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Topping up the Tank: Enhancing the Emotional Resilience of Social Workers in Local Authority Adult Services

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2022
Abstract

The emotional resilience of social workers has increasingly been a focus of research, particularly in response to high levels of stress in the profession. Most of this research has been carried out in relation to social workers generically or those working within children’s services. There is a dearth of research into the emotional resilience of social workers in adult services, which this study aims to address.

Interviews were conducted with twenty-eight social workers based in local authority adult services to explore how they conceptualised emotional resilience and experienced it in the context of their professional roles. In addition, nine of these social workers completed diary entries to provide a ‘snapshot’ picture of resilience in their day-to-day working lives. A further eight interviews were carried out with social work managers to gain an overview of how resilience may be enhanced within teams and organisations. The findings suggest that social workers generally felt well equipped to manage the emotional nature of engaging with and supporting service users and saw this as the essence of their role. Organisational pressures and expectations were identified as a significant source of adversity such that working conditions often detracted from rather than enhanced emotional resilience.

Based on the findings of the study, a holistic framework of emotional resilience is presented comprising of the distinct domains of personal, relational, cultural and structural factors, while recognising that these domains are interwoven and mutually influential. A key finding from the study is the close connection between the emotional resilience of social workers and a commitment to carrying out their role within ethical and moral principles. Thus, professional integrity is identified as a concept which unites all of the four domains and underpins the resilience of social workers. It is argued that a more compassionate climate in adult social work, which promotes a relationship-based approach to practice and prioritises the welfare of service users and social workers, is integral to professional integrity and the nurturing of emotional resilience. Such a climate may enable social workers to move beyond conceptualisations of resilience as survival within stressful working environments towards notions of thriving and flourishing as they carry out their role in ethical and compassionate ways.
Lay Summary

The high level of stress and burnout experienced by social workers is well known and much researched. In the last decade or so, attention has been directed to the concept of emotional resilience in order to examine the factors that enable social workers to cope with the challenges and demands of their role. Most of this research has been carried out in relation to social workers generically or those working within children’s services. This study focuses specifically on social workers in adult services based in local authorities in Scotland.

The concept of emotional resilience broadly refers to the capacity to cope with adversity. Beyond this, there is a multitude of definitions and ways of conceptualising the term. General theories of resilience are explored in the thesis before examining the body of research on the resilience of social workers. In both the general literature and that relating to social work more specifically, the importance of context and the influence of external factors on resilient outcomes is increasingly highlighted in addition to more ‘internal’ and individualised aspects. In adopting a social constructionist approach, my study did not begin with a prescribed definition of emotional resilience but, instead, sought to identify how social workers in adult services conceptualised and experienced resilience in relation to their distinct professional roles.

The participants of the study, twenty-eight social workers and eight social work managers, generally reported that the term ‘emotional resilience’ was seldom used within their teams and organisations. However, in articulating their understanding of resilience as coping with the challenges and demands of their role, they offered definitions broadly in line with the literature. Metaphor was prevalent in the participants’ conceptualisations, and provided a rich illustration of how they experienced resilience in their professional lives. Importantly, through metaphors of resilience as solidity, elasticity, currency and fuel, its finite nature was conveyed with the clear message that there are limits to coping capacity in meeting the multiple and complex demands of social work practice.

The findings of the study suggest that adversity and resilience were experienced by the participants in a myriad of ways. These are categorised within the domains of personal, relational, cultural and structural factors, and depicted as a visual model entitled ‘A Holistic Framework of Emotional Resilience.’ The thesis explores each of the domains separately while recognising their mutually influential nature. Within the personal domain, factors such as personal perspective and notions of ‘self’ are explored as well as the links between resilience and emotional intelligence. The place of
relationships in the lives of social workers in adult services was a dominant theme in the data. The key relationships with service users, peers, managers and other professionals are discussed in terms of their contributions to both adversity and resilience. The cultural domain of resilience focuses on the impact of the managerialist culture that has come to characterise adult social work in Scotland and beyond. It builds on the relational domain by highlighting how the participants’ commitment to developing supportive relationships with service users was often experienced as being in conflict with organisational practices and the wider culture of social work with adults. This more ‘robotic’ environment, with its emphasis on organisational procedure and outcomes, was felt by the participants to have a detrimental impact on their resilience. The structural domain expands on the theme of managerialism by drawing attention to the demanding working conditions experienced by the participants, and demonstrates the extent to which adversity was felt to arise predominantly from organisational and bureaucratic pressures rather than from the emotional demands of the role.

Within the exploration of each domain, various ways to enhance resilience for social workers in adult services are identified. More broadly, the domains are set against a backdrop of professional integrity, reflecting the underlying importance to the participants of carrying out their role effectively and ethically. Primarily, this sense of integrity appeared to be intrinsically bound up in prioritising the relational aspects of practice, adopting more compassionate approaches and reflecting a sense of humanity. Thus, recommendations are made for policy, practice and further research which focus on nurturing such a climate of compassion and humanity, enabling social workers to better fulfil their professional role in ethical ways, and serving as a foundation on which their emotional resilience can flourish.
Acknowledgements

The process of undertaking a PhD was at times joyful, illuminating and inspiring, and at other times a painful limp to the finish line. Many people supported the journey directly and indirectly.

Firstly, a huge thank you to my supervisors, Dr George Palattiyil, Dr Jackie Gulland and Dr Pearse McCusker, who were an integral part of this journey, steering me through the process, providing expert guidance on all research-related matters and offering a great deal of knowledge, support and encouragement. The wider social work team at the University of Edinburgh was invaluable in offering wisdom, humour and kindness in abundance. I am immensely grateful for the employment opportunities I have been offered in the team, and could not have asked for a more welcoming group of people with whom to take my first tentative steps into academia. Thanks to Rona for regular informal supervision on the beach!

I have great appreciation for my old friend Sarah McMillan and new friend Cath Shaw for inviting me to talk about my research at various professional forums. This was significant in helping me make sense of my findings and stay connected with social work practitioners in the real world as I became buried in data. Thanks to Kirsty who was a significant source of support in her knowledge of the technicalities of undertaking a PhD (at times more complex than the PhD itself!), and to Carol for encouraging lunch breaks and generously giving her time to final hour proof reading.

Much appreciation goes to all my family and friends for taking an interest in my research or providing a welcome diversion. My Mum and sister, Jo, were as ever an invaluable and unconditional safety net of support. My Dad, a University of Edinburgh graduate himself, was sadly no longer alive when I began my PhD but I thought of him often throughout and felt a sense of fatherly support even in his absence. Thanks to Steve for patiently listening to me talk through my ideas, adding insights and reminding me that my own resilience was important, and to Julie for her characteristic curiosity, which often served as a prompt for my own thinking. The PhD process has been a long and, at times, anti-social one. I look forward to reconnecting with all those who I’ve missed along the way.

I am completely indebted to the social workers and managers who participated in this study. As well as appreciating the time they took out of their busy schedules to talk to me, I am hugely grateful for their willingness to articulate their experiences so candidly and was inspired by their commitment to the social work profession. I am acutely aware that the Covid-19 pandemic, unknown to us at the time, was lurking just around the corner. I cannot imagine the bucket loads of resilience it must have taken
to be a social worker during such extraordinary adversity. I wish them all well and sincerely hope that they have found opportunities to recover and replenish.

Lastly, a nod to the sea for providing a calming view in the later stages of writing this thesis as well as an invigorating bath to make me feel alive. There is much resilience to be found in the waves.

‘Time, like the sea, unties all knots’

Iris Murdoch

The Sea, the Sea
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1. INTRODUCTION

One day, in my eleventh year as a social worker in local authority adult services in Scotland, a colleague sitting opposite me looked up, sighed and said ‘this is relentless.’ These words summed up how I was feeling at the time and are, in part, the initial source of my motivation in undertaking this study. I had some fruitful experiences during my time as a social worker and found many aspects of the role interesting and rewarding. Increasingly, however, my observations were of teams of social workers largely very dedicated to supporting service users but often struggling with the volume and complexity of the work. Absence due to stress was common and seemed to be considered an endemic and accepted characteristic of social work teams. Along with many of my colleagues, I began to flounder in this challenging climate and ultimately made a decision to move on from local authority social work. This was influenced primarily by the recognition that sustaining my own health and wellbeing, and continuing to be an effective practitioner, did not seem possible in these circumstances.

Nonetheless, while many of my colleagues struggled in a similar way, I was aware that others were somehow able to sustain themselves in the face of this seemingly relentless pressure. This inspired a curiosity about the factors that enabled them to cope. Towards the end of my time in local authority social work practice, I had become interested in ideas from eastern philosophy, which offered insights that moved beyond the focus on stress management prevalent in social work towards more positive notions of thriving and flourishing. I began to wonder how social workers might be enabled not just to cope and ‘survive’ in their role but, perhaps, to thrive. Increasingly, I came across the concept of emotional resilience, which seemed to capture the very essence of thriving and flourishing. This initial spark of curiosity led me to explore the emotional resilience of social workers as the topic of a Master’s degree dissertation in 2016. This small scale project generated some ideas and insights that I was keen to explore further, and which then developed into the doctoral research presented in this thesis.

1.1 The Experiences of Social Workers: Challenges and Job Satisfaction

Both personal experience and published literature suggest that social work is a profession of some complexity. Social workers are engaged in supporting service users and carers who are often in situations of distress and crisis, and who may have experienced trauma. This places workers at risk of burnout, defined by the World Health Organisation (2019) as an ‘occupational phenomenon’
characterised by exhaustion, negativity, cynicism and reduced efficacy. There are additional risks of compassion fatigue involving a decreased capacity to feel empathy and concern for others accompanied by a sense of hopelessness (Fahy, 2007; Grant and Kinman, 2013; van Heugten, 2011), and secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma, which may arise from being exposed to the trauma narratives of service users (Branson, 2019; Fahy, 2007).

It is not only engagement with service users that can contribute to the demands on social workers; the broader context of social work also presents challenges. At the turn of the century, in Scotland where my study is based, a review was commissioned into social work services which culminated in the ‘Changing Lives’ report (Scottish Executive, 2006). The report emphasised the transformational change occurring within the country particularly in terms of an aging population and, overall, a greater demand on services. It acknowledged a myriad of challenges within the profession including ineffective bureaucratic procedures, the pressure of heavy caseloads, a burgeoning risk averse approach and the damaging nature of cultures of blame. Ten years later, a further report by Audit Scotland (2016) highlighted very similar challenges and conveyed the stark message that ‘current approaches to delivering social work services will not be sustainable in the long term’ (p.5). A funding increase of between sixteen and twenty-one percent was called for, however, according to a later report by Unison Scotland (2019), this call had not been heeded. My study was carried out prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the government-imposed lockdown beginning in March 2020, however the pandemic has further highlighted some of these challenges with reports that the adult care sector has been neglected in favour of support and funding for the National Health Service (Campbell, 2021; Picken and Ellerson, 2021; Unison, 2020).

Given this background, social workers are ‘highly vulnerable to work-related stress’ (Kinman and Grant, 2011, p.271) and experience high levels of burnout compared to other occupations (Collins, 2008; Grant et al., 2014b). In a study of social services workers conducted by Unison Scotland (2019), seventy-nine percent of respondents scored their stress level as seven or above on a scale of one to ten, and almost fifty-nine percent rated morale in their teams as poor or very poor. The survey included all staff in social work teams, not only qualified social workers, but overall it highlights a working climate under considerable pressure. A study of working conditions in the UK in 2018 based on survey data from 3221 social workers, found that self-reported stress levels were higher than a similar study carried out in 2017 and were related to workload demands, inadequate managerial support, lack of role clarity, limited control and decision-making, poor communication regarding organisational change and ‘negative’ service user behaviour (Ravalier and Boichat, 2018). The study
also found that, of all employment sectors in the UK, health and social care had the highest rate of sickness absence due to stress and other mental health concerns.

Despite this professional landscape, many social workers profess fulfilment and positive feelings arising from the relationships they form with services users (BASW, 2018; BASW NI et al., 2020) and the difference they can make in people’s lives (Bunce et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2021; van Heugten, 2011; Wendt et al., 2011). A study in Scotland (SSSC, 2017) found that eighty-one percent of social workers enjoyed their jobs although job satisfaction appeared to decrease for those who had been in the profession for ten years or more, perhaps indicating the cumulative effects of work-related challenges. Findings from the SSSC study (ibid.) did portray a mixed picture, however, with one fifth of social workers saying that they would be likely to leave their job in the next five years unless improvements were seen in caseloads, management support, pay and work/life balance.

1.2 Resilience in Social Work: The Research Background

Given the climate of social work outlined, exploring issues of stress and poor staff retention is crucial in order to address burnout and support the overall wellbeing of social workers. Additionally, it is useful to consider why some social workers do not experience high levels of stress despite challenging working conditions. In other words, what are the factors that enable social workers to thrive? This approach is mirrored in social work practice, in which strengths-based perspectives have long been a popular method of intervention with service users (Payne, 2014) and appeared as a way of balancing psychotherapeutic approaches, which adopt a more deficit-orientated focus (Guo and Tsui, 2010). The concept of resilience emerged in a similar way; studies which focused on poor psychosocial outcomes for children who had experienced adversity unexpectedly found that many fared well despite these experiences (McMurray et al., 2008). Although earlier ideas of resilience suggested extraordinary invulnerability or invincibility, more current thinking depicts it as common (Masten, 2001) and not only observed in ‘rare and exceptionally healthy individuals’ (Bonanno, 2004, p.20). Nonetheless, while all individuals and communities have the potential to be resilient, it is not necessarily ‘automatic, absolute or stable’ (de las Olas Palma-Garcia and Hombrados-Mendieta, 2017, p.19). Indeed, there may be a great deal of variation in responses to adversity; some people experience no negative effects at all, or only for a short period of time before recovering, while others are negatively affected for longer (Seery et al., 2010).
As a concept, resilience can be difficult to define and has become, according to van Breda (2018), ‘an empty word that can be filled with almost any meaning’ (p.2). However, there does appear to be agreement in the broader literature that it is fundamentally concerned with successful coping and adaptation in relation to adverse experiences (e.g. Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001; Padesky and Mooney, 2012; Seery et al., 2010). With resilience, adversity can be managed without significantly negative outcomes or feelings of distress (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000) or, rather less specifically, with a ‘relatively good outcome’ (Rutter, 1999, p.119). This is very much in line with concepts from physics which depict resilience as ‘the ability of a substance to return to its usual shape after being bent, stretched, or pressed’ (Cambridge English Dictionary, no date). But while the process of being bent, stretched or pressed might be quite evident in the physical world, it is more elusive in relation to emotional experience and, beyond the broad definitions presented, it is a much discussed and contested concept. Before proceeding to unravel some of these complexities in Chapter Two, it is important to note that in some of the literature referred to, the term ‘resilience’ or ‘psychological resilience’ is used as well as ‘emotional resilience.’ Any literature which explores resilience in relation to emotional wellbeing is deemed relevant to my study whatever the particular term used. While my preferred term in this thesis is ‘emotional resilience’, which reflects an explicit focus on the emotional wellbeing of social workers, ‘resilience’ will also be used for ease.

It is noted by some theorists that ideas of resilience first began to influence the social work profession in relation to service user groups, predominantly children and young people and, to a lesser extent, adult service users (Cairns, 2002; Collins, 2007; Crowder and Sears, 2017; Daniel and Wassell, 2002; Pooley and Cohen, 2010). Fifteen years ago, the ‘Changing Lives’ report on generic social work services proposed that ‘the social worker’s task is to work alongside people to help them build resilience, maintain hope and optimism and develop their strengths and abilities’ (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.26). A later report, building on the findings of ‘Changing Lives’, asserts that ‘to work in social services you need to be resilient - complexity is part of everyday practice and there are no simple solutions’ (Scottish Government, 2015, p.24). In this later report, the rhetoric of resilience is directly applied to the workforce and, in the spirit of metaphorically fitting one’s own oxygen mask before helping others (Greer, 2016), it makes sense that for social workers to support the wellbeing of service users, they first need to attend to their own.

