Why do they stay? A study of resilient child protection workers in three European countries

Perché rimangono? Uno studio sulla resilienza degli assistenti sociali della protezione minori in tre paesi europei

Varför stannar de kvar? En studie av motståndskraftiga socialarbetare inom social barnavård i tre europeiska länder

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Whilst 50\% of child protection workers across much of Europe and the affluent ‘West’ leave after two years, many stay and develop substantial professional careers. This paper discusses research in Italy, Sweden and England examining what factors explain ‘remaining’ for more than three years in this stressful job. Underpinned by a hermeneutic epistemology, qualitative interviews were undertaken and subject to an interpretative thematic analysis. The findings proved to be complex and multi-layered and this paper presents an overview of these. The theoretical framework for the project mainly drew on organisations and resilience, and the initial sections of the paper consider how formulations of resilience as contextual and relational can elucidate professional sustainability. Organisational issues are considered, including the impact of work management, of supervision and of allocation in different national contexts. The paper also focuses on the role of friendships and informal support at work. Threaded through these established themes are more, perhaps surprising, concepts: for example, creativity, power, reflexive spaces and interpersonal relations as explanatory of remaining in child protection work.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Resilience; child protection social workers; European comparative research; professions

\textbf{SOMMARIO}

Mentre il 50\% degli assistenti sociali che lavorano nella protezione all’infanzia in molte zone dell’Europa e dell’occidente affluente abbandonano il loro posto dopo due anni, molti assistenti sociali rimangono e sviluppano in maniera sostanziale le loro carriere professionali. Questo articolo presenta una ricerca svolta in Italia, Svezia e Inghilterra esaminando quali fattori possano spiegare il rimanere di tali professionisti per più di tre anni in un contesto lavorativo così stressante. Sono state condotte e sottoposte ad analisi tematica di tipo interpretativo una serie di interviste qualitative, realizzate in ambito epistemologicoermeutico. L’articolo presenta una panoramica dei risultati che si sono rivelati complessi e stratificati. Il contesto teorico del
progetto è stato impostato prevalentemente sui temi dell’organizzazione e della resilienza e le sezioni iniziali dell’articolo considerano come il definire contestuale e relazionale la resilienza possa spiegare la sostenibilità professionale. Sono stati presi in considerazione temi organizzativi, incluso l’impatto sul lavoro del management, della supervisione e della collocazione in differenti contesti nazionali. L’articolo si focalizza anche sul ruolo dell’amicizia e del supporto informale sul posto di lavoro. Intrecciati a queste temi già noti, vi sono altri, e forse sorprendenti, concetti esplicativi del rimanere nel settore della protezione all’infanzia, quali ad esempio quelli di creatività, potere, spazi di riflessività e relazioni interpersonali.

**ABSTRAKT**

Även om 50% av socialarbetarna i social barnavård i stora delar av Europa och den rika delen av västvärlden lämnar sitt arbete efter 2 år stannar många kvar och utvecklar gedigna professionella karriärer. Denna artikel diskuterar forskning i Italien, Sverige och England som undersöker vilka faktor som förklarar varför man stannar kvar mer än 3 år i detta stressiga arbete. Inom ramen för en hermeneutisk epistemologi genomfördes kvalitativa intervjuer som analyserades genom en tolkande, tematisk ansats. Resultaten visade sig vara komplexa och mångfacetterade och i denna artikel presenteras en översikt över dessa. Teoretiskt bygger projektet huvudsakligen på organisationsteori och teorier om resiliens. Den inledande delen av artikeln diskuterar hur organisatorisk och relationell resiliens kan förklara varför professionella stannar kvar. Organisatoriska faktorer såsom ledningens betydelse, betydelsen av handledning och betydelsen av tilldelning av resurser i olika nationella kontexter diskuteras. Artikeln fokuserar också på vilken roll vänskap och informellt stöd spelar för viljan att stanna kvar. Utöver dessa teman diskuteras också t.ex. kreativitet, makt, rum för reflektion och personliga relationer som förklaring till varför man stannar kvar i social barnavård.

