and social care involvement. The articulation of parent as the 'wrong-doer' was much less prevalent than the other two storylines, but it is implied across the interviews in the unspoken positioning of parents as failing due

⁴⁰ 'Marianne' p.47

⁴¹ 'Samantha' p.23

to their very involvement with social care. This is seen in the strength and frequency of the 'same-as-us' and 'parent-as-child' storylines which are second-order positions in response to the first order positioning of blaming parents that is accorded to families when they come to the attention of social care. That supervisors appeared to resist the first order positioning of blaming parents is of interest, and can be understood as a consequence of the relational distance between parent and supervisor: people who see a great deal of each other in highly charged emotional encounters. This relationship fosters the 'horizontal' form of relating; which is interrupted by the ongoing 'vertical' relationship of supervisor as assessor and parent as requiring change.

Where the blame storyline was present in spoken form in the interview data it was delivered not as a direct accusation to parents, but more of a presentation of the parents chosen activities, leaving judgement to be made externally to the supervisor:

"Sometimes their world revolves around getting up, either going to the pub or going out with friends and it doesn't, it's not, it doesn't seem like reality"⁴²

The parents are positioned as eternal adolescents, self-interested and disconnected from the reality. This is a counter-positioning to Samantha (and by extension me as the listener) who inhabit 'reality' and implicitly the approved way of how to act when responsible for children. The moral judgement is that parents make the wrong choices, that they privilege their own needs and wishes above their children's and this is not an acceptable way to conduct oneself - it is not "reality". The result of the blame storyline is a disruption to the horizontal relating between supervisor and parent. The supervisor is located in a double bind; they judge the parents and find them wanting, but the actions they can pursue regarding this judgement are limited, they cannot act to change the situation. This limitation is natural and engineered. It is natural because the supervisor cannot change actions or choices made in the past that have resulted in the family being in the contact service. Curtailed moral action is engineered by the competing moral positions the contact supervisor has been shown to adopt. A result of this conflict between competing moral positions is the self-silencing of contact supervisors. The self-silencing takes the form of the inhibited 'blame' storyline, where judgement is hinted at rather than directly voiced. The voicing of the idea that parents should not see their children is deeply uncomfortable. During Angela's interview, she suggested that perhaps a sexually abusive parent should not see the child⁴³, but this view was delivered as the opinion of a nameless person and spoken to me in a whisper, as if Angela did not want us to be overheard. I understand Angela's whispering as an example of the clash between the storyline of 'here-for-a-reason', the acceptance that harm has been done, and the other moral storylines and discourses that parents 'should' see their children, and that families are benign and always safe. The child is more visible in the 'here-for-a-reason' storyline and positioned as the motivating force behind the moral judgement. This location is tenuous however as it collides and collapses with the 'same-as-us' and 'parent-as-child' moral positions; resulting in the child's experience often being subsumed into their parent's own troublesome history.

The constant and shifting interweave of the three storylines presented here is illustrated by Rose's reflections on one parent she works with:

⁴² 'Samantha' p.44

⁴³ 'Angela' p.18

“She’s *the young mum*...and she has *so many issues going on in her own life*, aside from the fact that she has *a third child in foster care* at the moment...and *she will present as being quite streetwise and... knows everything and...can be quite aggressive in the way she will talk to you and... get annoyed about things*, but *is actually very vulnerable young adult* with...*very limited positive experiences in her whole childhood of being parented positively and obviously... very difficult for her.*”⁴⁴

I have highlighted the different storylines as they are employed by Rose. Being “the young mum” employs a ‘parent-as-child’ position, and at the same time draws on a social discourse where young women who become mothers are denigrated, the ‘here-for-a-reason’ blame storyline is active in this way though not directly voiced. The ‘same-as-us’ storyline is evident in the shared experience of having “many issues...in her own life”. This is rapidly followed by another implicit blame narrative: “third child in foster care”. The individual actions of the parent are characterised as bad moral choices: “streetwise, aggressive, annoyed”. The occupation of this blame storyline gives way immediately to the psychological ‘parent-as-child’ intergenerational storyline: “vulnerable...limited positive experience in her whole childhood of being parented”.

The rapid change in positions that the contact supervisor is required to make in order to make sense of the moral landscape they are located in indicates an experience for the supervisor that is inherently conflictual. This conflict is borne from the supervisor having to occupy different relational stances at the same time in regard to families and social care. I have used the spatial descriptions of ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ to articulate the differing relational demands and shifts in distance that is unique to the contact encounter.

The three storylines have been shown to be ways in which contact supervisors make sense of the moral landscape they negotiate working with families who are involved with social care. The shifts in positioning employed by contact supervisors do not fully resolve the dilemma of the contact encounter. The ‘same-as-us’ forgiveness and understanding storyline does not provide a moral orientation of why families are in the painful situations they are in. An attempt to answer this is provided by the ‘parent-as-child’ psychological storyline; but leads to another gap in moral understanding, that of where is the parent figure who can (idealistically) meet the overwhelming needs the families in the contact encounter communicate. These gaps in moral coherence are the unresolved tensions at the heart of the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme, and are articulated through the implicit ‘here-for-a-reason’ blame storyline which due to the implicit and indirect presence promotes a communication of inherent threat. What is still to be understood is the moral criterion supervisors draw on to construct their positions regarding families, notably parents.

Moral Parenting

The preceding chapter established the contact encounter as a site of disciplinary power relations. The Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme presents the interview data as communicating an inherent imbalance in the role of contact supervisor; a collection of competing types of knowledge and degrees of relationship which are all marked by moral positions and judgements. I turn now to a

⁴⁴ ‘Rose’ p.15

layer of analysis regarding how the dominant discourse of parenting shapes the moral criterion for assessment by supervisors towards the families they work with.

The parenting discourse locates moral responsibility for parenting as an aspect of the personal self. The classification of parenting is drawn from the psy-complex (Rose 1990); middle class values of universal development and a neoliberal focus on the individual at the cost of social and political influence and impact. In this sense the parenting discourse is a moral one; it assesses and judges parents on their adherence to the disciplinary structures of enclosed social discourse that allows some attitudes and behaviours to be validated and others excluded.

There has been a significant growth in the parenting discourse in British society, seen in the very expansion of supervised contact as an emerging distinctive field of social care practice. The increasing dominance of the parenting discourse is allied with "the individualized ethos of neo-liberal politics [of] choice, personal responsibility, control over one's own fate, self-promotion and self-government" (Rose 1996).

Material taken from interviews helps identify the construction of the moral individual parent, the morality of class and the gendered nature of judging mothers.

The Parenting Discourse: morality individualised

"And I guess that's where supervision is really important, because...parenting is such a personal thing. It's such a charged thing, and I think we all need to be open to the fact that there are lots of different ways to be a good parent. And someone doing something differently doesn't necessarily mean that it's wrong, because you don't want to make the assumption just because...a family is in this situation that they don't have any strengths. ..you know, that everything always bad..."⁴⁵

Mia's reflections serve as an example of how the social discourse on 'parenting' is central in the contact encounter. Parenting is stated to be "personal" and "charged". These statements illustrate how decisions on how to raise ones' children are located in the individual parent. This creates parenting as an essentially moral set of actions and decisions. These moralities are enacted within an enclosed discourse of 'parenting' where the psy-complex is active. This is evident in the creation of a classification of parents based on White middle class "norms" of parenting (Holt 2008). 'Expert' opinions are promoted in the psychological models of universal development and constructions of childhood, which shape moral assumptions on how to bring up children. Therefore, what is defined as "such a personal thing" is the continued production of socially constructed assumptions about action within parameters set by the dominant discourses around how children should be and what parents must do to ensure they create this model of child. Mia's assertion that: "there are lots of different ways to be a good parent" can be understood as an act of resistance to the normalising discourse that 'parenting' is located within. Her continued insistence that difference is not wrong, speaks of a parenting normative, constructed through psy-complex discourses on development, discipline and social advancement. Alternative ways of parenting are deemed as a moral failure. The contact encounter is a site where power relations and social discourse regarding the morality of the family are at the forefront of supervisors' experience. Mia's emphasis on the disregarded strengths

⁴⁵ 'Mia' p.22-23

of families exposes the moral judgement upon families who operate at the boundaries of the enclosed discourses on parenting as: "bad".