Significantly, the concept of resilience is now formally referenced in the ‘Standards in Social Work Education’ in Scotland (SSSC, 2019a), which require social work students to evidence the implementation of ‘strategies to develop personal and professional resilience in order to manage uncertainty, change and stress’ (p.21). It does not elaborate on the nature of these strategies, other
than specifying the merits of professional supervision, leaving this somewhat open to interpretation. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research exploring the resilience of social workers and highlighting the ways in which it can be developed (e.g. Adamson et al., 2014; Collins, 2007, 2017; Crowder and Sears, 2017; Grant and Kinman, 2013; Grant et al., 2021; Greer, 2016; Kearns and McArdle, 2012; Kinman and Grant, 2011, 2017; McFadden et al., 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Much of this research has focused on the social work profession generically or, in particular, those working in children’s services, perhaps reflecting the fact that this area of social work is often viewed as particularly complex and challenging (Kinman and Grant, 2017). While useful, this potentially masks the impact of other specific roles within the broad sphere of social work. Although there has been some recent attention paid to the wellbeing of health and social care staff in light of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic (McFadden et al., 2021), there is no research, to my knowledge, which explores emotional resilience in relation to social workers in adult services whether in Scotland or further afield. It is this gap which I aim to address, and which reflects my own professional background and interests.

1.3 Adult Social Work in Scotland: Law, Policy and Regulation

To set the context of social work practice with adults, it is important to understand the wider legal and policy background. In Scotland, where my study is based, it is the responsibility of local authorities to provide statutory social work services. These are structured into the three main disciplines of Adult Services, Children and Families, and Justice Services, each with a distinct role and tasks, although the framework for social work education is generic and sets out the relevant knowledge, skills and values pertaining to all three (Scottish Government, 2003). In relation to social work with adults, it is helpful to briefly track its influences from the point at which the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 outlined the requirement of local authorities to ‘promote social welfare by making available advice, guidance and assistance’ (Sec.12). The National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 made amendments to the 1968 Act in placing greater responsibility on local authorities for the care of adults in the community. It stipulates that everyone ‘in need’ is entitled to a social work assessment to be carried out by the local authority although it remains the decision of the authority regarding ‘whether the needs of the person being assessed call for the provision of’ community care services (Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, Sec.12 (A)). It thus became the role of the social worker in adult services to carry out community care assessments and arrange packages of care for individuals in order to meet their identified needs. With the introduction of the 1990 Act came a shift in the culture of social work towards one of managerialism characterised by more ‘contractual’ rather than therapeutic
relationships with service users (Howe, 1996). This creates potential challenges to the value base of social workers who prioritise relationship-building in their role (Morley et al., 2019; Ruch, 2012, 2018).

The focus on support in the community and the closure of long stay institutions, introduced by the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, was arguably the first step in the direction of ‘personalisation’ which has since become a priority for the delivery of social work services in Scotland. The Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 formally brought the ethos of personalisation into social work and aims to give service users more control and autonomy over decisions about how they receive care and support. Under this legislation, service users are assessed by a social worker and a budget is allocated if the person is deemed eligible for local authority funded support. This budget can be managed in several ways, including direct payments being made to service users to organise and manage their care (Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, Sec.4). However, at the same time as the personalisation agenda was in full swing, the UK found itself in a time of austerity with limited budgets for social work services and significant savings required to be made (Unison Scotland, 2014).

In order to manage these scarce resources, in 2009 the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) agreed a set of ‘eligibility criteria’ for local authority social work services based on a model of risk. Under this policy there are four levels of eligibility: critical risk, substantial risk, moderate risk and low risk (Scottish Government, 2014, p.19). The guidance for local authorities provided by the Scottish Government is not prescriptive in applying these criteria and instead gives individual authorities discretion. Some local authorities in Scotland have made a decision to provide services only to people who meet the criterion of ‘critical’, defined as ‘major risks to an individual’s independent living or health and well-being and likely to call for the immediate or imminent provision of social care services’, or ‘substantial’ which refers to ‘significant risks to an individual’s independence or health and wellbeing and likely to call for the immediate or imminent provision of social care services’ (Scottish Government, 2014, p.19). Therefore, while the ethos of self-directed support may aptly reflect social work values of service user empowerment and self-determination, criticisms have been levelled at local authorities for using it to impose budget cuts in a time of austerity thereby creating potential ethical conflict for social workers involved in implementing it in practice (Pearson et al., 2018).

A backdrop to this focus on risk is the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 which places significant duties on local authority social work departments to safeguard the welfare of adults. Under this legislation, the investigation of adult protection concerns is now a key role of social work although
with a focus on multidisciplinary approaches to risk management (Scottish Executive, 2006). While the Act provides a more structured framework for the responsibilities of social work departments welcomed by many practitioners, tensions can arise in balancing the autonomy of service users with intervention to address risk and harm (Mackay et al., 2012). The Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000 provides some clarity on the issue of autonomy and protection by formalising the right of local authorities, or designated individuals, to safeguard the welfare of adults who are deemed not to have the capacity to safeguard themselves. Overall, the social work role in protecting vulnerable adults has been said to create a culture of increased accountability and blame in social work, which can lead to risk averse practice (Gilbert and Powell, 2010; Hardy, 2021). Again, there are some potentially complex ethical dilemmas that social workers are required to navigate in practice.

A significant change for local authority adult services has come about in the formal integration of health and social care. This is set out in the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014 and has entailed the creation of thirty-one ‘integration authorities’ in Scotland. The legislation requires councils and NHS boards to plan and deliver services jointly, as detailed in Part One of the Act, with the aim of providing more consistent care in recognition of the interwoven nature of health and social care needs. There is scope for many benefits in terms of the effectiveness of service delivery, with an overall commitment to the delivery of higher quality services (Audit Scotland, 2018). Nonetheless, the integration of health and social care has been reported to make the governance of social work services more complex, erode the distinct professional identity of social work (Audit Scotland, 2016) and give rise to misunderstandings concerning different professional roles (Pearson and Watson, 2018; Tazzyman et al., 2021). The pressure on social care during the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the demands of meeting the health needs of the population, has heightened awareness of the need for change. A recent review into adult social care has recommended quite radical changes in the form of a new ‘National Care Service’ in parallel with the existing National Health Service (Feeley, 2021).

Social workers in adult services are required to practice within this legal and policy framework as well as in a wider context of professional values and ethics. In Scotland, all social workers must register with the Scottish Social Services Council and, in doing so, agree to abide by a set of prescribed Codes of Practice (SSSC, 2016). The Codes broadly relate to a range of responsibilities held by social workers regarding their personal accountability and conduct with service users, carers and other professionals, a commitment to organisational policy and procedure, the promotion of public trust in the profession, and the development of relevant knowledge and skills. The value base of social work is highly relevant since, as will become apparent later in this thesis, the emotional resilience of social workers in adult services appears to be intrinsically bound up in notions of ethical practice.
1.4 The Study: Rationale and Aims

From the discussion thus far, it is apparent that social work entails demands and challenges that can negatively impact on the wellbeing of workers. Based on my curiosity about how some social workers appear to cope nonetheless, I was keen to adopt a strengths-based approach in my study. The notion of resilience appeared to offer a conceptual tool for avoiding the deficit model that a focus on stress can evoke, and exploring, instead, more positive notions of thriving and flourishing. Fletcher and Sarker (2013) point out that the need to cope and adapt is often associated with negative events, however, apparently positive events such as a marriage or work promotion may also require adaptation. This might be very pertinent to social workers many of whom, as outlined, enjoy their jobs and feel positive about making a difference in people’s lives but often experience high levels of stress and burnout. In the professional sphere, an association has been shown between resilience, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, leading to better performance overall (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Resilient social workers, then, may be more likely to experience a greater sense of wellbeing and job satisfaction as well as more effectively carry out their role and tasks. Despite the apparent benefits to considering the resilience of social workers, however, there are significant critiques of the concept and its use within the realm of social work as well as more generally. Criticism centres around the emphasis on individualised notions of resilience without consideration of the organisational, structural and political influences that shape people’s lives and may contribute towards their experiences of adversity (Collins, 2017; Garrett, 2015). Given the organisational demands on social workers outlined earlier in the chapter, and the prevalence of burnout as an organisational phenomena, this critique is an important one to address.

As stated, there has been an increasing research focus on the resilience of social workers over the past decade or so, which has made important contributions to addressing the challenges of social work practice and promoting wellbeing. None of this, however, has focused on adult social work as a particular area of practice. My main aim in this study is to address this gap, and examine how social workers in adult services may sustain and enhance their emotional resilience, and to understand the wider contextual factors that can be seen to create adversity or support resilience. In particular, it sought to explore:

- How social workers understand the concept of ‘emotional resilience’
- How emotional resilience, as a concept and experience, is discussed among social workers
- How social workers personally develop and sustain emotional resilience in relation to their professional roles
• How the culture and practices of social work teams and organisations support or inhibit emotional resilience
• How emotional resilience can be further nurtured in the workplace

This thesis presents my findings from empirical research addressing these questions by means of data gathered from social workers and social work managers employed in adult services within local authorities in Scotland. Interviews were carried out with twenty-eight social workers and diary entries collected from nine of them in order to explore their understanding and experience of resilience in the context of their professional roles. In addition, eight social work managers were interviewed to examine the ways in which resilience could be supported and enhanced within teams and organisations.

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature is presented in order to gain a greater understanding of how resilience is conceptualised generally and in relation to social work. The chapter concludes by refining the definition of emotional resilience in order to set the context for an analysis of the concept as conveyed by the research participants in my study. In Chapter Three, the overall research design is presented by outlining the research paradigm and strategy, and justifying my chosen methods of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are discussed as well as the limitations and practical challenges of the study. My own position as a former social worker necessitates a degree of reflexivity therefore the impact of my identity on the research process is examined. Chapter Four provides an introduction to the research findings by setting out the participants’ conceptual and experiential understanding of resilience, and drawing these together to present a holistic framework for developing emotional resilience across four different domains, identified as ‘personal’, ‘relational’, ‘cultural’ and ‘structural.’ Chapters Five to Eight address each of these domains in turn while recognising that they are often intertwined and mutually influential. The thesis concludes in Chapter Nine by summarising the key messages from the research findings, and identifying implications for policy, practice and further research in the hope that this may contribute towards sustaining and enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers.
2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Some brief definitions of resilience have already been presented but, beyond these, there is much debate about the nature of resilience and the part it plays in sustaining emotional wellbeing. This chapter examines theories of resilience as formulated by various scholars from the disciplines of psychology, sociology and philosophy, and from those who reject traditional notions of the concept and argue for a less individualised perspective. After presenting a methodology for the review of literature, the multi-dimensional nature of resilience is explored followed by a more in-depth examination of its two main facets; ‘adversity’ and ‘coping.’ Consideration is given to the extent to which resilience may be seen as the maintenance of emotional stability and functioning or, alternatively, as recovery. The idea of recovery, as expressed in the metaphor ‘bouncing back’, is extended to include notions of ‘bouncing forwards’, encompassing the potential to flourish and thrive rather than merely survive. Moving from the individual experience of resilience to examine the wider context, a ‘systems’ approach to resilience is discussed, incorporating critiques that the concept has been depoliticised and attention diverted from structural factors that may create adversity. The second half of the chapter relates the concept of emotional resilience to social workers. Research in this area is explored, again considering individual factors as well as the wider context, in this case the teams and organisations in which social work is practised. Some of the emotional demands of engaging with service users are discussed alongside the impact of workplace culture and working conditions. The chapter ends with a summary of how the various perspectives on resilience presented in the literature have informed and shaped my own study.

2.2 Methodology of the Literature Review

Before embarking on an empirical study, it is important to develop an understanding of research that has already been done in the chosen field of enquiry and what is already known about the topic (Hart, 2018; Silverman, 2021). I was originally introduced to the concept of emotional resilience for social workers in an article entitled “Bouncing Back? Personal Representations of Resilience of Student and Experienced Social Workers’ by Grant and Kinman (2013), who have done extensive research on the topic. The reference list in their article led me to consult various other established resilience scholars such as Fletcher and Sarker, Masten, Rutter and Ungar. From there
a ‘snowballing’ process led me to a great many other relevant sources and gave me a deeper insight into the topic. In addition, certain material came to my attention through involvement in research forums and from colleagues.

To complement this with a more structured approach to reviewing the literature and to ensure that I had a solid grounding in existing knowledge on the topic, I undertook a narrative review. This approach is appropriate for inductive, interpretative studies such as my own that seek to generate theoretical insights (Bryman, 2012). I checked the ‘database by subject’ guidance on the University library’s website to establish the databases commonly used in social work research. This led me to conduct literature searches using ASSIA (Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts), DiscoverEd (the University library database), Google Scholar, IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences) and Social Care Online. The results of these searches are shown in Appendix 1 indicating the time periods for undertaking them, which were prior to and following the data collection for my study; until 2018, and from 2019 to 2021 respectively.

Literature reviews should be guided by the research questions (Bryman, 2012), therefore I began by using the search terms ‘emotional resilience’ and ‘social work’ or ‘social worker.’ Due to the paucity of initial results, it became apparent that the prefix ‘emotional’ is often substituted for ‘psychological’ or omitted altogether. I therefore modified the search term to ‘resilience’ which proved a great deal more useful in returning relevant sources. In addition, I added the term ‘practitioner’ and ‘professional’ to capture more sources that focused on resilience in relation to social workers. Other parameters set for the search were that articles should be peer reviewed and written in English.

After identifying articles that met the search criteria, I screened the abstracts and used various further criteria for eligibility. Many of the sources identified using the key search terms focused on the resilience of social work service user groups. These were not deemed eligible on the basis that they address issues very distinct to that of resilience in the professional social work role. As there appears to have been no research on the resilience of social workers in adult services specifically, highlighting a gap that I address in this study, eligible sources included material on the resilience of social workers engaged with other service user groups. Much of the research has been conducted in relation to social workers generally or those in children’s services. While the latter is a different role to that of social work with adults, as explained in Chapter One, the three disciplines of social work in Scotland share a generic qualifying programme and can therefore be assumed to have commonalities. I chose to include articles on the resilience of social work students for much
the same reason. Students are likely to be exposed to some of the same challenges as qualified social workers, especially as a significant part of their training involves field work within social work organisations and in direct contact with service users. Evidently, they are also the social workers of tomorrow and will soon bring their own understanding and experience of adversity and resilience to the workforce.

Although the role of a social worker may differ somewhat between countries, there appears to be sufficient similarity in context, role and tasks to consider internationally published material to be of interest, therefore this was also included. Generally, literature relating to professions outside of social work was excluded due to the level of perceived variance between roles. Exceptions were made when the content was specifically relevant. For example, various studies on the impact of yoga and mindfulness on nurses were useful in supplementing material from the social work field. The resilience of social work professionals is a relatively recent area of study with most of the literature dating from 2000 onwards therefore the timeframe of publication was not a criteria for eligibility.

Most of the eligible articles were included in the final sample, however, there was some duplication across databases. A small number of articles were excluded if they were deemed not to address the research question. This related primarily to literature relating to social work education and students where the focus was on academic stress as opposed to the emotional impact of social work practice.