**Introduction**

In the last two decades it has become increasingly apparent that child protection workers in Europe, and further afield, leave their jobs because of burnout, low salaries, organisational conditions, work stressors, occasionally threats and the low status of the profession (Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Horwitz, 2006). This is of some importance for social service providers and for society as a whole, since the work addresses the lives of vulnerable children and their families. From the perspective of service users, there is a strong case for consistent and enduring relationships with a known worker enhancing the quality of the work (Trevithick, 2005). The research literature suggests that low organisational and professional commitment together with stress and lack of social support are the strongest predictors of turnover or social workers’ intentions to leave (e.g. Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006).

The research into child protection burnout and turnover shows a dearth of studies capturing the voices of those who actually stay, though these are emerging (e.g. Adamson, Beddoe, & Davys, 2012; Burns, 2011). The question of ‘what sustains … ’ is only beginning to be examined, and some related issues remain unaddressed. For example, how do managers support ‘remaining’? For workers, this perspective might consider complex ethical and relational issues, for example, is ‘suffering in silence’ resilient? Is friendship at work fundamental? These are some of the questions this paper will address.

The article aims to examine what factors influence the decision to remain in child protection work. Initially, it reviews some of the contemporary literature relating to ‘survival’ at work. The notion of resilience is discussed as a core element of a broader conceptualisation of ‘remaining in practice’,
which concerns itself with the interplay between, for example, organisational conditions and individual workers. The paper then substantially draws on the experiences and understanding of social workers and social work managers accessed through original primary research undertaken by the authors in Sweden, Italy and England in 2012. It addresses three of the themes of ‘staying’ that emerged most powerfully from the narratives of the interview subjects. It considers what organisational features were deemed relevant, how different forms of supervision contribute and the significance of informal relationships at work for an enduring career in child protection.

Terminologically, the paper utilises ‘child welfare’ as the over-arching concept for the whole sector of work in relation to children and families, and ‘child protection work’ as the service within this that is mandated to assess the situation of children in need, and with the power to move the child from its family (within national policy and legislative structures).

**Previous research and theoretical perspectives**

Briefly, then, what does previous research suggest as the discontents of workers in children’s welfare generally and child protection specifically: the ‘risk factors’ causing worker dissatisfaction and low retention in these jobs? A fairly consistent range of themes can be detected, the most significant of which seem to be social work career reasons and status implications (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005; Kullberg 2011), overall working conditions (ÓDonnell & Kirkner, 2009), ‘organisational climate’ (Mor Barak et al., 2006), lack of organisational recognition (Tham, 2007), high case loads (Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattershall, 2004), organisational commitment and role conflict (ÓDonnell & Kirkner, 2009), commitment to child welfare (Hamama, 2011), inadequate supervision (Collins, 2008), poor salary (Mederos & Woldeguiorguis, 2003), threats of or actual physical trauma/harm (Horwitz, 2006) and lack of resources to do the job (Gonzlez, Faller, Orgega, & Tropman, 2009). There is also some research evaluating intervention projects and in-service training programmes in order to improve workforce retention (Caringi et al., 2008; Turcotte, Lamonde, & Beauduioin, 2009).

However, the ‘common sense’ assumption that remaining in child protection reflects the obverse of the identified ‘leaving’ factors (e.g. smaller case loads, better salary) seems not to be straightforwardly the case. Different kinds of, and complex, multi-stranded factors may be cited as reasons for staying (as the primary research below illustrates). For example, it may relate to the perceived importance and meaning of the work between social worker and service user conceptualised in Collin’s study as ‘high job satisfaction’ (2008) rather than organisational issues (Gibbs, 2001). Concepts from psychology, understanding survival as a product of character traits, for example, ‘coping strategies’, ‘engaged coping styles’ and ‘dispositional goal orientation’, have been given some consideration (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Burns (2011) argues that workers’ understanding of the potential career pathways in which an initial period of ‘serving your time’ in child protection was implicated also influences the decision to stay. Other studies focus on how increased education can impact on long-term commitment to public child welfare work (Auerbach, McGowan, & LaPorten, 2008; Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009).