The psy-complex construction and transmission of normalising universal development does not take social or political factors into account, which results in the narrowing of development into individual psychological classification, making the success or failure of children the sole responsibility of parents (Holt 2005). This collapses child rearing into a private sphere of family that is 'colonised' by the parenting discourse, and taken into public sphere, seen in the State's interest in parenting as production of citizens (Holt 2008). Mia works in the contact encounter, and though she can be understood as voicing resistance to the parenting discourse, she also upholds it in her assertion that: "supervision is really important". The psy-complex is active in the individualisation of parenting, "such a personal thing" whilst concurrent with the public claim over it, the injunction to parent in a way to produce a socially acceptable and valuable citizen.

Therefore, the responsibility for child rearing is narrowed to be the sole responsibility of parents, who are classified as achieving this or not according to universalist 'expert' knowledges that impose 'norms'. When these norms are not met, the family receives state judgement and intervention. Examples of this intervention include the contact encounter. Many people spoke in their interviews about contact as an opportunity for change, rather than 'just' assessment, that parents could be taught how to parent differently. These demands for change are the "hoops" that have to be jumped through. The current preoccupation with "risk" is a value judgement, a feature of normalising discourse impacting on family life. The emphasis on risk exemplifies the shift in social discourse from an appreciation of need (which would include social and political aspects such as housing, employment, education) to assessment of risk, the individualised moral actions of a parent. The ongoing panoptic principle embodied in the risk discourse is understood by me to echo the implicit themes of danger and threat present across the interview narratives. There is a need for supervision, a need to defend against the ever present yet murky threat to the enclosed discourse regarding parenting.

Class, parenting and morality

The parenting discourse is a moral one, which through the psy-complex constructions of 'parenting' draws on social class with its associated moral classification and judgment. Mia continues:

"...I was having an interesting conversation with a supervisor yesterday who used to be a foster carer, and she was talking about how she's always struggled because she feels that in lots of cases where...professionals get involved it's almost like there's a desire to make people middle class. And that it's quite diff, people find it quite difficult to accept... I suppose behaviours or attitudes that might be construed as being working class. And I think, you know, having space to reflect upon what you're bringing and what your ideas and judgements and values are...and not putting that...on the families."⁴⁶

Mia presents traditional classifications of class, by counter positioning classifications of people according to work and employment: "foster carer", associated with the working class, and "professionals", associated with the middle classes. These structural categorisations of class have

⁴⁶ Ibid

been reconstituted towards a form of subjectivity. There has been a shift from class and group identity to a focus on the individual, a "reflexive modernity" that uses universal psychological classification to assess social experience (Gillies 2005). This is again evident in the psy-complex active in the parenting discourse. Mia articulates this shift though expanding on: "the desire to make people middle class". The constituents of class are listed not as work categories but as: "behaviours or attitudes". Class is decided by one's actions in the social world, actions emerging from individual choice and moral beliefs. Mia's earlier comment that: "just because a... family is in this situation ...everything always bad" illustrates the moral judgement made on parents. Parents' failure is deemed to be having made incorrect choices that lead to them being in the situation of state intervention through the social care system.

The families that come to the attention of child protection agencies are predominantly working class, evidenced in Mia's attention to 'cases' where 'professionals' are involved. Social class is hidden and re-presented in neoliberal moral terms of "social exclusion". The blame for this exclusion is laid at the individual self who fails to comply with the middle class values (behaviours or attitudes) in their family life. Because of the collapse of social 'success' into terms of the individual psychological self, prosperity becomes linked to being the right kind of 'self'; social disadvantage becomes associated with poor self-management. This reinforces parenting as an individualised moral discourse, the failures of families to uphold the normalising discourse of what is 'good' parenting are reflections of the moral failures and incorrect choices of parents. Their failures as parents are part of a wider moral failure; that of not 'succeeding' in approved fields of prosperity, employment or education. Class, repackaged as social inclusion or exclusion, is reinforced through enclosed disciplinary structures that construct and maintain the social discourse regarding parenting. As an enclosed system of power relations, the boundaries of the discourse enable the definition of other; the socially excluded. Examples of this can be seen in the storylines expanded earlier in this chapter. The "here-for-a-reason" storyline positions parents as excluded from the social care system, the supervisor is socially *included*, the parent is not, illustrating a way in which the contact encounter maintains and promotes the parenting discourse.

Moral parents: resistance and docile bodies

The Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme articulates some of the inherent tension at work in the contact supervisor's role. Contrasting forms of knowledge and relationship are in constant and disrupting motion. This is reflected in the fluctuations of power relations at work in the contact encounter. The disciplinary activity of the parenting discourse is punctuated by resistance to the enforced normalisation that creates the enclosure of the parenting discourse.

Resistance to the neo-liberal internalisation of responsibility at the heart of the parenting discourse is evident in the "same-as-us" storyline, where the contact supervisor opposes the social exclusion that separates parents, by stating that parents and supervisors are the same. This operates as a type of moral identification between them, and a rejection of the moral judgement that makes parents 'fail'. The identification between parent and supervisor seen in the "same-as-us" storyline can be understood as voicing the hidden class discourse that underlies the parenting discourse embodied in the contact encounter, in that supervisors and families are often from the same social class bracket. Resistance is also located in the 'parent-as-child' storyline with its emphasis on intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect. This challenges the individualised morality of the parenting discourse by

asserting the importance of wider factors of social and political access and influence on shaping peoples' choices and scope of possible actions.

The parenting discourse is resisted and maintained by contact supervisors and parents:

"A lot of parents don't actually see the contact for what it is. It is all about the battle- and they are fighting the wrong battle. Rather than fighting the battle to get their child back they're fighting the system so to speak"⁴⁷

Samantha's presentation of the contact encounter as a "battle" is illustrative of the ongoing pulse of resistance within the contact encounter. The refusal to "see the contact for what it is" can be understood as parents resisting the boundaries of the parenting discourse; i.e accepting their failure and amending their behaviour to become acceptable to the psy-complex norms. Adherence to these norms will be rewarded by the return of their child. Interestingly, at the same time the parent is also operating as a docile body by maintaining and creating the parenting discourse in their participation in the 'battle'; by "fighting the system" they maintain the enclosed discourse by operating as a defining boundary, the excluded other, the bad parent that by contrast validates the normalised discourse. Their choice to not participate is of course curtailed by the disciplinary system they are a part of. Samantha upholds the parenting discourse by placing the unification of the family as the target of the 'battle' and justifies contact as a route to this. Contact supervision therefore has the power to draw parents into the enclosure of 'good' parenting and as such holds a high moral status. Her metaphor of warring sides in a conflict speaks to the inclusion/exclusion criteria characteristic of disciplinary power relations, and the moral imperatives and judgements that accompany the variant of this power relationship: the parenting discourse.

Bad Mothers

By using the term "parenting" to describe the disciplinary power relations that order moral judgement as seen in the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme, I have avoided a gender specific focus. However, 'parenting' is of course gendered and implicit discourses around motherhood and fatherhood within parenting emphasise fathers as 'part-time' carers for their children whereas mothers as are the 'full-time' parent (Sunderland 2006). Therefore, when talking about parenting, I am also talking directly to discourses on mothering and motherhood.