Narrative reviews can be an ‘uncertain process of discovery’ (Bryman, 2012, p.110) since topics and themes arise in relation to the overall subject of enquiry that may not have been anticipated. As my review of the literature on resilience progressed, I developed a thematic map (Appendix 2) of the key themes and topics in the literature that related to my research questions, and subsequently during the data analysis process. As my research questions explicitly focused on organisational factors of resilience, this was an additional theme known and explored from the outset. New themes were identified from the literature, such as emotional intelligence and emotional labour, which merited exploration. Yet more themes, most notably professional integrity, took on relevance as my fieldwork progressed. I re-examined the literature in order to gain a sense of the overall concept as well as its relationship to resilience. Again, in some cases, following up references in articles led to a snowballing process, which enabled me to expand my understanding. In addition, more systematic searches were carried out using the methods described above to gather sources exploring the relationship between social work, resilience and each key theme.
2.3 Theories of Emotional Resilience

Multi-dimensional resilience

There is much discussion in the literature about whether resilience is a trait, skill, resource, process, outcome or a combination of these (Fletcher and Sarker, 2013; Pooley and Cohen, 2010). In response to the question of whether resilience is a personality trait, Masten (2014) comments that ‘this perennial issue should be put to rest. The answer is no’ (p.14). According to Howe (2008), it is not about innate strength of character and no-one has ‘across-the-board resilience’ (p.106). These comments do not necessarily deny that resilience involves personality traits at all but assert that there are other key components. Indeed, many theorists do include personality traits as one facet of resilience among others. Rajan-Rankin (2014) states that resilience is the ‘individual’s adaptive response to adversity, stress-resistant personality traits and the ability to ‘bounce back’ (p.2426), and so, too, is it seen in Grotberg’s resilience framework for children (1995 cited in Kearns and McArdle, 2012, p.386).

- ‘I have’ - resources, opportunities, relationships, stability
- ‘I am’ - characteristics, attitudes, sense of self, identity
- ‘I can’ - skills, abilities.

It is interesting that the ‘I am’ domain in Grotberg’s framework is broader than personality traits encompassing, in addition, attitudes and identity. Youssef and Luthans (2007) suggest that constructs of positive affect and behaviour, which contribute towards resilience, should be seen as neither a fixed trait nor a variable state but instead existing somewhere on a trait-state continuum. In this way, a sense of humour, for example, might be seen as a combination of personal traits and variable states or attitudes. Furthermore, the idea of inherent personality traits is increasingly challenged by a growing understanding of neuroplasticity which proposes that, due to the capacity of the brain to be shaped by experience, one’s traits are malleable rather than static (Luders et al., 2009). While the influence of life experiences may be embedded so deeply in us that they appear to be inherent personality traits, neuroplasticity suggests that there is, in fact, the potential to change.

Grant and Kinman (2013), in a review of resilience theory, present a list of factors demonstrating its multi-dimensional nature. Some factors are concerned with a sense of self; self-esteem, self-awareness, autonomy, a positive self-concept and a strong sense of identity. Self-esteem, in particular, is argued by Carver et al. (1989) to be important for resilience given that people with lower self-esteem tend to blame themselves more, experience higher levels of distress and use more disengagement strategies, all of which undermine resilience. Also considered to be significant, according to Grant and
Kinman’s review, are more general attitudes such as optimism, hope, humour, positivity, enthusiasm, flexibility, adaptability to change, openness to new experiences, orientation to the future, a sense of purpose and deriving meaning from challenges. Certain skills are associated with resilience such as critical thinking, emotional literacy, learning from experience and the ability to set limits. Social skills that nurture effective relationships are seen as important, as is the ability to use coping strategies and internal and external resources for support, and to plan and creatively problem solve. Some further factors not included in Grant and Kinman’s list are identified by de las Olas Palma-Garcia and Hombrados-Mendieta (2017); self-confidence, independence, determination, ingenuity, perseverance and a ‘stable life view’ which they define as the ability to accept circumstances without distress (p.22).

There is further debate over whether resilience is a process or an outcome. According to van Breda (2018), this dichotomy creates an ‘unnatural split’ (p.4) since adversity, outcomes and the mediating factors between the two are all, in his view, essential components of resilience. He suggests that a consideration of the process by which positive outcomes to adversity occur can enlighten our understanding of the contributing factors. Other scholars have similarly combined process and outcome in their presentation of resilience theory. Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) see it as ‘a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma’ (p.858). Crane and Searle (2016) take a broader view and propose that resilience can be understood in terms of three distinct roles; direct effect, moderating and mediating. Its direct effect promotes positive emotional wellbeing in spite of adverse experiences. Its moderating role acts as a buffer by reducing or eliminating the negative emotions felt in response to stressors. In its mediating role, resilience is enhanced or depleted by stressors and, in turn, affects the amount of negative emotion felt. So, it could be argued that resilience in adverse situations leads to wellbeing, or at least the absence of distress, in which case it is a process by which a positive outcome is achieved. Alternatively, resilience could be seen as a component of wellbeing and in this way is more akin to an outcome of managing adversity effectively. A combination of these perspectives might suggest that resilience and wellbeing are both an outcome and a process such that resilience creates greater wellbeing which in turn increases resilience and so on. In this sense, both resilience and wellbeing are involved in the process of enhancing the other and are also outcomes of one another.

**Perceptions of adversity**

As the broad definition of resilience refers to coping with adversity, it seems pertinent to explore the two distinct concepts of ‘coping’ and ‘adversity.’ Adversity can be either acute or chronic and has ‘the
potential to disrupt or challenge adaptive functioning and development’ (Yates et al., 2015, p.774). It involves ‘negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment difficulties’ (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000, p.858). Statistical significance can be useful in providing validated measures of outcomes however, as my study is not a quantitative one, it is important to consider other ways of understanding adversity. Additionally, statistical measures do not always capture the variety and richness of experience and what might be learned from the different ways in which people cope and adjust to circumstance. In this sense, adversity may be considered subjective with situations being defined as adverse by virtue of one experiencing it as such. Indeed, some resilience theorists, such as Rutter (1993), explicitly include the role of situational appraisal in their accounts of resilience.

Addressing the subjective experience of adversity and suffering is at the heart of various philosophical, psychological and spiritual approaches to wellbeing. Stoicism, a philosophical movement that began in the fourth century BC is often misinterpreted as entailing an absence of emotion (Graver, 2007; Robertson, 2010). Instead, Stoic philosophers propose that emotion arises from judgement, and a Stoic response involves the capacity to ‘practice fortitude in the face of blows of fate’ (Costello, 2014, p.16). The philosopher Epictetus, here quoted by Holiday and Hanselman (2016, p.112), states that ‘it isn’t events themselves that disturb people, but only their judgements about them.’ Holiday (2016) suggests that a Stoic approach, in which personal responses to external stimuli are controlled, enables us to realise that strong emotional reactions are ‘a luxury, an indulgence of our lesser self’ (p.73). He uses the example of astronauts who are often required to control their emotions to navigate their way through life and death matters. Following on from this example, he suggests responding to a challenging situation by reminding ourselves we are not going to die as a result of it. This may be reassuring but, given that most of the time we are not astronauts in space or in similarly precarious situations, such a depiction of resilience seems to over-emphasise survival with less scope for experiences of thriving and flourishing that are, perhaps, more pertinent to everyday life. In addition, it relies on the premise that logic can override emotion and that these are separate entities, in contrast to the notion that emotion and reason are interdependent, which I will return to later in this thesis.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has its roots in Stoicism and focuses on identifying the relationship between thought, feeling and action with the aim of exposing and addressing problematic thought patterns and behaviour (Robertson, 2010). It, too, asserts that the perception of events can be altered to promote wellbeing and suggests that, as cognition influences emotion, cognitive reframing of a situation can change the emotion one attaches to it (ibid.). In the context of resilience, a strengths-based cognitive behavioural therapy has been developed by Padesky and Mooney (2012),
which aims to develop positive qualities in order to bolster resilience rather than focusing on the alleviation of distress or problem-solving. Areas of existing strength in everyday life are highlighted, and individuals are encouraged to recognise their resilience in these areas so that they can apply them to the more challenging aspects of their lives. The authors comment that this constitutes a win-win situation.

If things go well, they win. If things do not go well, they have another chance to ‘win’ by being resilient. This perspective often enables clients to embrace challenges and can help them overcome avoidance.

(Padesky and Mooney, 2012, p.288)

Several other theories of resilience emphasise a similar point in suggesting that resilience can be enhanced through the experience of coping successfully with adversity (Park and Folkman, 1997; Seery et al., 2010).

Buddhist philosophy shares some of the principles of Stoicism in highlighting that suffering arises from a person’s response to external experiences. It is fundamentally concerned with the alleviation of suffering caused by confusion regarding the nature of reality. This confusion is centred on the apparently misguided belief that all things are permanent and objectively real when they are, in fact, temporary and transient. The nature of this confusion is thought to give rise to strong attraction and aversion to particular phenomena or experiences (Edelglass and Garfield, 2009). An example is the response to bereavement, which is typically seen in a Western context as a ‘problem of the loss’, whereas from a Buddhist perspective it is a ‘problem of aversion to the loss’ (Djikic, 2014, p.3). In other words, the suffering arising from the loss is one of perspective and a lack of acceptance regarding the essentially temporary nature of existence. This appears to be in contrast to the main tenets of attachment theory, which presents emotional bonds between people as a fundamental need with far reaching consequences to wellbeing if significant attachments are threatened or severed by death or other forms of separation, especially in childhood (e.g. Bowlby, 1969). That aside, the notion that we may become attached to ideas, perceptions and perspectives that ultimately cause us suffering is a compelling one and this may, in part, explain why practices originating from Buddhism, such as mindfulness and meditation, have gained popularity in recent years. These practices offer techniques that aim to lessen the suffering caused by attraction and aversion by means of attention to present experience, and acceptance and openness to unpleasant feelings (Dorjee, 2010). Other embodied and contemplative practices such as yoga may have similar effects (Karmalkar, 2017; Loizzo, 2018; Spence, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). The use of such practices in developing emotional resilience is a theme that will be returned to throughout this thesis.
If it seems unrealistic to change one’s perception in the face of difficult experiences, there are numerous examples of people who have achieved exactly that. Listening to a BBC recording (2019) of Terry Waite speaking about his five years as a hostage in Beirut, often in solitary confinement, I was struck by how he used this as a learning experience while not underplaying the severity of his situation. The conditions that he endured entailed a level of adversity unimaginable to many of us, with little control over any aspect of his life and confronting the possibility of his own death on a daily basis. Yet, in captivity he learned how to manage his anger and to live more in the present, somehow finding a sense of peace. Victor Frankl’s famous book, Man’s Search for Meaning (Frankl, 1992), is an account of his time as a prisoner in a concentration camp during the Second World War. This experience profoundly shaped his views on the capacity of people to cope in extreme situations.

> Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

(Frankl, 1992, p.74)

Again, his experience is one that few of us could contemplate and he evidently demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of such extreme adversity.

Conceptually, the emphasis on perception and appraisal in relation to resilience is a complex one. If resilience is fundamentally about coping with adverse events, it could be seen as redundant if we can change our perception to avoid experiencing events as adverse in the first place. Put simply, if we are not experiencing adversity, there is no need to be resilient. An alternative view is that the ability to alter our perception and appraisal of events is an aspect of resilience itself. In this sense, changing one’s perception may negate the need for resilience in the aftermath of an adverse event but does itself constitute an aspect of resilience, albeit one employed at an earlier stage. Thus, the event may be considered adverse in the sense that it would potentially cause distress in the absence of resilience. Fletcher and Sarker (2013) note that some resilience scholars go even further and seek to make a distinction between ‘resilience’ and ‘coping.’

> Resilience is characterized by its influence on one’s appraisal prior to emotional and coping responses and by its positive, protective impact, whereas coping is characterized by its response to a stressful encounter and by its varying effectiveness in resolving outstanding issues.

(Fletcher and Sarker, 2013, p.16)

In this depiction of resilience, its core feature is situational appraisal, and concepts of coping, though no less important, are considered notionally different.
Coping

Although a change in perception may be an important facet of resilience, it seems unrealistic to assume that this will always be successful and that no events will be experienced as adverse. Furthermore, it relies on the premise that perceptions of adversity are entirely subjective and therefore open to positive reframing. This negates the fact that there can be anecdotal agreement about what constitutes adversity as well as, to again quote Luthar and Cicchetti (2000), events which are ‘statistically associated with adjustment difficulties’ (p.858). When positive reframing eludes us, coping strategies may come to the fore. Indeed, in contrast to those who see coping as a concept distinct from resilience, others view it as intrinsic. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert that coping is a core aspect of resilience and distinguish between ‘problem-focused coping’, which aims to address the source of stress, and ‘emotion-focused coping’, which manages the emotional distress arising from the situation. In contrast, Carver et al. (1989) maintain that focusing exclusively on the emotional element of a situation may impede action leading to a resolution therefore strategies of emotion-focused coping, such as seeking sympathy from others, should only be used in the short-term. They argue that problem-focused coping, such as the use of advice and practical assistance, is more effective in the longer term. This seems prescriptive considering that situations may be experienced as adverse due to emotional demands and, therefore, emotion-focused coping may be more appropriate than practical solutions. This is certainly relevant to social workers, as will be argued later in the thesis in the context of my research findings.

Tobin et al. (1984 cited in Adamson et al., 2014, p.526) take a broader view in their ‘coping strategies inventory’, which encompasses eight different methods of coping. Four are engaged coping mechanisms: changing the stressor, considering the stressor from a different perspective, seeking social support and expressing negative emotion. The remaining four are disengaged and may increase vulnerability to the negative impact of adversity: wishful thinking, self-criticism, withdrawing socially and being unable to reframe a stressor. It is interesting to note that, in this depiction of coping, appraisal of the stressor is included. In this sense, the concepts of appraisal and coping are not discrete and, instead, appraisal is seen as a particular type of coping mechanism among others. However, the inventory adds another complexity to the relationship between resilience and coping in its suggestion that not all forms of coping lead to resilience. In addition to the disengaged strategies identified by Tobin et al. (ibid.), negative strategies may include denial of the stressful situation, behavioural disengagement which inhibits action, mental disengagement by using alcohol, drugs or sleep, and avoidance of thinking or talking about the problem (Carver et al., 1989). These different strategies could also be defined as adaptive and maladaptive coping, the former reducing stress and the latter
either exacerbating stress or being ineffective at managing it (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Rutter, 1999). If Luthar and Cicchetti’s (2000) definition of resilience as the absence of psychological distress is used, it follows that any coping strategy which leads to a negative emotional outcome could not be seen as resilient.

Helpful to the nuances of this debate is Luthar and Cicchetti’s suggestion (2000) that coping is influenced by both vulnerability and protective factors. These factors mediate the way in which people cope with adversity and can arise from the individual, their relationships and their environment. If vulnerability factors are present, a person may be less resilient, have decreased coping capacity and feel more distressed. In contrast, if sufficient protective factors are in place, one is likely to be more resilient, better able to cope and experience less distress. A key message conveyed by Luther and Cicchetti is that different vulnerability and protective factors apply to different experiences of adversity, and that resilience research should explore the factors unique to each context. A protective factor in one situation or for one person can be a risk factor in different circumstances, thus risk and protection are neither inherent nor objective characteristics (Rutter, 1993; van Breda, 2018). These perspectives on context-specific notions of adversity and resilience support the need to direct attention towards social workers in adult services rather than assuming that research into the resilience of social workers more generally will be applicable in its entirety.