The role of supervision in retaining social work staff in child protection is strongly underlined in the existing literature (e.g. Cearley, 2004; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2008; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Certainly in the authors’ study, interviewees (social workers and managers) recognised supervision as an important support. Supervision in the public sector according to some classic authors (e.g. Kadushin, 1976) encompasses administrative, educative and supportive activities. Work from Payne (1994) emphasises its managerial and professional functions – including educative and supportive supervision – and others (Morrison, 2001) add an additional mediation role, for example, over resources, through which the needs of front-line workers are represented to senior management.

Rushton and Nathan (1996) defined two core functions in child protection supervision: ‘inquisitorial’ (relating to accountability) and ‘empathic-containing’ (relating to support), which, they argue, have to be combined. In England official inquiries into child protection failures have emphasised
the quality of supervision, but, increasingly, this activity has been linked to performance management. In Sweden, where demands for supervision intensified during the late 1980s, fuelled by the drive for professional recognition, social workers have upheld their right to external supervision, besides internal (Bradley & Höjer, 2009). In Italy, when supervision is provided – and it happens relatively rarely – it is focused on the administrative and on the educative and supportive aspects (Giarola, 2008).

**Human service organisations**

Human service organisations (HSOs), according to a number of writers, contain specific traits (Hasenfeld, 2010; Johansson, Dellgran, & Höjer, 2015). These traits will impact on the activities and the role of the different organisational ‘actors’, including employees and service users, and therefore can be helpful in examining social workers in child protection roles.

Often mentioned traits of HSOs are the moral and value-based foundation of their activities (e.g. ‘in the best interests of the child’), the important implications of their activities for people’s lives (e.g. children may be taken out of the family and placed ‘in care’) and uncertainty when it comes to both the tasks and the expected outcomes of their activities (due to limited reliable research about best practice). These activities may include a range of functions, for example, people processing, people sustaining and people changing, and each of these functions needs trained staff with a high degree of professional expertise in order to act appropriately within this complex picture (Brodkin, 2011; Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). From an organisational point of view, it is important to help social workers to handle uncertainties by, for instance, offering organisational support, guidelines and continuing education.

**Resilience**

In this work situation characterised by so much uncertainty, staff resilience is increasingly becoming an important concept in order to understand why people stay in child protection. Central to much of the field of inquiry relating to who survives in child protection work is the concept of resilience itself, about which a burgeoning literature exists in relation to social work (Adamson et al., 2012; Kinman & Grant, 2011; McFadden, Taylor, Campbell, & McQuilkin, 2012). Resilience as a theoretical construct, even when limiting its consideration to social sciences applications, draws on a diverse range of psychological, and social-relational underpinnings in a variety of contexts. However, despite and because of its flexibility the notion of resilience facilitates a wide cross-disciplinary approach to ‘enduring’. Of the many authors applying resilience to understanding, for example, children thriving or workers lasting, few can be found now who would accept a purely psychological model of resilience (Gilligan, 2004). Russ, Lonne, and Darlington (2009) in relation to child protection social work make the point that thinking about individual capacities can be blame-making, leading to individual workers being stereotyped as ‘not coping’. They argue for a notion of resilience that can explicate coping at an individual and a collective level.

Rutter, whose child psychology perspective has been influential for several decades, offers just such a complex model of resilience, much cited in work on resilient social workers. For example, Horwitz (2006) appropriates Rutter’s thinking for operationalising the supporting of professional resilience. Organisations, he argues, should instigate risk reduction, for example, by avoiding unnecessary exposure to traumatising events, and, should this be unavoidable, minimise its impact. They should facilitate the development of professional esteem and encourage openness towards ‘life opportunities’. These ideas were helpful for developing this study’s theme of the organisational context of resilience.