Families that come into the contact encounter are varied, parents, grandparents, siblings, other family members are all potentially present in supervised contact with the removed child/ren. In interviews, both fathers and mothers were discussed, however it was mothers that were mentioned most often⁴⁸. This could be because lone parent families are disproportionately represented in the social care system. The World Report on Violence and Health details the complex and myriad social factors that combine in situations of variants of child abuse, and among the risk factors for physical violence towards children by parents: "In both developing and industrialized countries, poor, young, single mothers are among those at greatest risk for using violence towards their children" (WHO

⁴⁷ 'Samantha' p.26

⁴⁸ for example the "young Mum" is the previous section.

2002)⁴⁹. Women who are mothers are more likely to be targets for state intervention in families, because of the social and political impediments they face due to their gender within the conditions of current patriarchal society.

Moral assessment and judgement of women who have children is significantly different to the moral assessment of men who have children. The patriarchal institution of motherhood equates women with mothering and subjects women to "unrealistic institutional expectations" (O'Reilly 2009, Ross 2009, Snitow 1992). The psy-complex is active in contemporary constructions of motherhood in the demand for 'good' mothers to be 'total' mothers, which are a "modern, expert-defined and culturally middle class (and white) creation" (Gurevich 2008). Mothers are held completely responsible for the biological, emotional, neurological and social development of their children into acceptable members of society. This child-centred emphasis in parenting discourses displaces the mother as a subject; her sole purpose is to provide for her child, and failure to meet all the others needs casts her whole identity as a failure as any wants or desires have to be directed towards the child (Wall 2001). This is a moral failing, and an important aspect in the construction of the 'bad mother'. The contact encounter brings together mothers who have been socially judged as failing in their care for their children, and thereby failing to 'take' the right moral choices. This positioning of mothers as making poor moral choices, leads them to the point where the family have to enter the paternalistic system of social care. Maternal failure therefore is a moral failure as it transgresses the dominant discourses regarding what 'good' mothering is. These mothers have been morally judged before they even meet the contact supervisor, and it is this powerful discourse around their moral failure that contact supervisors attempt to negotiate within the relationship that develops between supervisor and parent. It is this relationship that powers the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme, with tensions emerging from contrasting moral positioning required as a consequence of the parenting discourse that encloses the contact encounter.

The Fine Lines of Gut Feelings: Conflict and Ambivalence

The analysis of the Gut Feelings/Fine Line core theme has suggested that there are multiple moral positions at work in the contact encounter and these are connected to the shifting relational distances between supervisor/parent/social care. The conditions that these moral negotiations take place within are enclosed disciplinary discourses, where moral criteria regarding class, parenting and gender are constructed and maintained. What is still to be understood is *why* there is conflict regarding the contrasting moralities and how the storylines interconnect with regarding to this question. A further analysis is required to counterbalance the 'social' with the 'psychic' to further develop the psychosocial investigation of contact supervision. Hence, the three storylines will be reviewed from a psychoanalytic perspective to generate ideas about possible sources of the apparent conflict and how the varying positioning constellations respond and relate to disruptive dynamics.

'Parent-as-child': Eliminating Loss

⁴⁹ The very production of this report merits a research project to itself in order to fully consider the political, social and moral implications and discourses it presents. A psychosocial investigation would be most fitting for an area of such complexity as "violence".

Claire's description of some of the women she has met through the contact encounter stands as a firm example of the 'parent-as-child' storyline: young mothers are presented as children themselves, a child among a seeming ongoing stream of infants:

"The ones that really struggle are the younger mums we've had... we've got girls coming through here who are on their fifth babies... we've got one girl at the moment [clears throat], she's 19 ... loads of issues, lovely kid... she had a baby adopted last year, she's got one in here that she's been having contact with for the year, final hearing, this week...he'll be adopted, and she's five months pregnant. Yeah, and then we've got another one, this is her fourth child we're on... Another one five children, and they're getting pregnant as the last baby's been kind of relinquished. So they're really hard and they're really sad and they get just too comfortable...because they get a lot of their own needs met."⁵⁰

Claire draws attention to a pattern she has observed, the replacement of the "relinquished" baby by another pregnancy. This pattern of repeated behaviour can be explored through the expansion of Freud's concept of the compulsion to repeat (Freud 1914, Freud 1920). The compulsion to repeat was first presented by Freud as an aspect of memory: "the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (Freud 1914). After the First World War, Freud developed another emphasis to the compulsion to repeat. The repetition of often un-pleasurable events was recast in the context of trauma: the overwhelming of the psychic system by internal or external forces. The compulsion to repeat is understood in part to be a defensive attempt to "bind psychically" the traumatic event (Freud 1920). In Claire's example this would be seen in the new pregnancies as an attempt to master the previous experience of a removed child.

The repeated pregnancies therefore can be viewed as a resistance to remembering by acting out. What is being resisted? The external loss of the previous child/ren has been just been suggested, and additionally 'replacement' pregnancies could represent a compulsion to repeat the mother's own infantile experience. The 'parent-as-child' storyline emphasises the repetition of the parent's history in the life of the child. It may be the repressed memory being enacted as a "present day force" is the mother's own infantile experience of failed care and separation (Freud 1914). Claire reports her own emotional experience as "sad" and "hard", which can be understood psychoanalytically as possible unconscious communications of the mother's repeated early life experience projected onto Claire.

The question of why either experience - the hypothesised maternal early experience being compulsively repeated through multiple pregnancies and the removal of the children or the pain of having one's children removed by social care - has to be enacted rather than remembered is significant. Through enactment by the compulsion to repeat, the foundational experience is maintained in the present, and as such remains undifferentiated in time, unable to be finished and moved away from as an experience. This presents an inability to accept difference and separation. The suggested emphasis on the mother's own infant experience allows for further understanding

⁵⁰ 'Claire' p.4

about why separation is so difficult. The capacity to separate is a developmental achievement (Freud, A 1963). It is developed from repeated physical and relational experiences in infancy of a consistent and protective caregiver. Through these experiences, the child internalises a core sense of safety within themselves that enables the full development of selfhood and consequently self-representation (Winnicott 1971). This allows for actual separation from caregivers and entry into a wider social and relational world. If this stage of “object constancy” has not been reached, then relational experience is impaired in the capacity to be representing in thought or feeling. This leads to experiences having to be enacted bodily (Fonagy and Target 1994). In order to be able to separate and acknowledge difference, there has to be a robust internal foundation of relational safety and security. If the families that enter the contact encounter have limited experience of ‘good enough’ care in their early years, their capacity to be able to acknowledge separateness and difference will be reduced. The struggle to acknowledge separation disrupts the capacity to mourn in the psychoanalytic sense: an acceptance of loss and change, as detailed in the preceding chapter. The compulsion to repeat having children that are removed (or the potential loss of care-giver in the mother’s own experience) is due to a denial of separateness, contributed to by a possible missed developmental opportunity that allows for acknowledgment of loss and the process of mourning.

This in mind, the contact supervisor can be understood as having to witness the ongoing denial of loss, on multiple levels of consciousness. In addition to this experience, they are also the recipient of the expression of deficit, the care that the mother did not receive: “they get just too comfortable ... because they get a lot of their own needs met.” Claire’s comment appears to present the parent as the child, whose own needs went unmet, and now is attempting to meet those needs through involvement with the contact service. The contact environment becomes a ‘container’ for the unprocessed, enacted, probably traumatic aspects of the mother’s experience (Bion 1962). This moves the contact supervisor into the role of the helpless/failing parent in that they are doomed to witness repeated cycles of failed care in that the contact encounter cannot adequately meet the relational needs of the mother; an echo of the ‘relinquished’ baby and ‘replacement’ pregnancy. They are additionally cast in the role of helpless child through the projected communications of impotence in the face of powerful cycles of repeated relational trauma. The recurrence in the interviews of the supervisors wish for family reunification is interesting in this context. I understand it in part to be response to the pain of the loss for parent and child, and the mourning required for the care that was missing.