**Bouncing back**

In the discussion so far, resilience has been linked to the absence of psychological distress and the presence of emotional wellbeing. Whether or not psychological distress is avoided completely is another matter of debate among resilience scholars. Fletcher and Sarker (2013) note that the word ‘resilience’ derives from the Latin word ‘resilire’ meaning ‘to leap back’ and, indeed, a common metaphor for resilience is ‘bouncing back.’ This suggests an original state or baseline to which one returns following the negative impact of an adverse event (Gilbert et al., 1998). Negative and intense emotions can and do occur but resilience enables a quicker and more complete recovery (Tugade and Frederickson, 2004) with only ‘a short-lived downturn in functioning’ (Crane and Searle, 2016, p.468). Features of the adverse event itself, its frequency and severity, may influence conditions for recovery. Crane and Searle (ibid.) suggest that extreme events may be more difficult to recover from than everyday stressors. On the other hand, daily stressors can become insidious and contribute towards cumulative adversity as they provide little opportunity for recovery (Seery et al., 2010), an issue that seems pertinent to social work given the workload stressors highlighted in Chapter One. What constitutes a ‘negative’ emotion, from which a ‘bounce back’ to emotional wellbeing occurs, is rarely
specified in the literature and is beyond the scope of the thesis to explore in depth. Some philosophical arguments, such as that proposed by Aristotle, suggest that there is no such phenomenon as a ‘negative emotion’, it is more about the context in which the emotion is experienced, and finding a balance between extremes (Hall, 2018). For the purposes of this thesis, ideas of negative and positive emotions will simply be viewed as subjective and defined as such by the person experiencing them.

An alternative view of resilience is that it enables stability and the maintenance of wellbeing with no such downturn. For example, Bonanno (2004) defines resilience as a ‘stable equilibrium’ and the ‘ability to maintain positive psychological functioning in the face of a loss or trauma’ (p.20), while recovery is a process distinct from this. Bonanno’s definition is interesting but, again, presents conceptual complexities around the nature of adversity. If we only experience positive, or at least stable emotions, in response to adversity, can it be described as adverse? There is, however, no need for ideas about retaining or regaining emotional stability to be mutually exclusive. Youssef and Luthans (2007) reflect both in suggesting that resilience involves ‘reactive recovery’ alongside ‘proactive learning and growth through conquering challenges’ (p.778). Reactive resilience enables recovery from adverse events that have a negative emotional impact, and proactive resilience prevents or lessens the negative impact from the outset so that a greater degree of stability is maintained (ibid.). Similarly, Crane and Searle (2016) identify the ‘harm reduction’ and ‘protection’ aspects of resilience. ‘Harm reduction’ recognises that psychological functioning may be negatively affected by adversity but views resilience as limiting the harm and enabling recovery. ‘Protection’, on the other hand, refers to resilience as ‘like a force field deflecting the impact of potentially stressful experiences’ (p.470). Resilience can therefore be seen to encompass both the capacity to remain at one’s emotional baseline during and after an adverse event, and the experience of a short downturn in functioning prior to recovery.

**Flourishing**

Ideas of resilience as ‘bouncing back’ imply a return to an emotional baseline but say little about the nature of that baseline and the extent to which it was emotionally healthy to begin with. In fact, some of the ideas of resilience already discussed seem to promote only an avoidance of negative outcomes or absence of psychological distress. Alternatively, resilience can be seen, not only as bouncing back, but as the capacity to ‘bounce back and beyond’ (Youssef and Luthans, 2007, p.784). Bonanno (2004) asserts that, as well as maintaining equilibrium, resilience can lead to positive emotion in relation to adversity. Positive emotions such as eagerness, excitement and confidence have been associated with resilience (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000) and such positivity can create a state of wellbeing which
further strengthens resilience (Fletcher and Sarker, 2013). Accordingly, ideas of resilience as ‘bouncing back and beyond’ encapsulate notions of growth, thriving and flourishing.

To draw again from Greek philosophy, Aristotle’s concept of ‘eudamonia’ is often translated as ‘flourishing’ and involves ‘the balance of good and bad experiences; something that one works at over time; something that is shared or struggled over; or something that is imagined and internal to the self’ in contrast to more reductionist notions of superficial happiness and wellbeing (Cieslik, 2015, p.423). These ‘bad experiences’ and ‘struggles’ are presented, not as inherently harmful, but as potential opportunities to flourish. Ideas of positive growth and flourishing are also reflected in Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of ‘flow’ states (2002). Csikszentmihalyi uses the term ‘optimal experience’ to refer to experiences that may stretch us to our physical and emotional limits and entail painful sensations, but that ultimately bring joy. These feelings of joy occur through engendering a sense of mastery, skill and control whereas low-challenge situations can lead to apathy (Carr, 2013). The ‘flow’ state occurs when there is intrinsic motivation; one is so absorbed in an activity that everything else ceases to be of importance. One of the most important messages of Csikszentmihalyi’s work, in relation to resilience, is the fact that flow states can be found amid experiences of great adversity.

People who have survived concentration camps or who have lived through near-fatal physical dangers often recall that in the midst of their ordeal they experienced extraordinarily rich epiphanies in response to such simple events as hearing the song of a bird in the forest, completing a hard task, or sharing a crust of bread with a friend.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.3)

However, for specific tasks to lead to a flow state there must be clear goals and the possibility of completion, as well as a sense of control and a balance between the challenges posed and skills and resources available (Carr, 2013). Unfortunately, as the findings of my study will show, the tasks expected of social workers do not always meet these criteria.

Such ideas of flourishing suggest that it is within the experience of adversity, rather than in spite of it, that growth and positivity may arise. Adverse experiences can be seen as opportunities for learning and the development of sustained coping mechanisms to manage future adversity (Adamson et al., 2014; Fletcher and Sarker, 2013; Kearns and McArdle, 2012; Rutter, 1993). Furthermore, they can increase confidence and self-esteem (Howe, 2008) and other characteristics associated with resilience such as self-efficacy and autonomy (Rutter, 1993). A longitudinal study carried out over a period of three years using survey data from 2398 respondents, found that moderate exposure to adverse life experiences led to greater resilience than having experienced either severe adversity or none at all.
Adversity was measured by collecting information on the respondents’ experience of thirty-seven specific events under the categories of illness/injury to self, illness/injury to a loved one, violence, bereavement, social/environmental stress, relationship stress and disaster (e.g. fire, flood). Although this prescriptive approach to the concept of adversity did not allow for respondents’ subjective interpretation, it was based on a diagnostic tool used for trauma and can therefore be deemed to represent experiences commonly interpreted as adverse. The results of the study indicate that moderate adversity manifests in lower levels of distress, higher life satisfaction and coping in the face of subsequent adverse experiences. Additionally, it suggests that moderate adversity not only enables people to cope more effectively with similar events but promotes the development of resilient characteristics leading to an enhanced capacity to cope in a diverse range of situations. This is mirrored in biology in which physical resilience, for example to viral infection, may come about through limited and controlled exposure to the virus rather than avoidance of it (Rutter, 1993, 2012). Also making analogies with disease response, Gilbert et al. (1998) suggest that many people overestimate how long they will take to recover from adverse experiences and that a ‘psychological immune system’ operates to enable recovery more quickly than anticipated (p.619).

The capacity to develop resilience through managing adversity can also be considered in relation to the idea of ‘challenge stressors’ and ‘hindrance stressors’ (Crane and Searle, 2016). Based on findings from their longitudinal study of 208 participants, all in various forms of employment in Australia, Crane and Searle suggest that challenge stressors in the workplace are those that lead to personal growth, job satisfaction and the enhancement of resilience. On the other hand, hindrance stressors erode resilience and lead to lower job commitment and a higher turnover of staff. The researchers did note, however, that when challenge stressors occurred frequently, a decrease in resilience was usually seen. The concepts of challenge and hindrance stressors mirror those of ‘eustress’ and ‘distress.’ The term ‘eustress’ or ‘good stress’ was notably expounded by Seyle (1956 cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003) who proposed that a ‘stressor’ denotes the external influence on a person and ‘stress’ refers to their response but that these terms are somewhat neutral in what they say about the person’s subjective experience. It is the terms ‘eustress’ and ‘distress’ that define the impact of the stressor. ‘Eustress’ refers to an optimal level of stress that leads to better performance and engenders personal growth whereas ‘distress’ refers to either too little or too much stress, resulting in a negative impact (Le Fevre et al., 2003). Overall, these arguments suggest that it may be counterproductive to avoid adversity since it can be experienced as a positive challenge leading to personal growth and enhanced resilience. To do so, in this line of thinking, would be to endorse a narrow and superficial idea of wellbeing that
precludes engagement in everyday life and the flourishing that can occur when difficulties have been overcome.

Ecological and ‘systems’ approaches

Some of the theories of resilience presented in this chapter have focused primarily on the individual experience. Such individualistic approaches to resilience, while arguably very useful, have been criticised for neglecting to consider the wider context (Bottrell, 2009; Garrett, 2015; Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Pooley and Cohen, 2010; Webster and Rivers, 2019) and, in some cases, the concept of resilience has been rejected outright for its failure to do so (Kaika, 2017; Martin, 2015). A way of combining the individual and contextual nature of resilience is to view it as a ‘bio-psycho-social process’ (de las Olas Palma-Garcia and Hombrados-Mendieta, 2017, p.19) or within a systems theory approach (Hart et al., 2016; Yates et al., 2015), which recognises the interrelationship between a person and different aspects of their social environment. This approach takes into account both the personal agency of the individual and the external structures that may contribute towards adversity, resilience and wellbeing, rather than seeing these as dichotomous (van Breda, 2019). This interpretation is reflected in the findings of a study conducted by Grant and Kinman (2013), which sought the views of three hundred social workers on concepts of resilience and found that it was primarily understood and experienced as an interplay between individual characteristics and external support. Pooley and Cohen (2010) provide a useful concrete example of the contextual influence of resilience in their study of adolescence, women experiencing domestic violence, children from separated families, and adjustment to university education of school leavers. While a detailed account of their study is beyond the scope of this literature review, it is sufficient to note that it gave rise to some interesting insights regarding how people’s needs and opportunities can differ widely depending on the circumstances. It is important to note that context does not remain static; contextual factors may change over time, thus resilience can be thought of as a dynamic process with a combination of influences from internal and external factors that protect against adversity (Ungar, 2008, 2012, 2018).

In addition to the specific context of circumstance, the wider cultural setting is an important consideration in examining external influences on resilience. Research on resilience has largely been carried out in western nations, however, different cultural norms may impact on notions of what it means to be adaptive to circumstances and what is seen as ‘doing OK’ (Yates et al., 2015, p.775). Thus, to understand resilience it needs to be situated in a clear understanding of the specific cultural landscape. This may extend beyond an understanding of the influence of broad cultural norms to include different cultures within smaller communities. For example, Bottrell (2009) examined how
truancy from school was a means by which some young people protected themselves from their negative experiences in educational institutions, which they perceived to be neither inclusive nor able to meet their needs. As such, Bottrell advocates for a constructivist theory of resilience incorporating an understanding of the myriad of ways in which people cope with adversity, some of which may be considered ‘deviant’ in the context of cultural norms. In this sense, what are widely accepted manifestations of resilience might more accurately be seen as a reflection of dominant social values, which do not always reflect the experiences and concerns of marginalised and disempowered groups (McMurray et al., 2008).

One consequence that may arise from neglecting to consider the wider context of adversity and resilience is that of labelling individuals deficient and apportioning blame for their ‘failure’ to cope (Bottrell, 2009; Garrett, 2015; Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Pooley and Cohen, 2010; Webster and Rivers, 2019). Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) emphasise that people cannot necessarily become more resilient if they try harder, and to believe so fails to recognise that ‘continued onslaughts from the environment can disable the strongest’ (p.863). They go as far as asserting that people should not be characterised as ‘resilient’. Rather, they argue, the concept should be applied to the adaptive process and referred to as ‘resilient trajectories or outcomes’ (p.865). Even when individual characteristics are associated with greater levels of resilience, they maintain that these characteristics are not inherent but developed in the context of life experiences. Ungar (2018), a prominent resilience theorist, has written a great deal about the influence of wider social factors on resilience and uses the Cinderella fairy tale as an analogy.

The problem with Cinderella stories is that they make success seem to be all about the personal qualities of exceptional people. They epitomize the myth of the exceptional individual and conveniently overlook the deficits in the environment that surround their protagonists. The heroes and heroines look so beautiful, talented and self-assured that we forget about the supports that help them escape terrible situations. The story of the resourced individual is hidden in the footnotes.

(Ungar, 2018, p.16-17)

The message is that, while the focus is often on the individual’s capacity to be resilient, it is rare that external support and resources are absent.

Some more recent perspectives on resilience have begun to draw explicit attention to issues of social inequality that may contribute towards adversity and aim, instead, to promote a collective social justice approach (e.g. Hart et al., 2016). A focus on strengths-based approaches to resilience, while potentially empowering, suggests that it is the responsibility of the individual to adapt to their
circumstances. This neglects the fact that individuals inhabit a wider social setting where power imbalance may prevail (Guo and Tsui, 2010; Webster and Rivers, 2019). For example, although Padesky and Mooney’s strengths-based CBT model (2012) is intended to be positive and empowering, the example they provide to illustrate the model does not appear to recognise the apparent impact of power imbalance. The example is one of a young man who is dealing with a domineering boss, and is said to ‘win’ even if the situation does not improve since this will afford him an opportunity to develop resilience. While no doubt useful to be able to encounter adversity with a positive attitude, this says little about the responsibility of the domineering boss to address their use or abuse of power.

On a more political level, Neocleous (2013) argues that ‘resilience’ has replaced notions of ‘security’ as the concept by which relief may be found in times of financial austerity.

Good subjects will ‘survive and thrive in any situation’, they will ‘achieve balance’ across the several insecure and part-time jobs they have, ‘overcome life’s hurdles’ such as facing retirement without a pension to speak of, and just ‘bounce back’ from whatever life throws, whether it be cuts to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown. Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self.

(Neocleous, 2013, p.5)

The ‘neoliberal’ society, prominent in western politics, is one characterised by the promotion of individual responsibility and reduced state intervention in social welfare. In this neoliberal society, it is the responsibility of the individual to adapt to the state in order to survive and thrive. The state apparently has no corresponding responsibility to alleviate adverse social circumstances (Garrett, 2015; Hart et al., 2016). Accordingly, the idea of resilience as coping with externally-imposed circumstances depoliticises it and suppresses the scope for resistance to political forces thereby maintaining the status quo (Evans and Reid, 2013). Garrett (2015) questions how far the neoliberal state must cause adversity before attention is turned to itself rather than to the individuals who are expected to cope. To neglect to address issues of inequality and disadvantage at their source would be to contribute towards a ‘social anaesthesia’ (Madsen, 2014, p.73), which locates social problems in the individual rather than in the structure of wider society.

It could be argued that, if the source of adversity is addressed and eliminated, the concept of resilience becomes irrelevant; there is no adversity and therefore no need for resilience. When we bounce back, we need something to bounce back from. A similar argument was explored in the context of situational appraisal; if an event is reframed to be considered more positively, there is no longer any adversity that requires a resilient response. However, in relation to appraisal, it was then argued that reframing
an event can be considered an aspect of resilience in itself. In the same way, addressing the source of adversity and challenging social injustice can also be seen as an important facet of resilience. References are made to ‘transforming’ adversity (Hart et al., 2016) and ‘changing the stressor’ (Tobin et al., 1984 cited in Adamson et al., 2014, p.526) as core aspects of resilience, which address the cause of distress rather than merely manage the response. Similarly, Yates et al. (2015) identify ‘risk-focused techniques’ which aim to eliminate or reduce exposure to adversity and can be employed alongside resource or process-focused techniques, which enable more effective coping. While recognising the importance of addressing the individualism of neoliberal resilience, van Breda (2019) warns that it can go too far in its elimination of personal agency. He illustrates this point with a useful analogy, stating that individual strategies to promote resilience ‘should no more be discarded than we would discard trauma counselling because it does not eradicate traumatic events’ (p.275). Thus, notions of resilience as individual strength and capacity to withstand adversity may function alongside a commitment to addressing the sources of inequality and disadvantage that expose some people to adversity more than others. As I argue later in the thesis, the importance of addressing sources of adversity as an integral aspect of resilience is highly pertinent to social workers alongside strategies to promote their personal resilience.