Those whose work takes them into fields where building resilience is a practice challenge have also developed multi-dimensional resilience models. Venistendael devised the ‘Casita’ (little house) model of resilience: ‘house’ as a graphic symbolisation of meanings such as strength, security, etc.
The house metaphor – easily depicted and comprehensible in any culture/age group – suggests a safe edifice, and the ‘rooms’ inside introduce the idea of different internal spaces, to encourage thinking about the different elements of the service user’s safety/resilience. For example, in the ‘basement’ of the ‘casita’ can be found health, relationships and acceptance. Further up are rooms with, for example, ‘meaningfulness’ and ‘humour’. The attic is where new experiences and hopes for the future are found. The casita requires people or groups to consider what their resilience consists of and what it needs and where it is developing. Venistendael’s particular formulation of what resilience encompasses has some similarities with Rutter’s work. Resilience is understood as contingent, and built in a relationship between an individual/group and its surroundings/environment. It requires resistance and construction, and involves transforming negative events for some elements of growth. Finally is the idea that resilience is not ethically neutral, and adaptation to circumstances, even ‘successfully’, cannot just be assumed to be in the interests of the person (or wider social interests). Overall the need for resilience to include making sense and making meaning – for example, creativity, humour, feeling what you do is worthwhile – is recognised (Venistendael, 2007). This overlaps with Rutter’s notion of ‘remaining open to life opportunities’. His emphasis on developing esteem in a relational context clearly has much in common with the casita model.

Similarly Collins (2008) paper on resilience in social work emphasises positive emotions, but also specifically recognises the role of ‘meaning, optimism and hope’ in staying in the field. Russ et al. in considering the same problematic of resilience in child protection, also conclude that supporting workers to remain and remain positive in this work would involve ‘an increased use of reflective practice, supervision, on-going learning, and collaborative peer support’ (p. 331).

Resilience, then, is clearly a complex and multi-dimensional concept and the above identifies a section of the literature on which this project drew to inform its ethos and methodology. Ideas about ‘hope’, ‘meaningfulness’, ‘learning’ and ‘relationships’ seemed productive. The concept of ‘ethical neutrality’, which Venistendael raises (above), seemed worth further consideration. Certainly in the literature we engaged with, controversy around the notion of ‘resilient people’ was evident (see e.g. Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience as defined within, for example, psychology may be attempting neutrality, but that it actually does this is under considerable challenge. As Osher, Kendziora, VanDenBerg, and Dennis (1999) comment:

> The popular conception of resilience ... is understood to be essentially dependent upon individual characteristics such as good temperament, intelligence, or the ability to form healthy relationships. (p. 3)

Assuming resilience as ‘individual personality’ serves to depoliticise by severing debates about structural adversities or inequalities of opportunity from its orbit. It can lead to assumptions, for example, that some people either may be biologically/genetically inferior in terms of their ‘strength of character’, or only have to try a bit harder and they can manage whatever adversity is coming to them (Peeters, 2016).

Understanding of resilience as either personal or contextual/relational has implications for choices and actions, for example, ethical practices undertaken (or not). In social welfare generally a political ethical approach to resilience might encompass ideas such as empowerment of communities and/or improvement in environments (to build the resilience of children and adults therein) (Osher et al., 1999; Peeters, 2016). In terms of sustaining resilient workers, this would more likely relate to support, and recognition from their ‘environment’, and also, as hinted at above, the (hopefully supported) resisting of unreasonable demands. In her study of resilient social work students, Rajan-Rankin concluded that active resistance connected to personal narratives was a crucial component of their capacity to overcome adversities in their lives (2014). Resistance seems key to ‘resilience ethics’, in terms of the individual and the political. There are issues of power at stake.

Overall, then, and why these issues of ethics and neutrality are fundamental here is that what people understand resilience to mean underpins what follows: what action may be taken or tolerated. If worker’s ‘traits’ are assumed to be responsible for failings of resilience, then contextual issues, for example, supervision and exposure to risk (see Rutter, above) can be ignored, which evokes a further
ethical issue to do with support. Clearly, if resilience is seen as a contextual issue, the reverse is true and moral responsibility becomes a shared, organisational responsibility.