The compulsion to repeat evident in the ‘parent-as-child’ storyline has been understood as a denial, or inability to acknowledge separation. It is a defence against loss, arguably a necessary one in the face of such overwhelming life experiences. The embodied experience of the contact encounter is also significant, supervisors being physically present with people in potential states of trauma enacting physically their struggle to separate and mourn. I understand this to be a factor in the power of the affective experience of contact supervisors as conveyed through the interview material.

Ambivalent Moralities

Why do the different moralities of the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme present conflict? I find the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence helpful in considering this question. Laplanche and Pontalis define ambivalence as: “The simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or

feelings in the relationship to a single object – especially the coexistence of love and hate” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). ‘Contradictory tendencies’ are characteristic of the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme. In this manner, the three storylines can be understood as operating as forms of psychic functioning in response to the ambivalence that is part of the supervisors embodied experience in the contact encounter.

The ‘same-as-us’ storyline with its core narrative of forgiveness and understanding denies any moral judgement of the parent by the contact supervisor. By casting the parent and supervisor as the same, blame is avoided and so is the disruption of ambivalence. I understand this denial of judgement to be a marker of unconscious ambivalence that cannot be integrated and is instead denied, so the contact supervisor and parent occupy the ‘good’ emotional landscape and the more difficult feelings connected to judgement are split off from emotional experience and projected away from the combined self of supervisor/parent: ‘same-as-us’ (Klein 1935). The ‘same-as-us’ storyline preserves the ‘good’ relationship between contact supervisor and parent by allowing them to come together, their relationship defined by the exclusion of moral judgement and blame. The ‘either-or’ dynamic employed to achieve this potentially indicates a core of ambivalence regarding morality.

The ‘parent-as-child’ psychological storyline also locates the contact encounter as a powerfully ambivalent site of experience. Moral acceptance and judgement are again separated. The parent is related to as a child without the capacity for different actions, and moral judgement deferred away from the supervisor/parent-child couple. The collapse of parent to child can be understood as a reaction-formation (the reversal of a feeling to its opposite). The hurtful parent becomes hurt child in mind, and the anger at the hurting parent is expressed in the castration of the parent from a person with agency to an impaired figure with limited resources. The need to deny and subvert the rage at a hurting parent can be understood as part of the core anxiety regarding the wish to retain the love and approval of the internal (and external) loved person, primarily the parent. The defensive manoeuvres used to negotiate ambivalence are necessary in order to maintain a degree of psychic and therefore social equilibrium for the supervisor.

However, the contact supervisor and the parent are not the infant and caregiver of psychoanalytic theory. Why are such powerful ambivalent defences employed and moral judgement so avoided? I suggest that it is the intensity of the contact encounter, parents and children meeting after removal, and the supervisor’s participation and observation in the family interactions at these emotionally heightened times that make the relationship between contact supervisor and parent unique. The repeated experiences of being part of highly affective family meetings bring the contact supervisor into close relationship with both parent and child⁵¹. It is this relationship that engenders the depth of psychic interaction between the parent and contact supervisor.

The storylines of “same-as-us” and “parent-as-child” are both presented here as mechanisms to avoid ambivalence in the attempt to maintain psychic and relational equilibrium. Where does the projected judgement go? It appears that this is problematic for contact supervisors. It has been shown that the moral judgement and associated challenging emotional experience of confusion and rage can be projected towards the social care and legal system, seen in the supervisor’s narratives

⁵¹ The length and scope of this project restricts expansion on the place of the child in the contact encounter.

about how they hold special knowledge that other parts of the system don't, and the decisions made about contact do not always fit the best needs for the family (as seen by contact supervisors). This is not a firm receptacle for the ambivalent projections however, as the contact supervisor moves from 'horizontal' relating with the family, to 'vertical' relationship with the system, excluding the family and as such collide with the ambivalent moral position they were attempting to negotiate. The recurring themes of undefined threat and danger that mark the interview material – the panic buttons that have never been pushed – could be understood as markers of unbound and non-processed projections arising from ambivalence surrounding moral judgement. The contact supervisor is in a position where integrating their ambivalence regarding the families they work with is extremely difficult. I argue this is due to the emotional intensity of the contact encounter and the lack of an alternative space for contact supervisors to process and reflect on their experiences in the contact encounter⁵².

Moral Constellations: Relational Refractions

The Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme is developed from narratives that convey a clash between what qualities are required of supervisors, which is linked to the lack of clarity about what the contact supervisor's task is. One task is clear – to keep children safe – the other is less explicit – to negotiate the relational experiences of the contact encounter. These different tasks reflect the contrasting relational patterns the supervisor is located in. I named the assessing, explicit task as the "vertical" pattern of relating the supervisor is engaged with, where the supervisor is allied with the system of social care. The implicit task of negotiating relationships *within* the contact encounter I named the "horizontal" pattern of relating, referring to the embodied experiences of supervisors being with families in times of heightened emotional interactions. The demands of concurrent vertical and horizontal patterns of relating draw moral dilemmas to the forefront of supervisors' experience.

These moral dilemmas are structured by the disciplinary discourse that supervised contact operates within. Moral criteria are set by neoliberal parenting discourses that place moral responsibility solely with the parent. The collapsing of class and wider social factors into 'social exclusion' contributes to the reframing of moral failure as personal failure. Additionally, the gendering of 'parenting' sets women who have children as personally responsible for social risk in their 'failure' to create socially sanctioned 'citizens'.

Conflict arising from moral dilemmas was further understood through an analysis of supervisors witnessing families negotiating the trauma of loss through repetitive enactments. The ambivalence encountered as a result of the refracted relational patterns the supervisor is located in was suggested to be defended against by supervisors through psychic systems of avoidance and denial.

⁵² One of the participating boroughs ran a 'reflecting group' for contact supervisors, however this was a borough where supervisors were on permanent council contracts and stayed in employment for long periods of time. Supervisors who had participated in these groups reported relief and deeper understanding of the families they worked with. The increasing shift to temporary and remote workers to fulfil contact obligations over larger geographical areas as a result of spending cuts in the public sector make this type of group impossible in certain areas.

The layers of analyses were accessed through the three storylines taken up by supervisors in response to their engagement in the contact encounter: same-as-us, parent-as-child and here-for-a-reason.

In summary, the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme presents the role of contact supervisor as located in a psychosocial site where constant refractions of relationship articulate and respond to the multiple and contrasting moral constellations exposed in the contact encounter.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

Degrees of Paralysis, Expanding Visibility

In this final chapter I will discuss the psychosocial implications of the thesis findings and what conclusions can be made concerning the project as a whole.

Supervised contact between children in care and their birth families has seen a sharp increase in recent years as a result of more families entering the care system. This is happening at a time of aggressive cuts in welfare state funding. This presents agencies working with increasingly vulnerable families with an (impossible) task: to provide more services of support and change with significantly less social, financial and workforce capital.