2.4 The Emotional Resilience of Social Workers

The ‘bread and butter’ of social work

The review of literature so far has provided a broad framework for understanding emotional resilience and the focus now turns to the resilience of social workers. As a profession, social work involves contact with service users who are often in situations of crisis, and who are likely to have experienced some degree of distress or trauma. The consequence is that ‘the bread and butter of social work is emotionally charged’ (Ruch, 2018, p.23). On a daily basis, social workers may be responding to the emotions of service users, which can have an impact on their own emotional wellbeing (Ferguson, 2017; Grant et al., 2014a; Morrison, 2007). Ingram (2015b) suggests that ‘given the impact that emotions have on behaviour, attention, decisions, appraisal, and motivation, emotions must be a central driver behind the actions of social workers across the myriad of contexts and situations in which they operate’ (p.26). In this professional landscape, it seems crucial to determine how social workers may develop resilience in order to manage their emotionally driven role.
In responding to the emotions of service users, social workers are expected to demonstrate empathy (Gerdes and Segal, 2011; Wagaman et al., 2015). The concept of empathy is a core tenet of Carl Rogers’ person-centred approach to counselling, and is defined as an understanding by the counsellor of clients’ emotions from their unique perspective (Rogers, 1961). According to Kinman and Grant (2011), empathy may either enhance or diminish the resilience of social workers and, as such, has a complex relationship to it. They helpfully identify three levels of empathy, which brings some clarity to this complexity. The first level relates to ‘perspective taking’ involving the adoption of others’ perspectives. The second level is identified as ‘empathetic concern’ characterised by warmth and compassion for others, and the third level is ‘empathetic personal distress’, which can lead to anxiety and discomfort triggered by the experiences of others. In their study examining the resilience of 240 social work students (ibid.), quantitative data from questionnaires found that the first two levels of empathy were associated with enhanced resilience but empathetic personal distress was linked to lower levels of resilience. A later study replicating and building on that undertaken by Kinman and Grant, also found that emotional intelligence was associated with greater resilience although, in contrast, empathetic concern was related to lower resilience (Bunce et al., 2019). This further demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between resilience and empathy with much still to unravel.

Personal distress may also manifest in vicarious trauma in which social workers experience feelings of trauma accumulatively through the situations of service users leading to intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviour, emotion numbing and hypervigilance (Branson, 2019; Fahy, 2007). The potential for compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress are further concerns, both involving feelings of overwhelm and helplessness in the face of another’s suffering (Branson, 2019). At the other end of the spectrum, social workers may become so overwhelmed that they employ strategies of emotional detachment as a form of self-protection (Ferguson, 2017). On the other hand, many social workers feel very positive about their engagement with service users, which can lead to ‘compassion satisfaction’ (Adamson et al., 2014; Kinman and Grant, 2020; Tanner, 2020) and ‘vicarious resilience’ in which the worker’s own resilience is strengthened through empathetic engagement with service users who have effectively managed the impact of trauma (Pack, 2014).

To help navigate the nuances of empathy and distress, the concept of emotional intelligence can be drawn upon to provide useful insights. Salovey and Mayer (1990) first used the term ‘emotional intelligence’ to describe the ability to understand the emotions of oneself and others, and to use this recognition to guide action. Goleman (1995) built on these ideas and noted that IQ (intelligence quotient) is often held in high esteem however ‘intelligence can come to nothing when the emotions
hold sway’ (p.4), thus highlighting the power of emotion to influence behaviour. He associates emotional intelligence with self-awareness, recognition of feelings, expressing emotions appropriately, management and understanding of emotions in oneself and others, reflective ability and regulation of mood. These elements are more broadly categorised into the intrapersonal domain of self-awareness and emotion management, and the interpersonal domain of social awareness and relationship skills (Morrison, 2007). Significantly, Goleman (1995) believes that, while IQ is innate, emotional intelligence can be learned.

Various studies have demonstrated a link between emotional intelligence and resilience. For example, data gathered from questionnaires completed by social work students in Kinman and Grant’s study (2011) referred to previously, indicated a positive association between emotional intelligence, reflective ability and resilience. Based on these findings, they recommended that specific interventions be designed to help social workers develop insight into the emotions of self and others. The role of reflection, a key aspect of emotional intelligence, in enabling social workers to gain a greater understanding of their emotions and how to manage them effectively has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Ingram, 2013). A study by Gerits et al. (2005) based on the results of emotional intelligence and burnout measures from 380 nurses working with patients with behavioural issues found that they experienced greater difficulty managing their role if they had lower emotional intelligence. The relationship was somewhat more complex, however, as higher emotional intelligence was not found to be entirely protective without additional resilience and coping strategies. This perhaps reinforces the importance of looking beyond individual characteristics in order to enhance resilience, a point which will be returned to throughout this thesis.

In addition to the development of emotional intelligence, the practice of mindfulness, referred to earlier in the chapter, is widely promoted by researchers as a means for social workers to develop resilience and manage emotional demands (Birnbaum, 2005; Crowder and Sears, 2017; Kinman et al., 2020; Lynn, 2010; Maddock et al., 2021; McCusker; 2022; Parkes and Kelly, 2014; Wong, 2004). Mindfulness entails present moment awareness of emotional and physical sensations, which can have the effect of increasing one’s capacity to tolerate those which are experienced as uncomfortable as well as reducing the potency of their impact (Neff and Germer, 2018; Wong, 2004). In this sense, difficult emotions felt in response to adversity may not be accompanied by a downturn in psychological functioning, as notions of resilience as ‘recovery’ suggest, since these emotions are tolerated more effectively from the outset. It is not that difficult emotions do not occur or are avoided. On the contrary, as Wong (2004) suggests, they are accepted and embraced as opportunities for learning and developing greater self-knowledge. Furthermore, with its focus on self-observation,
mindfulness practice can increase self-awareness and develop reflective ability, both of which are associated with emotional intelligence and increased resilience (Lynn, 2010; Wang et al., 2016).

Various empirical studies have found links between mindfulness and resilience or its associated components. A study of sixteen nursing students showed that, following an eight-week mindfulness programme, their anxiety had decreased, they were less likely to be negatively affected by the emotions of others, their coping skills had increased and they were more empathetic to others (Beddoe and Murphy, 2004). Similarly, a study of thirty social work students from two universities in the UK (Maddock et al., 2021) found that participation in a mindfulness-based programme was effective in reducing feelings of stress and anxiety, and promoting a sense of wellbeing. A mixed methods study involving eighteen social workers (Kinman et al., 2020) examined the impact of an eight-week mindfulness programme on their emotional resilience. The study found that increases in self-efficacy, psychological flexibility and compassion satisfaction increased after completing the mindfulness programme alongside a reduction in stress and compassion fatigue. All of the studies mentioned are small scale and not therefore generalisable to wider populations, however, the findings show promising links between mindfulness and resilience.

The ‘emotional backcloth’ of organisational and professional culture

As well as the emotive content of social work potentially having a personal impact, there is an interface with organisational culture. Emotions are said to shape culture within organisations (Goleman et al., 2002) and provide an ‘emotional backcloth’ that carries the imprint of their history (Fineman, 2000, p.13). More generally, organisational culture can involve an absorbing of norms and practices that may neither be analysed nor consciously questioned. The subtle nature of this process is reflected in the fact that the culture within teams and organisations arises primarily from socialisation of the individuals within it, which then informs action within that culture, rather than being something explicitly learned (von Rosenstiel, 2000). These perspectives suggest an elusive but pervasive influence of organisational culture on the emotional experience of those working within it.

Hochschild’s well-known study of flight attendants (1983) provides a fascinating account of the impact of organisational culture on their emotional experience. She uses the term ‘emotional labour’ to describe the flight attendants’ engagement in a process of emotion management in order to display the emotion required of them by their employer. Hochschild recognised that people may also display certain emotions within personal and social relationships in order to achieve a desired outcome, however, she was particularly interested in the commercialisation of this process. She observed that the flight attendants either made an attempt to genuinely feel the required emotion, which she
described as ‘deep acting’, or they engaged in ‘surface acting’ by expressing an outward display of it. The mismatch between the expressed and felt emotion is referred to as ‘emotive dissonance’ (ibid., p.90). Hochschild concluded that the risks from emotional labour are burnout from over-identification with the work, guilt about under-identification or detachment leading to cynicism and demotivation. Judge et al. (2009) cite various studies which show how emotive dissonance arising from surface acting can have a negative impact on job satisfaction. In contrast, they suggest that deep acting can be protective, at least in the short-term, as it enables employees to feel more authentic and gain a sense of achievement from their efforts. As already highlighted, greater job satisfaction can contribute towards higher levels of resilience (Youssef and Luthans, 2007).

Hochschild’s theory explicitly excludes professions, such as social work and teaching, in which emotion management is apparently supervised by oneself rather than being externally imposed by the employer. Wouters (1989), in her critique of Hochschild’s work, does not see this distinction as being necessary and indeed there does not appear to be any reason why Hochschild’s theory should not apply to social workers. It is unclear why she believes that the consequences of emotional labour may not be felt equally by those involved in self-regulation compared to those on whom expectations are imposed by managers and supervisors. Furthermore, the distinction between the self-supervision and external supervision of emotion may not be as clear cut as Hochschild appears to suggest. If social workers feel the need to self-regulate their emotions, this may be due to subtle expectations operating within the culture of their team and organisation. It is unlikely, for example, that open displays of sadness, anxiety or distress would be seen as acceptable within a formal adult protection meeting. Indeed, it has been suggested that some social work organisations promote a culture which encourages emotional repression with the effect that the emotions of social workers are ‘edited’ yet not absent (Ingram, 2015b, p.911). This may be reinforced by the fact that the day-to-day working lives of frontline social workers and senior managers rarely cross, and thus the impact of emotional labour may easily be ignored within social work organisations (Dwyer, 2007).

This ‘editing’ of emotion within organisational settings has been observed in previous research. Students in a study carried out by Grant and Kinman (2013), which sought views on the nature of resilience and its importance to the social work role, spoke about the perceived need to contain emotions that they felt were unprofessional to express. The qualified social workers in the same study also highlighted the need to manage the emotional complexities of the job. They tended to see this as requiring intrapersonal skills to control their emotional responses and maintain appropriate boundaries as well as interpersonal skills which enabled them to be in tune with the emotions of service-users. However, there is a mixed picture of the impact of emotion management on resilience.
In Grant and Kinman’s study (ibid.), the capacity to manage one’s emotions was generally associated with increased resilience, however, a study of social workers in Denmark found that it heightened emotional exhaustion and feelings of self-alienation (Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, 2015). This may reflect the difference, cited by Judge et al. (2009) earlier, between the relative impact of surface acting as opposed to deep acting, both of which can occur in emotion management.

Similarly, Rajan-Rankin’s phenomenological study of the resilience and emotion of social work students (2014) found that some students experienced conflict in their knowledge that emotional awareness was important for resilience alongside a sense that certain emotions were considered unprofessional and inappropriate to express within social work settings. The sample of ten students in the study poses obvious limitations to the generalisability of the findings, nonetheless it is interesting to note the negative impact on resilience arising from tensions between emotion and notions of professionalism. Rajan-Rankin echoes Hochschild’s work on the expectations of employees to manage their emotions, and relates this to social work in the context of power differences proposing that emotions are ‘experienced and reproduced within existing hierarchies’ (ibid., p.2429). She concludes that the emotional distress of social work students can involve a sense of diminished power and erosion of self-identity. Accordingly, one measure to enhance resilience, supported by those who critique individualised notions of resilience (e.g. Garrett, 2015; Hart et al., 2016), may be to address power structures within teams and organisations, and consider how notions of ‘social’ and collective’ resilience may be nurtured (Considine et al., 2015).

While a range of emotions may be experienced by social workers, particular attention has been given to the high levels of stress in the profession, as noted in Chapter One (Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Unison Scotland, 2019). It is unrealistic to think that all sources of adversity and stress can or should be eradicated from social work, however, the organisation’s response to employee stress may have an impact on their resilience. The ‘industry speed-up’ identified by Hochschild within airline companies (1983), in which increased emotional labour was demanded of the workforce, was the source of emotive dissonance among the flight attendants with an associated risk of burnout and cynicism. Based on research into the chronically poor working conditions of social workers outlined in Chapter One and further elaborated on later in this chapter, it could be argued that social work has had its own ‘industry speed-up’ in the form of increased caseloads and organisational demands. The risk of burnout for this group of professionals, too, is a significant concern. Despite this, within social work culture, stress is often considered to be a personal rather than organisational issue, potentially giving rise to feelings of inadequacy and a reluctance on the part of social workers to admit feeling under pressure (van Heugten, 2011). Rather than expecting employees to endure stressful working
conditions, Webster and Rivers (2019) call for a ‘world of work that doesn’t insist they make stress their friend’ (p.526).

Overall, if the culture of social work places expectations on workers to be tough and display emotional strength (Rajan-Rankin, 2014; van Heugten, 2011), it is all too easy to ‘ingest a sense of personal responsibility for your resilience failings in the face of demanding organisations’ (Taylor, 2016, para.3). In contrast, a workplace culture that recognises the emotional impact of the role and provides space for emotional expression might help to nurture a resilient workforce (Newell and Nelson-Gardell, 2014). This is reflected in a study of social work students (Grant et al., 2014a), which found that workshops and discussions with qualified workers led to a realisation, on the part of the students, that strong emotional responses to the social work role, even by experienced workers, are common. This had the effect of normalising and validating the students’ feelings, and seemed to enhance the perceived acceptability of emotional openness as well as reduce the stigma of disclosure, thus enhancing resilience.

These aspects of organisational culture, and their impact on wellbeing and resilience, are reflected in the wider culture of the social work profession. Arguably, one of the main overarching cultural influences affecting social workers in adult services is the increasingly managerialist and consumerist nature of contemporary social work. This culture began to emerge in the 1980s within the neoliberal political agenda characterised by individualism and a market-based economy. Its values are reflected in the implementation of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, which positions service users as consumers in a mixed economy of care with the role of social workers focused on assessment of need and care management (Collins, 2008; Gregson and Holloway, 2005; Ruch, 2018). Such a culture tends to be reflected in organisations by the prioritisation of cost effectiveness and the meeting of targets and performance indicators (Scottish Executive, 2006; Collins, 2008). More recently, the Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, although largely welcomed by social workers for its ethos of service user empowerment, has led to cynicism about its appropriation by local authorities to reduce service provision as a way of managing budget cuts (Pearson et al., 2018) thereby exacerbating these organisational tensions.