The research team acknowledged both the usefulness and the limitations of applying ‘frameworks’ of resilience themselves, in that they necessarily both include and exclude some perspectives. Ultimately we preferred to draw on those above, but incorporate in our design an open, reflective dialogue with those with longevity in child protection work, in which, without losing sight of the structure, whatever meanings and understandings workers surfaced could be explored across a range of dimensions. The three themes that this study presents below reflect the dominant emergent strands from these interviews and the research team’s thematic analysis of the data understood, invariably, through our engagement with the subject area from the literature.

**Research design and methodology**

The data for this project were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews focused on key issues in resilience and child protection social work. Interviews with 37 informants in Italy, Sweden and England were conducted over four months, between November 2012 and February 2013. The countries chosen represent three different welfare regimes (see Esping-Andersen, 1996) and differences in how child protection interventions are organised. For example, in England and Italy there is a child protection orientation, whereas in Sweden more of a family service orientation (see Gilbert, 2012). They also represent countries with established problems with retention (see the previous research section). In each country two geographic sites for collection of data were chosen for pragmatic reasons (availability and contacts within social work practice). There are no reasons to believe (according to national statistics) that the situation in the chosen sites differs in any significant way from the situation in other parts of each country. The sample was selected to reflect two different roles: social workers in child protection and, to introduce a further ‘concerned/informed actor’ dimension, managers in the same field (see Table 1). Social workers who stay in the sector and not those who had left were the focus, particularly how people continue – a strengths perspective rather than a deficit model – and the motivations they express. Ethics approval for interviewing human subjects was undertaken through the relevant university in the UK. As the research did not involve information about health or other personal issues that might challenge personal integrity, it did not fall under the act of ethical approval in the Swedish legislation, nor did it require ethical approval under the Italian system. We were mindful of ethical research considerations, offering a comprehensive description of the aims and processes of the research before the interviews. Prospective interviewees were informed about their right not to answer questions, to interrupt their participation at any time without explaining why, and the right to tell us – during the interview or after – that they had changed their mind, and that we then would not use any information from the interview.

Ten social service organisations were involved in two regions in Sweden, two cities in Italy and one city in England. The interviews were undertaken cross nationally in English. Each researcher was responsible for interviewing informants in another country. We acknowledge that this method introduces some limitations in shared understanding and meaning (though in reality the interviews were careful to explore confusions and differing nuances) but there were also advantages. Not only could we inject less preconception and more curiosity into the interviewing situation but could also avoid interviewing former students from our own universities. Most importantly, the inevitable process of

| Social workers | Social work managers | Total |
|---------------|----------------------|-------|
| Italy         | 12                   | 4     | 16   |
| Sweden        | 6                    | 3     | 9    |
| England       | 9                    | 3     | 12   |
| Total         | 27                   | 10    | 37   |
co-producing meaning in the interview between researcher and researched offers a counter-balance to the problems (Frost, Hojer, & Campanini, Sicora, & Kullberg, 2016; Kvale, 2008).

The details of the sample involved were thus:

Given the research set out to explore experience and meanings for the ‘actors’, an essentially hermeneutic methodology was deployed. There was a concern to understand the experience of the social workers and managers in terms of their narratives but also to include some interpretative analysis through which we might reconstruct the possible assumptions and implications evoked, in order to have a clearer picture of the phenomenon under investigation. The interviews were semi-structured, with tentative areas of enquiry forming the schedule. Initially explored were the personal and professional background of the interviewee, and their motivations for becoming a social worker. The theme of the second part of the interview was directly related to their perceptions of staying in child protection: how they understood this and the factors that seemed important to them. Prompts when needed included organisational and professional issues (support, work-loads, pay and conditions, opportunities), interpersonal factors, etc. Some reflection on what might encourage them or other people to leave the sector concluded the interviews. The approach to the interviewees was to ask open questions and follow the respondents where they wanted to go. However, according to the semi-structured tradition, the researchers had formulated some themes relevant to previous research and suggested from their theoretical perspective to guide the research.