The existing research on contact is predominantly outcomes focussed, investigating how contact supports family reunification, placement stability and the emotional development of the child. There has been little direct focus on the actual process of the contact encounter itself (Sen and Broadhurst 2011). Of the research there has been that looks directly at the contact encounter, the emphasis has been on the social worker or child rather than contact supervisor (Schofield and Beek 2005, Fitzgerald and Graham 2011). The one exception to this is an unpublished MA dissertation from the late 1990s which attends to the experience of qualified social workers in addition to ‘social care assistants’ (Hindle and Easton 1999). It is acknowledged that in terms of the relationship between policy and practice, research has lagged behind (Neil and Howe 2004). There is a gap in the present literature about the *experience* of the contact encounter itself, and the voice of the contact supervisor is absent from accounts. Attention to these two areas is urgently needed, due to the growth in demand for supervised contact and the increase in workers who are contact supervisors. This project has addressed these two gaps by offering an inductive, psychosocial investigation of contact supervisors’ experience.

Findings

The key finding of this project posits that contact supervision is a psychosocial site of moral dilemmas, contrasting relational demands, and unresolved conflicting emotions of loss and ambivalence.

This finding is developed from the analyses of core themes developed in the preceding chapters. The Cinderella Service analysis postulated that the role of the contact supervisor is necessarily fractured and conflicted, as manifested in the mutually enforcing and destabilising positions active in the storylines of *Rags to Riches* and *Doing the Dirty Work*. Supervisors maintained panoptic systems of enclosed discourses, and concurrently resisted these through taking up alternative relational positions with regards to system/supervisor/family. The themes of rivalry and exclusion were voiced through the metaphor of early oedipal psychic functioning which enabled an understanding of the dynamics of unresolved mourning and loss at the heart of the contact encounter.

The Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme detailed in chapter four presented the role of contact supervisor as a meeting point for competing moral dilemmas that are created and maintained through shifting relational experiences. These were articulated through the storylines that positioned and counter positioned supervisors in relation to families. The first order positioning of blame drew on neoliberal discourses of parenting, class and gender. The moral dilemmas faced by contact supervisors were formulated as being generated in part by a struggle to integrate dynamics of ambivalence.

Degrees of Paralysis

The project findings are characterised by what I am terming 'degrees of paralysis'. This is not a static state, but a deeply complex, conflictual and shifting system of embodied experiences that generate and draw on unresolved discursive and emotional dynamics. Paralysis occurs in the collision of conflictual experiences with the narrow range of subject positions available to supervisors. In discussion of the degrees of paralysis of contact supervision, there are three dimensions: structural, moral and emotional. These are interconnected; they inform and shape each other.

Degrees of paralysis within the structure of contact supervision are made visible through the systemic resistance to seeing contact fully. The resistance to 'full sight' was articulated through the tension inherent in the *Rags to Riches* storyline, between the positioning of contact as negated/unseen and privileged/valuable. The systemic resistance within the structure of contact supervision takes the form of self-silencing by supervisors through an apparent identification by the supervisor with the position of negated/unseen. Through negating themselves in this manner, supervisors enact a form of paralysis by blocking a full acknowledgment of the complexity of their task.

The disciplinary discourse that structures the system of supervised contact constructs the role of contact supervisor as a panoptic representative, responsible for gatekeeping the boundaries of enclosed systems: who can do what and where, what is acceptable or not. The operation of the supervisor as a docile body in this manner is seen in the vertical form of relating, supervisor with system, as presented in the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines core theme analysis. This system is interrupted by the horizontal form of relating, supervisor with family, enabling the role of supervisor to take up positions of resistance to the dominant disciplinary discourse. However, the structure becomes stalled in that the supervisor is mediating conflicting structures of relationship within a narrow range of available positions for the supervisor to take up. This creates a situation where there is little flexibility for the supervisor to act fully. Each act of maintaining the disciplinary discourse is slowed by the contrasting relational demands of horizontal relating, and a move to challenging the system is curtailed by the very structure of the role to maintain it.

The different aspects of paralysis, loss of flexibility and a stall in action, are voiced by the metaphor of early oedipal psychic functioning. Considering contact as operating in this state systemically, paralysis is inevitable due to the anxieties of loss and exclusion generating systemic defences of denial, a refusal to 'see', and 'either/or' thinking. Following this line of thought, supervised contact is developmentally arrested through its structure, unable to progress to a more flexible form of operation and experience.

The moral dimension of supervised contact is marked by degrees of paralysis. These emerge in the moral dilemmas generated by the conflict between the competing relational demands supervisors face and the discourses that provide the criterion employed to make moral judgements. Through the second order positions available in the Gut Feelings/Fine Lines storylines 'parent-as-child' and 'same-as-us', supervisors attempted to avoid blaming families. However, due to the contemporary social saturation of neoliberal discourses, where the families are 'blamed' before they even met the supervisor as a result of their involvement with social care, the supervisors experienced an inherent contradiction which constrained their voice, both inhibiting and upholding moral judgement. The paralysis within the moralities the supervisor has to negotiate is the complex interweave of embodied relationships with powerful neoliberal discourses.

Degrees of paralysis within the emotional dimension of contact are visible through the finding that contact supervisors function as an emotional receptacle for unprocessed loss, mourning and ambivalence generated in the contact encounter. Ambivalence is the concurrent feeling of two or more contrasting emotions, which creates a conflict. We have seen the struggle to see and be seen by contact supervisors, as well as the tension between seeing the family's vulnerabilities whilst acknowledging their harmful behaviours. The difficulty in integrating these contrasting 'knowledges' results in supervisors having to disown aspects of these, and these denied parts are articulated through ongoing narratives of implicit threat and danger. These narratives speak on one level to actual experiences of harm within the family. It must be acknowledged that thresholds to enter the care system are high, and even higher for contact to have to be supervised. These historic experiences must form a backdrop to supervisors' assumptions about families, though they are keen to assert they do not 'judge'. On another level, supervised contact is a setting where families are engaged in painful transition, which the supervisor has to witness and act as the emotional receptacle for those engaged in the powerfully affective, embodied interaction of contact. This places the supervisor as directly present in experiences of hurt, which is fragmented into narratives of threat. Drawing on the idea that contact functions on a rivalrous early oedipal level, rivalry acts as a signpost of anxiety generated about potential loss. The data analysis suggests that unresolved loss is a significant factor in shaping the experience of contact supervisors and how they construct their role. The ambivalence that becomes paralysed, impossible to integrate, is therefore concerned with harm and loss.

The formations of harm powering ambivalence in the contact encounter are both the knowledge of the fragility and vulnerability suffered by 'parent-as-child' and the actual child in the contact encounter. "Harm" also voices the harming parent, the capacity to hurt. This may be an aspect of the supervisor's own "harming" behaviour which is articulated in the dangers of "*judging*". Supervisors may resist a positioning of themselves as harmful by avoiding the moral judgement of parents. These formations of 'harm' are understood by me to be manifestations of the psychoanalytic concept of hate as seen in the classic understanding of ambivalence. The concurrent struggle to integrate knowledges of loss is also seen to operate on multiple levels. There is the concrete loss of the physical family unit living together. There is the loss of the wished for protective parent: for the child, 'parent-as-child' and 'negated/overlooked' supervisor. The rivalrous demand for exclusive ownership of the parent is a defence against the anxiety of losing the love object forever, and it is this love that is the classical psychoanalytic ambivalent desire.

The ambivalent tension between 'knowing' both harm and loss contributes to what can be seen and what cannot be seen in the role of contact supervisor⁵³. It is this ambivalence that causes contact to develop degrees of paralysis due to the difficulty in integrating knowledges of harm and loss and concurrent affective responses to these, which are heightened by the unique embodied relationship between supervisor and family. The narratives of threat articulate the ambivalent struggle of the contact supervisor, as does the absence of the child from the dominant interview narratives. It could be that the child presents too clear a vision of harm and loss, which is intolerable for the supervisor who occupies a site of irresolvable ambivalent tension. As such, an essential quality required for the supervisor's role is the capacity to tolerate the tension generated through the emotional dynamics of the contact encounter.