These organisational priorities do not mean that emotion is eclipsed (Rogers, 2001) or that relationships with service users do not remain a high priority for individual social workers (Trevithick, 2014; Turbett, 2014; Ward et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the priorities of a managerialist social work culture can be seen as conflicting with the development of emotionally supportive relationships with service users, often promoted as a key aspect of the professional role (Morley et al., 2019; Ruch, 2012,
The skills emphasised are ‘technical-rational’ rather than ‘less technocratic, softer’ skills (Clapton, 2021, p.223) and those relating to interpersonal relations (Hennessey, 2011; Ingram, 2015b). In such a climate, the completion of organisational tasks tends to take precedence over engaging with service users to gain a deeper understanding of their situation (Dwyer, 2007; Ferguson, 2017; Rose and Palattiyil, 2020). Although written around twenty-five years ago, Howe (1996) aptly sums up the impact of this cultural shift.

Relationships between social workers and their clients change from inter-personal to economic, from therapeutic to transactional, from nurturing and supportive to contractual and service oriented.

(Howe, 1996, p.92)

These conflicting priorities potentially create role confusion which may further undermine resilience (Rajan-Rankin, 2014).

In addition, ‘ethical stress’ caused by a conflict in values between a managerialist culture and the more relationship-orientated perspectives often favoured by social workers can be a significant contributory factor in reduced job satisfaction (Fenton, 2012) and, as a consequence, have a negative impact on resilience. Such a conflict can impact, too, on the overall sense of professional integrity that comes about through an integration of values, ethical principles and standards (Banks, 2016; Pawar et al., 2017). Weinberg and Banks (2019) refer to the managerial and neoliberal culture of social work as an ‘unethical climate’ (p.362), which may require social workers to exercise ‘ethical resistance’ (p.364). Thus, alongside emotional intelligence as a key factor in resilience, the promotion of ‘ethical intelligence’, that is the ability and confidence to respond critically to practice situations (Carey and Mazerolle, 2016, p.5), may also be important. Indeed, the term ‘resilience’ itself, in being socially constructed within social work organisations and wider society, may need to be scrutinised to determine the extent to which its use aligns with social work values (van Breda, 2019).

A further potential protection for resilience is the power of discretion that frontline workers may have in the way in which bureaucratic rules and processes are carried out (Johannessen, 2019) with the potential to realign practice and core values. In a narrative analysis of police officers, teachers and counsellors in the United States, collectively referred to as ‘street level workers’, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) highlight the complexity these workers often faced in navigating engagement with clients alongside the expectations of their employers. From the narratives accounts collected, it appeared that workers often operated according to their own personal and professional values, and avoided the ‘cookbook method’ (ibid., p.3) of prescribed rules, which could ultimately create feelings
of conflict and tension. In the context of social work, a recent study based in Wales found that greater opportunity to exercise professional judgement boosted social workers’ wellbeing and job satisfaction (Pithouse et al., 2019). More general links have also been made between resilience and autonomy characterised by a sense of self-direction and personal agency rather than external control (Bunce et al., 2019). Nonetheless, blame cultures in social work can limit the extent to which autonomy is exercised with a sense of safety and without fear of retribution (Gilbert and Powell, 2010; Simpson et al., 2020).

With its emphasis apparently turning away from attention to the emotional and relational aspects of practice, contemporary social work practice can create what Ingram (2015b) refers to as ‘battle lines’ between emotion and managerialist priorities (p.27). The favouring of technical-rational qualities in workers reflects the assumption that rationality is of a higher order than emotion, an idea promoted in some influential western philosophies. As far back as ancient Greek philosophy, Plato characterised emotion and rationality as two horses pulling us in opposite directions. Likewise, in professional organisations, emotion is often considered to be opposed to, and to interfere with, rational thinking (Fineman, 2000) with the consequence that ‘the reactions of ‘the heart’ are undervalued’ (Collins, 2007, p. 257-258). In her critique of such views regarding the dichotomy of emotion and rationality, Ahmed (2014) suggests that emotion has erroneously been seen as ‘beneath’ rationality such that ‘to be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous (p.3). On the contrary, there is a view that emotion can usefully guide rational thinking and decision-making in complex situations (Munro, 2011; Youell, 2005) or, indeed, that there is no such concept as pure cognition devoid of emotion (Fineman, 2000; Morrison, 2007).

Such considerations may contribute towards the development of emotional awareness in organisations leading to a greater recognition of and value attributed to the role of emotion in social work practice. An organisation that has such awareness could be described as an emotionally intelligent one (Goleman, 1998) and, certainly, it makes sense that the principles of emotional intelligence, outlined earlier in the chapter, to which social workers are expected to adhere in their relationships with service users should also be applied to social work employers (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). However, the concept of emotional intelligence within organisations can be problematic if its use is politically and organisationally motivated. Fineman (2000) warns that emotional intelligence ‘has become a victim of a commodification process where it is trapped in its own rhetoric – that of a marketable package’ (p.17). His point is that, while emotional intelligence helpfully highlights the importance of emotion, it can be used to reinforce ideas about what constitutes an appropriate emotion as defined by the political or organisational agenda. In fact, the marketable and commodified...
brand of emotional intelligence to which Fineman refers might be especially appealing in the managerialist and consumerist culture which, arguably, social work has increasingly adopted in recent years. On the other hand, it is possible that there are ‘parallel’ processes occurring within social work organisations which mirror the emotional overwhelm that social workers can experience in their relationships with service users (Farragher and Bloom, 2010). Organisations can be seen as ‘living complex systems’ and may be vulnerable to stress, burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma just as individuals are (ibid., p.131).

**The impact of working conditions**

In addition to the less tangible aspects of organisational culture, some of the structural and practical aspects of working conditions have been shown to have an impact on the emotional resilience of social workers. While it would be encouraging to see the organisation as a key player in supporting resilience, Ravalier and Boichat’s report into the working conditions of UK social workers (2018) found that they were exposed to ‘chronically poor’ conditions within their organisations compared to the national average for employees overall. To conduct their analysis, Ravalier and Boichat used the Health and Safety Executive’s Management Standards Indicator Tool (Health and Safety Executive, no date), which identifies the importance of six areas that can impact on stress in the workforce: workload demands; control over one’s job; support from peers, support from managers; positive working relationships; clarity of role; and management of organisational change. Based on the findings of the study, they concluded that working conditions were chronically poor in all areas except peer relationships.

Collins (2017) also highlights the myriad of pressures on social workers and identifies these as limited resources, heavy workloads, multiple demands, preoccupation with risk, extensive administrative requirements, role conflict, high sickness rates, staff turnover, lack of recognition, lack of reward for positive achievements, and negative media coverage. Most of these demands also relate to working conditions imposed on social workers within their organisations although others, such as negative media, are broader societal issues. Unison Scotland’s study (2019) into the experiences of employees in social work teams reported that seventy-six percent thought that their team was understaffed and eighty-two percent perceived their workload to have increased, detracting from the opportunity to create a healthy work and home life balance (Kinman et al., 2014). Many of the social workers who participated in the Unison study were fearful that the amount of pressure they were under would lead them to make mistakes that placed service users at risk. This sense of responsibility amid increased workload demand was found to increase anxiety and stress with fifty-two percent having had a work-
related illness. The report highlighted the negative impact of funding cuts and staff shortages with many experienced workers leaving the profession. In fact, ninety percent of respondents stated that they were considering leaving their jobs. Interestingly, in Ravalier and Boichat’s study (2018), the majority of social workers wishing to leave their jobs expressed a desire to remain in social work, suggesting a commitment to the profession but not to the current role.

Concerns are expressed in some of the literature that, within the context of this challenging professional climate, individual social workers may be blamed for apparently lacking the resilience to cope with working conditions that are ‘pathogenic’ (Kinman and Grant, 2011) and for failing to manage their self-care and wellbeing (Stuart, 2021). In this case, resilience becomes ‘another target to reach, or a stick to beat a struggling workforce’ (Taylor, 2016, para.18). Collins (2017) questions to what extent social workers should be expected to demonstrate resilience before attention is turned to the structural and organisational factors that increase demand. He warns that resilience conceptualised as an individual trait can detract from exposing aspects of the organisation that are exploitative, with the consequence that resilience comes to mean ‘acquiescence’ to unjust policy and practice (ibid., p.88) and a tendency to ‘accept the unacceptable’ (ibid., p.96). Similarly, Garrett (2015) offers a strong critique of the way in which resilience is applied within social work, questioning why it is implicitly accepted as a term without a scrutiny of the unequal power structures that he believes it entails in practice. While many definitions of resilience favour a focus on successful coping and adaptation, Garrett points out that this is based on a neoliberal political agenda of individual responsibility for collective issues. His focus is on general populations rather than working conditions within social work, however, his message may speak to social workers in highlighting the individual responsibility they are asked to take in the name of ‘resilience’ in order to manage what are, arguably, unmanageable demands. To be resilient is not only to ‘rise above’ the source of adversity but, in some cases, to eliminate it (van Breda, 2018, p.10). In the context of social work, organisations may therefore contribute towards the resilience of social workers by creating more favourable working conditions and eliminating some of the sources of stress.

Similar criticisms have been levelled at practices such as mindfulness, when used to promote individual responsibility for systemic issues (Webster and Rivers, 2019). Walsh (2016) argues that the use of mindfulness can be shaped implicitly by particular ideologies and, without these being made explicit, it is presented as panacea for all while in fact representing the priorities of a few. For example, within corporations, mindfulness is sometimes adopted as part of a neoliberal agenda which perceives employee stress as an individual responsibility and mindfulness as a way to manage it (Purser and Loy, 2013). Some organisations have ‘jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon’ as it has become ‘a trendy
method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals’ (ibid., para.15). On the other hand, there is research to suggest the possibility of a more critical approach to mindfulness that incorporates awareness of the impact of oppressive structures (Crowder and Sears, 2017; McCusker, 2022). These criticisms very much mirror those of resilience. It is not the concept itself that is problematic but its appropriation by those with the power to modify damaging social or organisational conditions but who seek, instead, to absolve themselves of any responsibility in this regard.

These concerns about the individualism of resilience bring into question the extent to which social work employers exercise the principle of organisational justice. There are three main elements to organisational justice; distributive justice concerning how fairly employees feel they are rewarded for their work, procedural justice denoting the extent to which fair procedures are thought to be followed regardless of outcomes, and interactional justice referring to interpersonal engagement and now often subsumed under the category of procedural justice (Kim et al., 2012). In a study of 218 social workers from fifty-one different agencies in Korea (ibid.), a correlation was found between burnout, intention to leave and low levels of organisational justice while high levels were associated with greater job satisfaction and organisational commitment. A more recent study of 608 social workers in China (Wang et al., 2021) also found that organisational justice, specifically interactional justice involving fair treatment though the actions and behaviours of managers and leaders, was associated with lower staff turnover and lower levels of burnout. They recommended that organisations pay particular attention to management issues when addressing staff wellbeing and retention.

In recognition of the demands on social workers, Collins (2017) asserts that employers have both a legal and moral duty to support their wellbeing. Certainly, organisations are required to protect their employees under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, which states that ‘it shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees’ (Sec. 2(1)). In recognition of the organisation’s responsibilities regarding the resilience of social workers, Grant et al. (2021) have developed a ‘SWORD’ (Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic) tool, which identifies the five ‘key foundational principles’ of secure base, sense of appreciation, learning organisation, mission and vision, and wellbeing (p.4). This was originally developed for social workers in children’s services but has since been expanded to include those in adult services, particularly in recognition of the pressures faced in this sector during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a clear focus in this tool on the organisation’s role in resilience and, as such, it shifts the focus from individual social workers onto the wider structures of teams, organisations and leadership.
2.5 Conclusion

Although concepts of resilience presented in the literature entail a great deal of variability and complexity, most concur that it is about coping with adversity. It is possible to argue logically that eliminating or minimising the impact of adversity is a concept entirely separate to that of resilience, since resilience is about the means to cope with such adversity and is irrelevant if adversity is not present. In contrast, broader definitions suggest that addressing the source of adversity is, in fact, a key approach to enhancing resilience. Proponents of a social justice approach to resilience strongly challenge the idea that individuals should be held entirely responsible for managing the impact of adversity particularly when this arises from structural inequality. This seems pertinent in social work in which, according to the research discussed in this chapter, a significant amount of the adversity in practitioners’ working lives arises from organisational demands; heavy caseloads and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures among others. A spotlight on these factors and a commitment to organisational justice seems important in order to avoid increasing feelings of self-doubt and self-blame on the part of the individual worker who struggles to manage such demands. Focusing exclusively on addressing structural factors, however, risks viewing individuals as without agency and ultimately accepting of their misfortune (Hall, 2018). To borrow a phrase from the theory of strengths-based perspectives, although we should not seek to ignore problematic circumstances ‘it is as wrong to deny the possible as it is to deny the problem’ (Saleebey, 1996, p.297).

On this basis, the broader definition of resilience is adopted in my study, by recognising the ways in which individual social workers may maintain and enhance their resilience as well as more collectively considering the circumstances in which adversity is seen to occur. This can be conceptualised as a holistic ‘systems’ approach which combines a recognition of the self-determination of the individual with an understanding of the influence of social and organisational context (McFadden et al., 2019; O’Leary et al., 2013). Social workers engage in individual relationships with service users which may give rise to personal emotional responses but this plays out in the context of the team and organisation as well as the wider structures of policy and legislation. Certain demands are placed on social workers, which emanate from these external factors either explicitly in their working conditions or more implicitly within cultural norms and expectations. To neglect to consider the wider structure is tantamount to expecting individual social workers to manage what might be considered unrealistic expectations (Collins, 2017; Kinman and Grant, 2011). On the other hand, removing all responsibility from individuals for their resilience risks rendering them passive and dependent. Furthermore, deeply embedded social and organisational structures take time to change, and even if they do, adversity is
unlikely to be eliminated altogether. Rather than rely on an unrealistic version of social work in which demands cease to exist, it may be more helpful for social workers to consider their individual coping strategies alongside an organisational commitment to examining the conditions in which they carry out their role.

As a final note, it is important to restate the multi-faceted nature of resilience and recognise that there may be a ‘many pathways approach’ to resilience (Padesky and Mooney, 2000, p.285). There is no ‘magic bullet’ (Maston and Coatsworth, 1998, p. 214) to boost resilience and each person will have a unique set of circumstances, characteristics, perspectives, skills and resources. These points further inform my intention to promote a holistic approach to resilience that is not prescriptive but incorporates a recognition of the richness and variety of experience. Based on the theoretical concepts of resilience summarised in this conclusion, the remainder of this thesis will outline the methodology of my study before presenting my findings within a holistic framework for developing and enhancing emotional resilience in relation to social workers in adult services.
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore how social workers may sustain and enhance their emotional resilience, and to understand the wider factors that contribute towards adversity or resilience. Within these broad questions, as outlined in Chapter One, there were several sub-questions as follows:

- How do social workers understand the concept of ‘emotional resilience’?
- How is emotional resilience, as a concept or experience, discussed among social workers either formally or informally?
- How do social workers personally develop and sustain emotional resilience in relation to their professional roles?
- How do the culture and practices of social work teams and organisations support or inhibit emotional resilience?
- How can emotional resilience be further nurtured in the workplace?