The transcripts of all the interviews were thematically analysed, allowing the emergence of categories that facilitated the search for connections between both the data collected in the two parts of the interview and the different situations represented by the 37 respondents.

Like all research, the process here contained limitations and challenges. For example, the design does not allow a relative comparison of the importance of different factors in choosing to stay in child protection. The number of participants is not large or systematically sampled enough to offer conclusions that can be reliably generalised in any of the chosen countries, or to actually compare the experiences on a national level. However, the main intention was to gain a varied but in-depth picture of the experiences of the different actors involved in child protection in different welfare contexts, and to surface key themes that can be drawn on to inform future studies. Inevitably, there are also limitations due to language and understanding of culture differences when doing cross-cultural research (Frost et al., 2016). This paper now will go on to consider the key findings of the study: the three themes of organisational issues in general, supervision and informal work-relations.

**Organisational issues**

The social workers interviewed discussed organisational issues to explain why they have stayed in child protection, of which five emerged as particularly significant: the task itself, the working structure, the team manager, the team itself and reflective spaces, including supervision. This section will briefly discuss these findings, giving further consideration to the latter two.

In the literature of low retention, there is substantial evidence that the *task itself* can be stressful, produce burnout and hence be a reason for leaving. However, we found paradoxically it can provide the motivation for staying. Many respondents describe the job as ‘a mission’ they love, as a passion, as something special, not for everyone: in the Italian interviews, ‘Missione’, ‘Passione’, ‘Amore’. And similar thoughts were expressed in Sweden:

I think we are in it and we have passion, we would not be here otherwise … (SW SWE)

This ‘mission’ is also more than working with each child and family: for some it is a way of feeling responsible and having a sense of doing something for the next generation. Another subtheme related to the task was the sense that (to paraphrase) the work is varied, no day is ever the same, it is never boring and you never know what to expect. It includes talking to people, writing, analysing family patterns and relations, playing with children, sometimes even shopping with mothers.
I just loved that... it's the adrenaline... You know I liked the fast business. I've got a low boredom threshold and I like that nothing's the same. (SWM ENG)

Interestingly, the power dimension, a tricky issue in contemporary social work, was a positive factor. Child protection work was seen as a powerful role with the capacity to change people's lives: not changing the world but making decisions that matter for individuals. One social worker expressed how it affected her on a personal level.

I am not saying I like the power, but I suppose in some ways you do because you can make changes in people's lives. (SW ENG)

The second theme in 'organisational issues' relates to how the work is structured. This includes having a reasonable number of cases, though no one could define what is the 'perfect' workload. Besides workload, having resources to offer the family is vital. Having a sense of being effective is fundamental.

Importantly in relation to the working structure was a systematic process for managing cases. Since the work itself is often uncertain, the research sample valued clarity: in allocation, procedures, methods – a range of processes, for example, an organised daily working situation with access to support and allocating joint workers in some cases (such as difficult home visits) were cited.

... it can not only depend on very good people with a high resilience.... have to create something in the organisation and the methods we use, so not everything will depend on if I have a stressful period or if I can work late ... ... / ... / ... You have to have a boss that can prioritize... (SW SWE)

The importance of the team manager was another subtheme. In the different countries team managers had differing roles and proximity to front-line practice. The good manager is in charge of what is happening in the team, gives recognition to the workers and covers their back in conflicts. For these workers it was important that the manager prioritises the safety of children and of staff. Interviewees were divided, though, as to whether managers should be very 'hands on' (e.g. knowing all the cases, in order to intervene) versus not being too involved and taking over the responsibility of the social workers.

The team itself seemed to be an important organisational factor. Mutual help, the mix between new and experienced practitioners, and the atmosphere were cited as resilience factors (see below). Furthermore, space for reflection was identified as necessary when working in child protection, with supervision a major but not exclusive component of this. This will now be considered in more depth.