The structural, moral and emotional dimensions of supervised contact are intimately connected, mutually reinforcing and disrupting each other. The paralysis that occurs in the systemic resistance to seeing contact fully, and the shifts between vertical and horizontal patterns of relating, is at the same time a moral negotiation of how to make sense of the contact encounter and what actions are possible. These are concurrently powered through the anxieties and defences aroused by the affective experience of the embodied contact encounter, which influence the shift between positions and forms of relating.

The role of the supervisor as a panoptic presence in the disciplinary system of contact is challenged by the concurrent structure of horizontal relating that the supervisor is engaged in. This causes a degree of paralysis, an interruption to the gatekeeping of the enclosed discourse that supervisors maintain. The location of the supervisor as boundary keeper also invests them with moral authority; they are the representative of moral order. However, the boundary of this first order positioning of moral authority, one that 'blames' families, is also challenged by the alternative discourses drawn on to make moral assessments. The second order positions available through the storylines of 'parent-as-child' and 'same-as-us' disrupt the boundary of 'blame'. These moral alternatives are in turn fractured through the dynamics of unprocessed loss and paralysis of the mourning process. Moral boundaries that deny difference between supervisor and parent, as in the 'same-as-us' storyline, operate as a psychic defence against loss. If there is no difference, no blame, then there is no boundary and the acknowledgement of loss can be avoided by retaining the other within the boundary of self. The panoptic presence of the supervisor can be understood as an articulation of the wish to avoid loss through the eradication of boundaries: if all can be seen, then nothing can be missed.

The paralysis evident in the structural self-silencing of supervisors can also be understood as a response to the moral dilemma that supervisors face, a resistance to the first order positioning of blame. Additionally, self-silencing operates in the location of the supervisor as a receptacle for the 'mess' of what is witnessed in the contact encounter. If the supervisor is the sole holder of contrasting forms of knowledge about the family, do they have the option to share it? I argue they

⁵³ John Steiner's 1985 paper *Turning a Blind Eye: The Cover up for Oedipus* details the pathological mechanism of 'turning a blind eye' in the face of oedipal negotiations. The continuation of the metaphor of sight is interesting in relation to the gradations of (in)visibility and oedipal psychic functioning at work in contact supervision (Steiner 1985).

do not, as they are positioned to see that others do not, and therefore their capacity to act through sharing this knowledge is limited. In order to speak, there must be someone to hear.

Implications of research on practice

The findings of this project present multiple implications for the design and practice of contact supervision.

Supervised contact as marked by degrees of paralysis: The implications of this finding are, perhaps unsurprisingly, problematic to untangle. There are many contributing factors to this, most far beyond the scope of this project, operating on large scale social and political macro levels of discourse. Changes in neoliberal socioeconomic structures are realistically unlikely, and the implication for supervised contact is that it will soldier on in the beleaguered battle of welfare provision and cuts to services. The large scale challenge facing contact is how to acknowledge and address the complex dynamics that develop degrees of paralysis, constraint and halts in action. These dynamics are relevant for the wider network around children in the care system. Birth families can be understood to struggle with unprocessed tension regarding harm and loss that is enacted to the point where actual harm or neglect takes place. The social care system operates within neoliberal discourses that have shifted social focus from 'care' to 'risk', placing full responsibility for moral action in the individual sphere thereby obscuring social and political factors that contribute to actions of harm and loss. This constrains the social care system in that their task is to 'protect' but also to provide a 'service' for what becomes the 'consumer' family. The consumer family are embedded in a disciplinary system, which curtails their agency in being able to refuse the 'service' that is offered to them. Obscured visibility and barriers to action reverberate across the networks around looked after children. These findings direct us to the questions: how can we increase the visibility of areas that become paralysed and what can we do to address this.

I suggest that one way to increase visibility to address the degrees of paralysis in supervised contact is through the development of lateral support structures for contact supervisors. The findings of this project provide material for this formulation in two ways: the finding that contact supervision can be seen as functioning on an early oedipal level; and the finding of the significance of the embodied relationships the supervisor is engaged in via the contact encounter.

Oedipal rivalry has been discussed in relation to the fear of loss powering the need to exclude the other. Sibling rivalry as an expression of oedipal desire has been seen as operating within and across the different relational patterns the contact supervisor is located in. The concept of siblings can be seen another way; not just as an obstacle to the desired parent but as organising object for the self in their own right (Mitchell 2003). This lateral option for reconfiguring oedipality brings the 'horizontal' relationships of supervisors and families within the contact encounter to mind. These embodied relationships are highly significant in supervised contact, as seen in the physical presence of the supervisor in the contact encounter, and the narratives of enacted repetitions of unresolved loss and mourning by families who return to the contact encounter again and again. Contact supervisors connect most powerfully to these 'side-by-side' relationships, and therefore it is on this level that attempts to increase visibility regarding the challenges contact presents must happen. A support structure that has embodied connections – people actually being physically together – and

on a peer level – a sibling who is 'like' – could provide an alternative to the supervisor located as sole witness and receptacle for the 'mess' of hurt and loss.

Structures of this type exist. In one participating borough, contact supervisors came together regularly for reflective groups facilitated by a child psychotherapist. These groups enabled people to share their experiences and responses to families in a setting that was not concerned with vertical processes of assessment and decision making. The supervisor from this borough was more reflective and tolerant of her own conflictual feelings regarding families and how she was affected by powerful emotions in the contact encounter. In another borough, the contact service was more successfully integrated with other parts of social care, where supervisors attended planning meetings and reviews for the families they worked with. The manager and supervisor from this borough had a less hostile attitude to the rest of social care, and were more confident that their work was seen and appreciated by their colleagues in other parts of the system.

These types of lateral systems of acknowledgement and support make a difference to the experience of contact supervisors, resulting in the role being seen more clearly which addresses some of the factors that contribute to the degrees of paralysis affecting contact. The absence of national guidelines for supervised contact notwithstanding, ways to encourage local authorities to develop lateral support systems for their contact services should be found.

The degrees of paralysis within contact block change and present a barrier to improving visibility into this field of social care practice. In the spirit of psychosocial commitment to attending to human interactions and the consequent shifts in knowledge and agency this entails, I assert the need to keep developing visibility of contact through formal research and focus on practice to increase pressure on local and national levels of policy guidance.

Supervised contact as a site of unresolved loss: The formulation of supervised contact as a psychosocial site of unresolved loss implies that the contact encounter can be expected to be a charged emotional setting for supervisors and for families. This is coherent with other studies on contact (Hindle and Easton 1999, Cossar 2013). Having this as an expectation can support the process of recruiting contact supervisors. As part of the interview process, it could be helpful to develop questions that ascertain how people manage in emotionally disruptive environments. The unresolved loss that permeates the contact encounter also has implications for how to manage and supervise those working in contact. As is the case for all of us who work closely with vulnerable families, our personal histories form aspects of the motivation to work in such settings. These unique contours of personal life can be a help or a hindrance, but must be sensitively considered from a managerial supervisory perspective. The finding related to unresolved loss also provides those working in contact with the expectation that things will go wrong, there will be sessions 'lost' and mistakes made as a consequence of the "triple deprivation" that characterises Looked After Children and the networks around them (Emanuel 2002). This finding has implications outside of the direct contact encounter, in the connection to the current loss of social care resources in light of the assault on welfare state funding and community services for families with regard to housing, benefits and access to mental health services. For those of us working in these fields, the loss can become overwhelming and contribute to the levels of deprivation felt by families and workers. Acknowledgement of the reverberations of loss across the systems will support the capacity to differentiate whose loss is where, and how to meet these experiences in appropriate ways.