In this chapter, I present the research design I devised in order to address these questions. Although it is presented in a linear format with one process leading to the next, research is usually more iterative in nature and will ‘weave back and forth between data and theory’ (Bryman, 2012, p.26). Research designs may even be cyclical (Blaikie, 2010) and will almost certainly be subject to modification as the research progresses. In this regard, I discuss how the project was initially planned and then adapted throughout the process. The research design is firstly presented in diagrammatic form before justifying its rationale in detail.
3.2 Research Paradigm and Strategy

The first stage of designing a plan for the overall research process is to clarify the ‘research paradigm’, which Blaikie (2010) defines as the philosophical perspectives underpinning the research questions, specifically the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. Epistemology refers to how knowledge is acquired, and ontology concerns theories of the nature of existence and social reality (ibid.). In terms of its epistemological perspective, my study was distinctly not positivist. Positivism is based on the gathering of what are considered objective ‘facts’ to develop knowledge, test hypotheses and explain phenomena (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2013). I intended to examine how definitions and experiences of emotional resilience arose for social workers within the context of their professional role and did not deem these to be factual nor objective. For this reason, interpretivism is the
epistemological strategy most consistent with the logic of this enquiry. An interpretivist approach does not seek to explain the causes of human behaviour but rather to understand the subjective meaning given to social phenomena (Bryman, 2012; Blaikie, 2010). Interpretivism strives to make ‘culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world’ in recognition that what occurs in one situation may not occur in another (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.80). This accorded well with my examination of social workers in adult services, and the exploration of whether, within this specific professional context, resilience may be experienced and interpreted in ways that more general studies had not uncovered.

Within the broad paradigm of interpretivism, I took a social constructionist approach, which has both ontological and epistemological elements in maintaining that social phenomena both come into being and are known through social interaction (Bryman, 2012). Social constructionism proposes that knowledge of the social world is indeterminate and that social phenomena are constructed by people in their role as social actors (Blaikie, 2010; Bryman 2012). In contrast to naïve realist and empiricist perspectives, the constructionist approach does not believe in an independent reality awaiting discovery. Instead, it ‘emphasizes the world of experience as it is lived, felt and undergone by people acting in social situations’ (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.24). Schwandt (2000), in highlighting the use of social constructionism in research, suggests that ‘we do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth’ (p.196).

In relation to emotional resilience, it is apparent from the literature that there is not one single, objective definition of the concept. Different perspectives have emerged from research, and certain writers emphasise the influence of the social and cultural landscape in shaping ideas and experiences of resilience and adversity (e.g. Bottrell, 2009; Ungar, 2008, 2012, 2018). In relation to professional organisations, von Rosenstiel (2000) emphasises their socially constructed nature in proposing that what can be observed within an organisation is a reliable indicator of its underlying values and beliefs. As a researcher studying the concept and experience of emotional resilience within social work teams and organisations, I therefore sought to understand meaning as it arose through its construction in this setting and within the wider societal context in which social work organisations are embedded. As a paradigm, it was useful in understanding what might constitute cultural norms and expectations within the organisation and wider society, guiding and perhaps prescribing the behaviour of individual social workers. Furthermore, the constructionist researcher ‘goes into the field particularly alert to the possibility of encountering a world radically different from their own’ (Waller et al., 2016, p.12). Given my own background in social work and my personal experience in relation to the topic under investigation, I endeavoured to remain as open as possible to other constructed ‘worlds’ by being alert
to any underlying assumptions I may have held. This is further explored in the context of ‘reflexivity’ later in the chapter.

Stronger forms of social constructionism propose that there is no independent reality at all while more moderate forms accept the existence of external reality but suggest that it is manifested and interpreted within social contexts (Lupton, 1998) or that ‘whatever the underlying nature of reality there is no direct access to it’ (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.24). I adopted a more moderate form of social constructionism in my study to reflect the fact that resilience is often associated with many different factors such as personality traits, the effects of early childhood experiences, skills, perspectives, circumstances and resources. From an ontological perspective, some of these factors may exist independently of context, culture and environment but are likely to be mediated through them. In terms of social institutions, their structures can be seen to have an objective reality and may exert social control over their members in the form of expected conduct and behaviour alongside sanctions for those who transgress (Dreher, 2015). Again, this reflects a more moderate form of social constructionism with a recognition of elements of objectivity. There can be a process of ‘internalization’ of this objective reality and the influence it exerts, leading to ‘retrojection of the social world into the subjective consciousness of the individual’ (ibid., p.56). Similarly, in relation to social institutions and wider social norms, Foucault promotes the idea of subjectivity as ‘an activity that always takes place within a context of constraint’ (Taylor, 2014, p.173). Thus, while the definition of resilience may have been constructed by the participants and in the process of the interview, they may also have been influenced, perhaps subconsciously, by organisational and societal expectations.

More moderate forms of social constructionism have parallels with critical realism, which draws from both constructionist and positivist perspectives in asserting that, while reality exists beyond our knowledge, it can only be known through the filter of our own experiences. As a philosophical framework for research, critical realism looks at causal processes which operate in the social world as well as interpretation of social phenomena (Roberts, 2014). While realism is ‘what you see is what you get’, critical realism is ‘what we see is not what we got’ (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.81). As my study was focused on the self-defined understanding and experience of emotional resilience within a particular environmental context, direct causal processes appeared less relevant than a focus on how notions of resilience may be constructed within the domain of social work, hence why I opted for a social constructionist rather than critical realist approach.

Epistemological and ontological perspectives are also associated with different research strategies. A research strategy refers to ‘the logic used to generate new knowledge’ (Blaikie, 2010, p.9) and is
important to identify in order to support the validity of any conclusions drawn (Crotty, 1998; Mason, 2002). It refers specifically to the four main approaches to research: inductive, deductive, retroductive and abductive. An inductive strategy describes characteristics or patterns, a deductive strategy tests theories and hypotheses, a retroductive strategy looks for underlying mechanisms to explain ‘observed regularities’, and an abductive strategy aims to understand the social world in terms of the meaning people attribute to it (Blaikie, 2010, p.84). My study did not begin with a hypothesis nor did it seek to discover an underlying mechanism to provide an explanation therefore it was neither deductive nor retroductive. I gave some thought to whether the appropriate strategy to address my research questions would be inductive or abductive. More specifically, the abductive strategy is concerned with describing and explaining social activities that arise from symbolic meanings, motives and tacit knowledge (Blaikie, 2003). Although an abductive strategy seemed appealing in the first instance focusing, as it does, on social processes, there are conceptual problems with perceiving emotional resilience as a social activity, motivation or aspect of knowledge. The conceptualisations of emotional resilience presented in the literature review in Chapter Two do not frame it in this way and, as such, my research questions were not concerned with how resilience played out in people’s motivations and actions. An inductive strategy, therefore, seemed most appropriate to my research design.

A key characteristic of an inductive study is the construction of theory about social phenomena based on patterns and themes emerging from the data gathered (Gray, 2009). As my research paradigm was one of social constructionism, there was an implicit recognition that the concept of resilience may have emerged within the culture of adult social work differently than in other settings. In this way, theory could only be constructed inductively from the data provided by participants. Of course, it is unrealistic to propose that inductive studies are entirely free of any theoretical framework, however, it is not the imperative of an inductive approach to fit the data into existing theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In terms of my own study this meant that, while I was familiar with and informed by the literature on emotional resilience, it did not provide a rigid basis on which my subsequent data collection or analysis was based. The broad conclusions regarding theoretical perspectives of resilience that are drawn at the end of Chapter Two were certainly influential, particularly in terms of taking a more holistic approach to ideas and experiences of resilience. Nonetheless, within this broad perspective, I remained open to what my study revealed by striving to construct theory inductively from the research data.

A more straightforward decision concerning the research strategy was whether to gather quantitative or qualitative data. Qualitative research is associated and consistent with social constructionism and
an inductive approach (Bryman, 2012) and logically fitted with my chosen strategy. It is used to gather information about people’s experiences, thoughts and feelings in everyday life and is often described as generating ‘rich’ data (Shaw and Gould, 2001) with ‘thick’ description (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In my study, the choice of qualitative methods enabled me to address the research questions in order to arrive at an understanding of how emotional resilience was understood and experienced by social workers in the context of adult services. There are criticisms that qualitative research is anecdotal on the grounds of a lack of generalisability or use of standardised measures (Shaw and Gould, 2001). Indeed, qualitative data provides information about the research participants only, however, as a qualitative researcher I was ‘prepared to sacrifice scope for detail’ (Silverman, 2013, p.105).

3.3 Data Collection

Punch (1998) reminds researchers that they should not put the ‘methodological cart’ before the ‘substantive (or content) horse’ (p.5) by choosing methods of data collection prior to developing the research questions and strategy. Having outlined my research questions and the underlying paradigm and strategy, what follows is a discussion of my methods. Of course, the recruitment of participants came before data collection began, however, some of my decisions about the methods of data collection set the context for subsequent recruitment and will therefore be discussed first. My study was in two phases, the first involving social workers and the second, social work managers.

In Phase One, my aim was to explore social workers’ experiences of emotional resilience within the professional context in which it played out. Surveys and questionnaires were discounted as a method because, while useful for gathering data from a larger range of participants, they would not have enabled face to face discussion and the opportunity to probe into ideas and themes that arose spontaneously. Instead, I considered the relative merits of focus groups, ethnographic methods and interviews. As the literature review in Chapter Two highlights, resilience can be viewed both as an individual experience and influenced by context and cultural setting. I considered carrying out focus groups bearing in mind that this method lends itself to an exploration of how culture and social interaction shape ideas and perspectives (Mason, 2002). A focus group allows the researcher to understand how meaning is constructed in social settings and fits well with a social constructionist approach. Although I was indeed seeking to understand how resilience may be constructed within the culture of the social work profession, I considered the possibility of a ‘social desirability bias’ (Bryman, 2012, p.227). As emotional resilience is closely connected with experiences of stress and adversity, I was concerned that the participants might feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings with other
professionals, some of whom may be their colleagues. As highlighted earlier, ideas of social constructionism also refer to the potential for societies and institutions to exert social control over individuals, sometimes with subtly coercive influences on their behaviour (Dreher, 2015). On reflection, I believe that this was an appropriate decision as the literature, and subsequently my own findings, highlights that social workers may avoid disclosing feelings of stress for fear that this undermines their professionalism in the eyes of others (Grant and Kinman, 2013; Ingram, 2015a; Rajan-Rankin, 2014; Ruch, 2007).

Given that my research questions relate to individuals within a particular setting, I considered ethnographic methods based on observation. Ethnography is a way of ‘describing a culture and understanding a way of life from the point of view of its participants’ (Punch, 1998, p.157). It commonly entails observing people within their natural setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and is useful in avoiding the more contrived setting of data collection methods such as interviews and focus groups (Silverman, 2013). Despite its apparent benefits, there is a question about how observable resilience is and where to find naturally occurring instances of it. My aim was to understand how social workers conceptualised as well as experienced resilience therefore I deliberately did not approach my data collection with a definition in mind. Without an a priori definition of emotional resilience, it would have been difficult to use observational methods, as the data gathered would be heavily influenced by my own interpretation of what appeared to be manifestations of resilience. I could have observed certain practices, for example supervision sessions between employees and managers, but this would presuppose that supervision is a factor in developing resilience. Such a stance would have fundamentally changed the nature of the research questions and be contrary to the underlying social constructionist paradigm and inductive strategy of my study. Observing direct references to resilience may have been equally as problematic as, in my own experience of being a social worker over a period of eleven years, I do not recall one occasion when a colleague referred to the concept of resilience or how they developed it. This concern appeared to be well-founded as the majority of the participants stated that resilience was rarely, if ever, spoken about in their teams and organisations.

I concluded that interviews would be the most appropriate data collection method for Phase One in order to understand personal conceptualisations and experiences of resilience, and to explore how these may be influenced by the culture of social work teams and organisations and social expectations. Mason (2002) reminds researchers to ask themselves whether interviewing as a method of data collection accords logically with their ontological and epistemological perspectives. Interviews in general are ‘a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations
and constructions of reality’ (Punch, 1998, p.175) and can be viewed as giving access to the interviewee’s experience, or as ‘actively constructed narratives’ (Silverman, 2013, p.47). In this way, knowledge that arises from the interview process is seen to be co-constructed between the researcher and participant who each bring their own sense of identity, beliefs, values and perceptions to the dialogue (Robson, 2002). The reflexive nature of this co-construction of knowledge is returned to later in the chapter. Overall, these characteristics of interviewing as a method of data collection aligned with the interpretivist and social constructionist paradigm of my study within which emotional resilience was not considered to have an independent existence, or at least not one that was accessible beyond what the participants perceived it to be.

A semi-structured interview format was appropriate to yield data that most effectively addressed my research questions. This format incorporates a broad outline of pre-defined themes while accommodating flexibility for spontaneous discussion of other points of interest raised by the participants (Mason, 2002). Prior to deciding on the semi-structured format, I speculated on the usefulness of a narrative approach, which focuses on the ‘story’ told by participants (Lichtman, 2017). This approach aims to ‘capture people’s own understanding of their lived experience’ (Harding, 2013, p.132) and to explore why they understand their experiences in this way (Bryman, 2012). There is minimal prompting from the researcher and, instead, the participant is asked to recount their experiences and perceptions on the topic (Waller et al., 2016). As my research questions involved some specificity in seeking to understand personal experiences of emotional resilience as well as wider social and organisational influences, I concluded that a narrative approach would potentially be too broad.

The design and set up of the interviews required careful consideration, as all aspects of the process may impact on the knowledge that emerges. Several points were relevant in this regard. Firstly, clarity in the categorisation of the participant is important in the design and process of the interview, as confusion can occur when they are categorised in multiple ways (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). In devising my interview questions (Appendix 3), I needed to recognise that I was asking participants about their emotional resilience within a professional setting but that it may be difficult for them to separate their personal and professional lives. During the interviews, I therefore remained aware that certain aspects of the participants’ resilience in their personal lives could be relevant but that the conversation would need to be redirected back to the professional context if it strayed too far into the personal realm. In practice, there was indeed an apparent overlap between resilience in the participants’ personal and professional lives although generally this was framed within the professional context overall. Secondly, the structure of individual questions required consideration.
Cresswell (2014) advises qualitative researchers to avoid asking ‘why?’ questions as this indicates a desire to understand cause and effect rather than to explore the experience of participants. I heeded this advice and asked ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions to invite open responses. In initially asking how participants developed and sustained their emotional resilience, I phrased this as a broad question and then followed up with a specific question about how their employing organisation did or could support them to be resilient. This decision was based on the literature review, which highlighted criticisms of resilience being framed as an individual responsibility without attention to the wider factors that can contribute to adversity (Collins, 2017; Garret, 2015). Thirdly, as a result of having completed a similar study for a Master’s dissertation a few years previously, which functioned as an extended pilot for my doctoral research, I was aware that asking only about adversity in the social work role may lead participants down a path of negativity. I therefore added a question about job satisfaction, which worked well in drawing out some positive feelings and seemed to offer a more rounded depiction of the role.

I remained aware of the potential pitfalls of interviewing by scrutinising the ‘thirteen obstacles of listening’ (Wengraf, 2001, p.202-203) to identify areas I needed to further develop. I was relatively confident in my interviewing skills having spent many years as a social worker being required to listen actively and engage empathetically. Certain pitfalls I felt I managed to avoid relatively naturally. For example, as I was using audio recording, I was able to engage in the interview process without becoming preoccupied with note-taking. Additionally, I found that I was not falling into the trap of attempting to advise or identify with the participants. This was potentially a bigger risk, as I had been a social worker previously and may have sought to bring my own experience into the process. However, I was genuinely more interested in hearing about the participants’ experiences than I was in recalling my own. The main pitfalls that I had to make more effort to avoid were ‘dreaming’ and ‘rehearsing’ (ibid.). In relation to ‘dreaming’, I found that thoughts were often sparked by what the participant was saying and I would begin a process of initial analysis and interpretation rather than focusing on the present moment task of engagement. In terms of ‘rehearsing’, at times my mind was occupied by thinking about how I would respond to the participant, which potentially impacted on my ability to actively listen. I developed a routine of listening to the audio recording of each interview soon afterwards to aid the process of reflection on my interviewing style. This brought my awareness to these issues and meant that I was able to adapt my style and minimise the potential impact.