Supervision

In analysing the findings, Rushton and Nathan's distinctions ('accountability' or 'support', described above) were helpful. The interviewees demonstrated this functional split, but additionally the different emphasis seemed often to be associated, respectively, with 'internal' (case supervision from a senior practitioner, or management supervision, from the line manager, both of whom are part of the organisation) and 'external' supervision (with an expert supervisor outside the organisation).

A social worker expressed the feeling that internal supervision was really good, because we know each other's clients, and we also know how to deal with different things the next time they happen. (SW SWE)

This seems to suggest that as well as supervision per se, the collective or group elements were particularly helpful.

Another English worker suggested that internal supervision can also be linked to defining appropriate levels of autonomy in taking decisions and implementing them within the organisational context:

The internal version is good, because that is where you get your freedom of action. (SW ENG)
Comparing the two opportunities of having internal or external supervision, one Swedish social worker remarked:

I think the external is a bit over-rated. I could manage without it, but it depends of course also on who you go to. (SW SWE)

A different feeling, though hypothetical, as this is not an available system, is expressed by an English social worker:

You don’t want to tell your manager … sometimes you need to tell somebody who sits a bit outside ‘I’m feeling like this, should I feel like this’ and is that about me as an individual or is that about what I’m being exposed to in the workplace. (SW ENG)

In the interviews undertaken it was not clear that supervision generally can help to mediate between workers and management (see above), but external supervision seems to be better placed to discuss problems related to the organisation – even problems with managers – without fear of repercussions:

We talk about our boss, because it has been a problem … it has been important for us in our group to be able to leave office and talk to each other about how the situation is … (SW SWE)

It was also clear that for some workers, supervision is implicated in the ‘ethics of resilience’ (see above) – where does resilience overlap with ‘turning a blind eye’? It is also considered an important milestone in the process of retention.

If you haven’t got good supervision and management and all the rest of it, then I think you can stay too long and actually things that really and truthfully you should be saying, that are not acceptable, suddenly become kind of okay. (SW ENG)

Managers also recognised the importance of supervision:

The most important thing for me is to be a good supervisor. SWM ENG

It is like a sacred cow, …. I think every social service here in Sweden has it any other week … And you can’t take that away. (SWM SWE)

Supervision is part of processes of education, knowledge, experience and support. It may build on these. For example, some Italian managers suggested that supervision can fulfil its function only if social workers have acquired methodological skills and a sound professional identity. However, Italian workers’ views also suggested some ambivalence around supervision. Acknowledging a reluctance to be supervised individually, one worker said:

At that time there was some possibilities, there was some money, but my colleagues did not want because they considered it as a control, even if it was not. (SW IT)

Mostly though the absence of supervision was negative, and the issue of how social workers can continue to function as professionals in a situation where there is no access to supervision – frequently the case in Italy – was significant. Self-supporting strategies have been put in place:

the exchanges between us are important … also [even] if it is not a structured and formal space. (SW IT)

Friends, peers and significant work relationships

Research that demonstrates that friendships at work are important for well-being is available in a wide range of work contexts including social work. For example, in statutory social work colleagues were seen as the major source of support for most workers, with friends and family mentioned in some but not all studies (Collins, 2008). The findings from the participants of the present study demonstrated that ‘staying’ connected to the relationships they had. This is articulated as simply ‘that the relationship in itself is a positive force’ but also discussed by some in terms of the
complex range of dimensions that work relationships provided, for example, recognition, esteem, support and caring:

Why I think I’m still here today is that kind of feeling of support … peer to peer stuff … people having an awareness of you or kind of having recognition of what work you are doing and where you are at emotionally. (SW ENG)

Simply being part of a group was valued for the collective strength it could offer …

One thing to get a bigger resilience is that the group is a joint unit that makes the individual social worker feel strong: I am not alone in this I am part of a team we are doing this together. (SW SWE)

This might be expected. Mor Barak et al.’s Californian study, considering diversity and turnover in child and family welfare workers, found ‘the degree to which you are accepted and included is vital to the individuals’ physical and psychological well-being’ (2006, p. 554). Additionally, and as the Casita model of resilience (above) predicts, specific elements of work relationships were valued. Humour and ‘uplift’, for example, were at a premium:

If you are a strong team and support each other and that you can have humour and lift each other up emotionally it makes all the difference. (SW SWE)

Where other resources are lacking, the group can become adjunct to or even a replacement for organisational support:

The work group is crucial – ‘peers’ ‘friends’ for support and supervision – usually the only resource. The exchange between us is important when you can do it. (SW IT)

However, the importance of the work friendship was oft repeated, and, as an understanding of resilience might predict, it counted for a great deal. As a social worker in child protection of nearly 20 years’ experience expressed …

The friends I have now are the friends I had from work … (SW ENG)

**Conclusions**

This paper has discussed the reasons social workers and social work managers in England, Italy and Sweden give for workers to stay in child protection. The use of a small sample and semi-structured, dialogical interviews surfaced a great deal of rich data, but does not claim reliable comparisons, for example, between countries or different type of welfare states, though it was interesting to note the similarities, especially between England and Sweden, described in the sections above.

Organisational features here come out slightly differently from other studies. ‘Staying’ is not seen by workers as an absence of the pressures that those who leave cite, but because the job of child protection is in itself rewarding on both an individual and collective level. The possibility of doing something to improve people’s lives is exciting, but frustrating if resources cannot be accessed: an issue for policy-makers and local managers. If social workers have the tools (including the time for preventive and supportive work) for positive intervention, job satisfaction and motivation to remain are increased.

Good working relationships – friendships, etc. – were highlighted in the study. Whether these are organic or organisationally generated deserves further consideration. Mutually supportive and co-operative groups certainly connect to service delivery, but have personal elements too as our sample identified. There may be a role for the managers to create an ethos of friendliness and trust, and some opportunities for people to develop supportive relationships with colleagues.

Supervision is a good example of creating formal spaces for reflection, and the examples from this study pinpoint the rich potential for support within the supervisory situation. However ‘management supervision’ – for ensuring work standards, offering guidance and advice etc. – may need to underpin ‘supportive supervision’.
The research team used two existing theoretical frameworks to consider why workers might endure in these difficult areas of practice. From these, Rutter’s ‘remaining open to life opportunities’ and Venistendael’s ‘Casita’s attic room ‘for new experiences’ both link to the interviewees valuing unpredictable and stimulating work opportunities. Rutter’s ‘risk reduction’ very much relates to sound management, organisational clarity and support. ‘Development of self-esteem’ is found in both Rutter’s and Venistendael’s formulations of resilience, and certainly resonate with workers we interviewed. Relationships with others, the very ‘foundations’ in the ‘house’ model, were patently valued in our sample, for example, as a form of recognition (Frost, 2013). From the HSO research it is evident that the values underpinning the activities also are reasons for people to enter the field of child protection. Motivational aspects are for instance the relational content of work, where you deal with important moral questions of life (Johansson et al., 2015).

Overall our findings mostly reflect the contemporary trends in other studies: that organisational and relational matters play an important role. Creating resilience is a complex issue, drawing on both collective and individual features. Respondents stressed collective factors above individual. Stressing social worker’s personalities may obscure organisational and professional responsibilities for changing the status quo, an example of our understanding that resilience is by no means a neutral concept, and an ‘ethics of resilience’, as discussed above, needs to inform theory and practice.

The complexity of social workers’ decisions to stay in or leave child protection is crystallised when studying it from different national contexts, impacted by individual or collective strategies at the workplace within the context of country specific developments in policy and professionalisation. Further research might profitably address a whole range of unexamined factors, national and more universal, for example, what difference might gender make; what difference status? Over the last years new professional trajectories have developed, where social workers may look for jobs with more specialisation, professional discretion and individual autonomy, taking them away from statutory social services all together (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005; Evans & Harris, 2004; Kullberg 2011).

A final thought, then, for examination in a future study perhaps, is that whether there are alternatives, and how attractive they look, may also play a role in deciding to stay in child protection work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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