Supervised contact as a site of unintegrated ambivalence: The ambivalence of 'knowing' both hurt and loss has been suggested to be difficult to integrate within contact supervision due to the complex relational demands of the role. The implication of this is the risk of 'blind spots' in practice, for example supervisors and other workers not seeing harm or hurt. These blind spots can be the focus of attention through supervision and shared group discussion. In this manner, attention to blind spots can be used as factors in ongoing assessment with families; for example in what manner are harming and hurtful actions and experiences acknowledged and changed over time – or not. The functioning of ambivalence has implications for those engaged in contact outside of the contact encounter. The current research base articulates the struggle for children in the care system with regard to the 'dual identities' they have to negotiate as being part of multiple family networks, namely birth and foster families (Atwool 2003). Communication with foster carers about how children are managing their own ambivalence in this regard is potentially another contributing factor to assessment – can the child 'know' why they are not living with their birth family and start to mourn this in developmentally appropriate ways which would be seen in their relationships with foster carers.

Supervised contact as a site of competing moral dilemmas: This finding impacts on practice in the potential for worker and network apathy arising from the moral tensions supervisors have to negotiate. Awareness of this possibility asserts the need for the different parts of the social care system engaged in family assessments to come together and communicate effectively throughout the time contact is taking place. Through shared discussion, the changing needs of the family can be shared and contrasting moral dilemmas can be explored rather than avoided. The robust and flexible developmental model for organising contact offered by Neil and Howe is applicable here, in their call for contact arrangements to be adjusted in line with changes in the family, placement and developmental task and history of the child (Neil and Howe 2004). The mindfulness to the particular child's needs as evolving over time enables a challenge to the defence of apathy in the face of moral dilemmas by framing the dilemmas as part of a continually changing picture of the child's best interest.

Supervised contact as a site of contrasting relational demands: This finding has implications for those managing supervisors, and calls for the centrality of this when designing and implementing support and supervisory structures. When the multiplicity of contrasting relational demands is not held in mind, the networks around Looked After Children can become fractured and enact family dynamics between agencies (Ironsides 2009). Moreover, direct attention to the relational negotiations demanded of supervisors can become a tool in directing understanding back again to the child's position between birth and foster families and how they can be supported in managing this. This could be achieved through open and frank discussion of the relational demands on supervisors in the context of the cases they are working on in individual and group supervision, team meetings and wider contact service culture.

Psychosocial research: researcher shifts

I started this research project at the start of my training to be a child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist and am finishing it two years into qualified practice. My professional stance as a therapist means I attend to the relationship between myself and other – colleague or patient – as a

central tool in my work. However, my involvement in psychosocial research has brought a different strand of awareness to my life as clinician and researcher.

In Chapter Two I detailed how I became aware of my shifts in positioning myself in the interviews between supervisor and manager and my trepidation on embarking into an unknown world of research. The impact of my engagement and shaping of the research process with regard to the findings of the project can be seen in three key areas: ambivalence, refracted relationships and ‘making strange’.

I suggested the ways I approached identifying and recruiting participants for the study could be understood as me positioning contact services in two main ways: fragile and resistant. Firstly, my initial assumptions about how contact services were adjusting to the cuts in public sector funding constructed an image of contact as ‘fragile’. My keenness to appear competent speaks to an image of fragility, in the need to provide robust support. Concurrently, I located contact services initially as ‘closed doors’, needing me to approach them through soft contacts in order to persuade them to participate. My sense of being the outsider and positioning myself as ‘like’ those I interviewed contributed to both constructions of fragility and resistance, contact both needing care but also being withholding. This connects in my mind to the finding that supervised contact is a site of unintegrated ambivalence; the struggle in knowing both hurt and loss. The hurt that is hard to ‘know’ is illustrated by the image of fragility, the knowledge takes on a harmful quality. The loss is traced in my construction of contact as resistant – I am the one anxious about potential loss in that context. Additionally, the threading of resistance in my positioning speaks to the unintegrated nature of the supervisor’s negotiation of ambivalence.

My interaction with Delores provided a helpful opportunity for me to understand more about my assumed position of power within the research process. I was comfortable with being the one to ask rather than tell, and her implicit challenge to this power dynamic was disruptive to me. The unsettling of my position links to the finding of how contact supervisors operate in a site of refracted relationships.

Finally, my entry into the role of researcher from a clinical background actually enabled me to engage in the psychosocial task of ‘making strange’. Moving into new areas of study encouraged a breadth (sometimes overwhelmingly so) of vision. I consider my choice of a multi-method data analysis to reflect this breadth, and as such provided an initial mapping of a hitherto under-researched area that is layered with complexity and the richness of supervisors’ experience.

My experience of being involved in this psychosocial exploration of contact supervision has enriched my clinical work, allowing me to consider and engage more in social discourses that I maintain and perpetuate. This has allowed me an increasingly nuanced view regarding the possibilities of agency, resistance and change.

Limitations of the project

With nuance in mind, I turn now to considering the limitations of this exploratory psychosocial project. As a portfolio doctorate, the size of the sample is small, ten interviews across five different local authorities. The small participant size limits the generalisability of the findings beyond the experience of those interviewed. Additional limitations with regard to participants are the self-

selecting sample of interviewees. All boroughs agreed to participate, and their motivation for this is not known. I was not involved in the selection of supervisors, managers got in touch with me with the names of people who were willing to be interviewed. This is also an unknown area - were supervisors selected by managers because they were thought to present the borough in a positive light? If supervisors did volunteer, I am left to presume it is because they have an interest and engagement with their role, which could impact significantly on the data. The gender distribution of participants is also an issue for consideration – only female supervisors were interviewed. This may reflect the gender disparity in childcare roles more generally, but with the significance of the gender discourse at work in contact in mind, the perspective of a male supervisor would have added to the study.

The main focus of this study was a family group of parent/s and child in the presence of a contact supervisor. However, it is contact with siblings that is the most prevalent contact arrangement made by courts for children in permanent care (Miles and Lindley 2003). I observed contact with siblings present in my shadowing exercise at the start of the research process, yet the issue of siblings is absent from this project. The dynamics within the contact encounter may be very different when no parent is present, and could affect the supervisors relational experience in significant ways. Sibling contact was not spoken about in the interview material, however I did not ask either, perhaps another form of the 'not-seeing' that operates in contact.

These limitations have implications for not only the generalisability of the project, but also its validity. Validity in qualitative research is a lively and continuing area of challenge and debate. With regard to the psychosocial approach of this project, I draw on an understanding of validity as a framework, and that assessments regarding validity are made with attention to how the differentiated sections interact. I base this validity framework on Whittemore et al's suggestion to consider validity as a set of primary and secondary criteria: "Credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity are considered primary criteria, whereas explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity are considered secondary criteria." (Whittemore *et al* 2001 p. 529). In order to satisfy this web of criteria I have endeavoured to be very clear about the intellectual field this project is located within, and provide commentary on the impact I as researcher have in constructing the findings of the study. I have detailed the processes of data collection and analysis and present findings not as claims for truth, but formulations for developing understandings in the spirit of exploratory research. These steps have been 'triangulated' by my doctoral supervisor, Dr Bruna Seu, who has provided consistent patient and encouraging commitment to my slow progress as a researcher. A possible limitation in this regard is the lack of a return to participants with research findings. This could have contributed to the validity of the findings as well as providing an active opportunity for the field of contact to experience being seen.

Recommendations for future research

Future research opportunities arising from this exploratory psychosocial project abound and are needed. The shortage of research into contact has been noted in the current literature (Andersson and Arvidsson 2008, Sen 2010). In line with the considerations regarding validity, future research could focus on the investigation of contact supervisors' development of increased visibility regarding their field. This could take many forms. One possibility is an action research avenue, where peer

systems of support are developed, trialled, and reviewed by supervisors in light of potential change within the contact encounter and tensions located within the supervisor's role.

Another rich vein of research potential lies in considering the reports the supervisors create. At present there are no national guidelines regarding what form these reports should be in, and the search for a template to fit the limited time of supervisors for this task and individual local authority needs continues⁵⁴. Different forms of discursive analysis on these written reports would add to the mapping started in this project.

With regard to siblings, an interesting gap is apparent. Parents of children in care are legally defined as "privileged" persons, who retain the right to petition court for contact arrangements to be made. However, siblings are not "privileged", yet are the most prevalent group in court ordered contact arrangements for children in permanent care (Miles and Lindley 2003 p.231/2). Investigation into the potential paralysis in the nature of sibling contact and alternative patterns of family relationship would be timely and worthwhile.

Conclusion: "Contact supervision with Looked After Children: A psychosocial exploration into role construction, negotiation, and wider implications"

Supervised contact between children in care and their birth families is frequently not considered by those external to the contact encounter. Once the often dramatic processes of immediate child protection are complete, the routine of contact appears to fade from view. However, this project has established that contact supervision stands as a crucial area of social care practice that is highly complex and demands further attention and consideration. Contact supervision is a period of change and transition for families and there is rich potential for this to be further developed. What blocks development is the degrees of paralysis that characterise supervised contact. As such, this project concludes with a call to continue and deepen attention and understanding into what barriers may be hidden from sight, and how to notice and address them. There is a need to take more care over those who do the caring, for the benefit of all involved in contact. Marianne's powerful narrative began this thesis, and we end with her statement that returns to the central actor in the contact encounter, who moves in and out of vision: "*Job description. You look after the children in your care.*"

⁵⁴ *In one participating borough various report proforma had been produced in an attempt to capture and communicate the richness of contact for assessment and legal processes.*

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Appendix One: Individual Interview Thematic Analysis Coding

INITIAL CODES:

Layer One

Followed reading transcription aloud, then repeated readings four times. Layer one of initial codes was the marking of phrases of interest, curiosity, and connection to research questions.

Example from Delores

"She was breastfeeding the baby, I think she was on methadone, and it had an impact on the baby"

"Parents share a lot with you...about what they've been through...they kind of look for you for support"

INITIAL CODES:

Layer Two

Drawing of phrases into descriptive themes

Example from Delores

Contamination

Parents in the room

System

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SUBTHEMES:

Collation of descriptive themes into broader more conceptual categories

Example from Delores

Boundaries

Systems/triangle tension

Appendix Two: Data Set Thematic Analysis Coding

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SUBTHEMES:

The subthemes from the ten interviews collated to make a long list of subthemes from across the data set, see appendix 3.

DATA SET SUBTHEMES:

Subthemes from across the data set examined and drawn into 8 conceptual categories, see appendix 4. Full data set re-read to check subthemes reflect text. Re-reading enabled move to candidate theme level of coding; which subthemes shared characteristic and were felt to be connected most powerfully to the data.

CANDIATE THEMES:

Subthemes refined to 3 higher conceptual categories that incorporated atmosphere of subthemes:

Cinderella

**Breech and
Danger**

**Gut Feelings
and Fine Lines**

CORE THEMES:

Candidate themes read across the data set. Cross over between the Breech and Danger candidate theme established to be interwoven with other candidate themes. Core themes concluded to be:

The Cinderella Service

**Gut Feelings/Fine
Lines**

Setting – roles as coping function	System:Change/Failure/Relationships	Ideals	Judgement
Our process in interview and echo of how emotional process negotiated	Financial	Systems functioning and not	Power of Experience
Tensions	Role: Definition/Reports/Pressure/Blur/tension	Balance	Role
Professional qualities	Danger	Boundaries	Relationships
Connections as coping function	System: Change/clash	“Good Contact”	System
Threat	Role: unique position/clash/cycles of relationships/challenge and change	Systems/triangles tension	Boundaries
Distance	Relationships: clash	Role	Clash : Personal impact and professional demands
Tensions	Pain	Contact as a specific piece of work	Threat
Position	Contact as unseen	Relationships: child at centre/worker to parent to child/parenting/system/family	“Parenting” conflict
Role and qualities	“Rights” discourse	Role: Point of contact/Unique access/Qualities needed for role/Complexity – shifting identifications, role gives security	System: Clash/Tension/Support/Failure
Parenting	Bad Parent/Victim Child	Tensions: In system/Changes/Tensions in job: different needs, system/relationship tensions	Role: Tension/Specifics/Mismatch /Expectations/Experience/Gut feeling/Fine lines
Process of interview me and her	Witness	Boundaries	Cycles
Assessment	Emotional impact and connection		Boundaries
“Fine Lines”	Role		Tension: Positioning of worker in relationships/Feeling/Experience/“Reality”
Distance, Balance, Limits	Danger		
Role	Boundaries/flooding		
Gender			
Systems – flux			
‘Good Contact’			
Relationships; family/self/system			

Appendix Four: Data Set Subthemes

- **Moral Dilemmas**
- **Skills**
- **Gut Feelings**
- **Active/Passive ambivalence**
- **Boundaries**
- **Systems**
- **Role**
- **Tension**
- **Danger**
- **The Value of the Field**
- **Overlooked Worker**
- **Unique Position**

Appendix Five: Information Sheet

Information sheet for participants

Department of Psychosocial Studies
BIRKBECK
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Title of Study: Contact supervision with Looked After Children: an exploration into role construction, negotiation, and wider implications.

Name of researcher: Eva Crasnow

The study is being done as part of my clinical doctoral degree in the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London. The study has received ethical approval.

This study wants to explore what the job of Contact Supervisor involves and how people understand and manage the work.

If you agree to participate you will agree a convenient time and place for me to interview you for about an hour. You are free to stop the interview and withdraw at any time.

All names and identifying factors – places, locations - will be changed, so your data remains totally anonymous.

The analysis of our interview will be written up in a report of the study for my degree. You will not be identifiable in the write up or any publication which might ensue.

The study is supervised by Dr Bruna Seu who may be contacted at the above address and telephone number.

Appendix Six: Consent Form

Consent form for participants

Title of Study: Contact supervision with Looked After Children: an exploration into role construction, negotiation, and wider implications.

Name of researcher: Eva Crasnow

I have been informed about the nature of this study and willingly consent to take part in it.

I understand that the content of the interview will be kept confidential.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I am over 16 years of age.

Name _____

Signed _____

Date _____

There should be two signed copies, one for participant, one for researcher.

Appendix Seven: Interview Schedule

TOPIC AREA	SPECIFIC QUESTIONS
<p>What does the job involve?</p>	<p>Could you talk me through an average week?</p> <p>How did you get this job, how much does it pay, what qualifications do you need? What do you look for in recruiting supervisors?</p> <p>What is the most and least important part of your job as you see it?</p> <p>What do you like about your job, what would you change?</p> <p>You must meet a lot of families, is there anything that seems to be common between them and their experiences of Contact?</p>
<p>What is their experience of doing this job?</p>	<p>Can you please tell me about an experience at work that made an impression on you?</p> <p>Can you tell me about a situation at work that you found difficult, and how did you react.</p> <p>Do you have children? Do you think your experience of parenting plays a part in this job?</p>
<p>Does this role connect with the wider system of Care? How is that understood?</p>	<p>Do you think the rest of the system has a good idea of the work you do?</p> <p>What do you think could be the implications of the funding cuts on the supervisory Contact system?</p> <p>Anything else regarding your job that you feel hasn't been covered so far?</p>