The use of interviews to gather data has some limitations. There are questions about the ‘correspondence between verbal responses and behaviour, the relationship between what people say, what they do and what they say they do, and the assumption that language is a good indicator of

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thought and action’ (Punch, 1998, p.183). Furthermore, the information gathered is not directly observed and thus may be subject to a form of filtering (Cresswell, 2014). In other words, what participants say in interviews may not reflect their day-to-day reality as it is lived in practice. In addition, a social desirability bias may influence participant responses in interviews as well as focus groups. In my study, even without the presence of other social workers, the participants may have been reluctant to admit certain feelings to me as the researcher, or indeed to themselves. To counterbalance these limitations, I requested that the social workers keep a diary in addition to being interviewed. Hyers et al. (2006) suggest that diaries are a useful method for gaining insight into daily life experiences and enable researchers to ‘capture characteristics and frequencies of mundane incidents and any immediate responses to those incidents, thereby better capturing some of the subtle, sometimes ambiguous, and often forgotten aspects of experience’ (p.317). They assert that interviews and focus groups are more likely to emphasise the out of ordinary experiences, and to provide a summary and reflection on broader issues. In addition, they point out that interviews may be impacted by recall issues due to a time lag between the experience and its recollection (ibid.). My hope was that the information included in a diary format would enhance that provided by social workers during the interviews by allowing scope for reflection on the specifics of a working day. In terms of social desirability, there may also have been a greater willingness to share information in written form than in a face to face setting.

The diary questions (Appendix 4) broadly mirrored the interview questions in asking what had supported the participants’ resilience followed by a specific question about how the organisation had contributed towards this and what else might have supported their resilience. However, rather than asking about the social work role generally, as I did in the interviews, the diary format asked for information about the events of the day. This enabled a snapshot of the working lives of social workers in a way that the interviews did not necessarily capture. Although some of the participants’ responses to the interview questions were in the form of descriptions of particular situations, the time lag between the experience and its account, as highlighted by Hyers et al. (2006), may have affected recall whereas the diaries offered a more immediate account. The general question ‘how did it make you feel?’ after asking participants to describe what had happened at work that day was designed to be open to the identification of a full range of emotional responses to enable a wider analysis of their impact on resilience. Similar to the interview questions, a semi-structured format was used to provide a framework that offered guidance to the participants and made comparison possible while allowing for freedom of expression.
In deciding whether to carry out the interviews or diaries first, I considered the fact that asking for diary entries first would enable me to follow up on anything of particular interest at the interview. However, without having first had a discussion with the participants about their understanding and experience of resilience, I was concerned that they would be unsure how to complete the diary. This concern led to the decision to carry out the interviews before the diaries so that the participants had the opportunity to discuss the concept of resilience and come to a personal understanding of what it meant to them before highlighting examples in their diary entries. I left a space on the front page of the diary for participants to write their own definition of resilience in order to establish a reference point for articulating whether they felt resilient in the course of their day’s work. This was also enormously helpful in providing further data on their understanding of resilience as a theoretical concept.

I was aware that the time commitment asked of the participants, in both being interviewed and keeping a diary, may affect recruitment therefore I needed to find a balance between gathering sufficient data to be useful and avoiding making participation onerous. I decided to ask the participants to write five diary entries over a two-week period. Although this is a relatively short period of time, I recognised the irony, in a study on resilience, of creating adversity for social workers by contributing to their workload. Additionally, I reflected that my aim was to obtain a snapshot of daily working life and the factors that influenced resilience, whatever the events of the day may have been. Although less frequent diary entries might have allowed for a greater period of reflection, I reasoned that this could be achieved by the interviews and that the ‘snapshot’ quality of daily diary data could potentially add something new. As it was possible that issues would be raised in the diaries that warranted further exploration, I asked the participants if they were happy for me to contact them again. This left the possibility of further contact flexible rather than being a prescribed part of the overall research design. All of the participants agreed to this, however, following data analysis I did not deem it necessary, as no new themes arose in the diaries that had not been identified in the interviews.

The fact that no new themes emerged from the diaries raises the question of how useful they were as a data collection method. In my view, the study as a whole would have been valuable on the basis of the interviews alone and this was particularly the case since only nine of the twenty-eight social workers who participated in the study returned diary entries to me. However, the diary data was useful in corroborating the themes identified in the interviews and providing concrete illustrations. On reflection, I could have been more assertive about the need for diary data as an integral part of the research design but, as stated, I was reluctant to burden the participants. The use of other
methods of diary keeping such as video or audio diaries may have provided a less onerous alternative and encouraged greater participation. Quotes from the diaries as well as the interviews are included throughout this thesis. For the purposes of clarity for the reader, the quotes can be assumed to derive from the interview data unless explicitly identified as diary entries.

After gathering data from the interviews with social workers and completed diary entries, I moved on to Phase Two of the study in which I collected data from social work managers. My aim in this phase was primarily to address the research questions regarding how social work teams and organisations may support or inhibit the resilience of social workers and what more could be done to enhance it. The inclusion of this aspect of the research design arose from the Master’s dissertation I completed on the same topic, for which I interviewed thirteen social workers about how they developed and sustained emotional resilience. This previous study did not provide scope for an exploration of the wider organisational issues that were prevalent in the participants’ responses, and, as such, it was identified as an area for further research. Managers, in taking an overview of the functioning of social work teams, were deemed well placed to comment on this in the current study.

My initial plan for Phase Two of data collection was to carry out focus groups. This method seemed appropriate as I was not intending to seek information about potentially sensitive experiences from the perspective of individuals but rather to gain an understanding of the influence of teams and organisations as a whole. Focus groups enable ideas to be generated and meaning constructed during the process of group discussion. They allow people to ‘probe each other’s reasons for holding a certain view’ (Bryman, 2012, p.503) and are useful in ‘bringing to the surface aspects of a situation that might not otherwise be exposed’ (Punch, 1998, p.177). These features appeared to lend themselves well to this stage of my research in potentially facilitating the generation of ideas about how to develop resilience within teams and address barriers. If some social work managers felt that certain barriers were insurmountable, others may have put forward creative and innovative solutions. However, the social desirability bias was again a concern as managers, much like social workers, may have felt inhibited about sharing ideas with other professionals in a similar role and feared being judged on their competence. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, the practicalities of arranging groups of managers to meet at a fixed time was potentially a significant obstacle. For these reasons, I decided to carry out individual interviews.

The interviews with managers were of a slightly different format to those with social workers (Appendix 5). The initial questions were the same regarding definitions of resilience and whether it was seen as important in the social work role. Rather than exploring resilience as it related to
managers personally, the questions then moved to how social workers were being or could have been supported to develop resilience within teams and organisations. The interview culminated with me sharing the main themes identified in the data from the interviews and diaries with social workers. Each theme was written on a separate card and the manager was asked to sort the themes into categories of organisational responsibility, personal responsibility or both. They were then prompted to talk about these themes and to share any further views and perspectives. The themes from the social workers’ interviews and diaries were identified following an initial period of data analysis and were: supervision, organisational change and consultation, accountability, clarity of role, integration of health and social care, workload, bureaucracy, peer support, emotional support, stress management, reflective practice, professional development, level of social work experience, feeling valued, physical environment and healthy lifestyle.

On reflection, it would have been useful to undergo a more thorough process of data analysis before embarking on the interviews with managers to ensure that I had been able to identify a complete range of themes which accurately reflected the perspectives of the social workers. However, reviewing these themes at a later stage to check their relevance, I was satisfied that most remained prominent throughout all stages of the analysis and reflected the initial key findings. Most importantly, the themes related to both personal and organisational aspects of resilience, which enabled me to explore where the responsibility for enhancing the resilience of social workers was seen by the managers to lie. This was a key aspect of my study in light of criticisms identified in the literature review that some conceptualisations of resilience over-personalise it and neglect to consider wider factors. Overall, the interviews with managers were invaluable in gaining their perspectives on the factors identified by social workers as important to their resilience, thereby enabling an analysis of the extent to which the views of social workers and managers aligned.

3.4 Sampling and Recruitment

In any research design, it is important to be explicit about how participants are recruited and their task presented to them, as this may have an impact on the final data gathered (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). I took the approach of purposive sampling, which selects participants on the basis that they can provide data that assist in the formulation of theory (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Purposive sampling, like qualitative research more generally, does not aim to develop conclusions that can be generalised to a wider population but instead allows an in-depth exploration into a particular topic with findings that may be applicable in similar cases (Bryman, 2012; Robson and McCartan, 2016).
topic and research questions concern local authority social workers in adult services therefore my sample was drawn from this group. As stated, my rationale for seeking information from social work managers in Phase Two of the data collection was that they were in a position to comment on more general practices within teams and organisations, which may promote or inhibit the development of resilience among social workers. Sample size was my next consideration. For my previous Master’s study on the same topic, the interviews I carried out with thirteen social workers generated a great deal of data that could have contributed to a much larger study than I had scope for at the time. For this reason, I judged that approximately twice this number of interviews would generate sufficient data for a more in-depth study. I had no prior benchmark for the number of social work managers to be interviewed in Phase Two but surmised that ten would be sufficient to provide the overview of resilience within teams and organisations that I was seeking.

As an initial form of contact, I prepared an outline of my study and sent it, along with participation information and consent forms (Appendices 4, 5, 6 and 7), to the research officers or other appropriate contact person within various local authorities in Scotland. Each local authority had a slightly different procedure but generally, following the approval of my request, the details of my study were forwarded to team managers and cascaded to their teams. Individual social workers and managers were then free to contact me directly if they wished to take part. In the interests of cost and time, I began by contacting five local authorities within easy travelling distance. Four local authorities approved my request and one declined. Responses from potential participants within the four authorities began slowly and I was concerned that this would not yield the number I judged I needed in order to gather sufficient data, therefore I expanded my recruitment.

I contacted two additional local authorities but there was a lengthy delay in receiving a response despite several prompts. As I continue to be involved in the profession as an independent practice educator, I have contact with social workers through various forums and was able to approach them directly. This led to the recruitment of two further participants, one of whom was especially interested in the project and recruited a further three social workers from her team. This ‘snowballing’ effect may have had some impact on the data due to these four social workers being employed in the same team, however, overall it did not constitute a disproportionately large part of my sample. Additionally, I recruited several participants through the Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW) who agreed to promote my study on various social media platforms. This was useful in accessing participants from local authorities other than those I had already contacted. As my research request had not gone through the official channels for these prospective participants, I asked each of them to gain agreement from their line managers before proceeding.
For Phase One of the study, the final sample was twenty-eight social workers from seven different local authorities. The larger number of local authorities represented in the final sample than I had originally intended was useful in enabling a broader understanding of resilience within different organisational settings. Furthermore, it enabled greater anonymity of participants, which was especially important for Phase Two of the study when the themes that had arisen from the interviews with social workers were presented to managers. For Phase Two, I was able to recruit eight managers from two local authorities only. Ideally, there would have been a wider sample, however, diversity was less important for this phase as one of the main aims was to gain managers’ views on the range of themes that had arisen in the interviews with social workers in Phase One, which itself spanned several local authorities and thus offered a greater degree of diversity in setting.

3.5 Participants

Demographic information was recorded on a paper form completed by each participant just prior to their interview. This information is presented in the two tables below, Table 1 relating to the social workers and Table 2 to the managers. No prescribed categories were provided for gender and ethnicity thereby enabling the participants to self-identify.

Table 1: Participant Social Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Length of experience as a social worker</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>&lt; 1 year</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pia</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Non-British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eilidh</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Non-British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2: Participant Social Work Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Length of experience as a social work manager</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Scottish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 indicates, the majority of the twenty-eight social workers who participated in the study were White with one who identified as Black African. Of the twenty-seven White participants, fifteen defined themselves as Scottish, six as British, two as Non-British, two as Irish, one as English and one as Canadian. Twenty-two identified as female and the remaining six as male. Three were in the 21-30 age range, six in the 31-40 range, eight in the 41-50 range, ten in the 51-60 range and one was over 61. The length of experience as a social worker varied widely, from less than one year of experience as the shortest to thirty-eight years as the longest. To break this down further, six of the participants had five years’ experience or less, four had between six and ten years, thirteen had between eleven and twenty years, four had between twenty-one and thirty years, and one had over thirty years’ experience. Table 2 shows that, of the managers, four identified as White Scottish and four as White British. Six were female and two male. Three were in the 41-50 age range, four in the 51-60 range and one was over 61. Again, there was wide variety in the length of experience. Three of the managers had five years’ experience or less, three had between eleven and twenty years and the remaining two managers both had just over twenty years’ experience.

As the participants were self-selecting, it was not possible to ensure diversity in the sample. This was most apparent in terms of ethnicity as, across both samples, only one participant was not White and a significant majority defined themselves as White Scottish or White British. In terms of gender, the
large majority of the social workers and managers were female, reflecting the gender balance in the profession in Scotland, which is comprised of around eighty percent women (Unison Scotland, 2019). In other respects, however, the sample was diverse. There was a broad age range among the social workers and variety in the length of social work experience from newly qualified to those with over thirty years’ experience. The managers were all over forty, which reflects the fact that management positions tend to come later in one’s career, however, there was diversity in the length of experience as a manager.

As indicated in the tables, all of the participants are referred to by a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity, the reasons for which are discussed in the ‘ethics’ section of this chapter. As there are two distinct sets of participants, throughout the thesis they are differentiated, when using direct quotes, by referring to the pseudonym only of the social workers and the suffix (Manager) after the pseudonym of the managers. In direct quotes, my own part as the interviewer, is denoted with the abbreviation 'INT'. When discussing the findings more generally, the terms ‘participant social workers’ and ‘participant managers’ are used in order to make a distinction between the two groups. When no such distinction is necessary, the term ‘participants’ is used to refer to both groups collectively.

3.6 Data Analysis

In social research, data analysis can be said to begin from the transcription of data (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999), therefore the subsequent analysis of transcribed data is an ‘interpretation of an interpretation’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.9). Potter and Hepburn (2005) present an argument for detailed transcription including timed pauses, emphasis, volume, intonation and the overlapping speech of interviewee and interviewer. They acknowledge concerns that the ‘minutiae’ of conversation may distract from the overall messages of the data but argue that detailed transcription can more effectively denote the interactional nature of the discourse within interviews without detracting from the ideological content. After giving this some thought, I concluded that I would transcribe ‘verbatim’ but not in the level of detail described. Such detailed transcription is more useful when conducting discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013), which was not my intention. According to Wengraf (2001), verbatim transcribing, even without this minutiae of conversation, need not be considered a ‘cleaned up’ version of the dialogue and it is certainly less subjective than producing only a broad summary of the source data. Overall, transcription constitutes the first step of immersion into the data to become familiar with them (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and, while time consuming, certainly
functioned as an initial stage of analysis in my research, as I noted thoughts and ideas that arose during the transcription process.

I decided to use thematic analysis as my approach due to its alignment with a constructionist research paradigm. Thematic analysis is an active interpretative process and looks beneath the data in order to ‘theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.85). Braun and Clarke (ibid.) encourage researchers to reflect on what makes a theme a theme. They suggest that it is ‘something important about the data’ and represents a ‘patterned response or meaning’ (ibid., p.82). Fundamentally, it is about the prevalence of themes which address the research questions. Prevalence can refer to the number of participants referring to a particular theme or the number of times it is identified overall (ibid.). However, as qualitative research is not quantitative, this too is a matter of interpretation.

Thematic analysis involves a process of coding in which data are labelled to represent a theme alongside other data judged by the researcher to belong to the same theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding usually has two stages; first level coding and second level coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). First level coding involves a close, often line by line, examination of the data to apply initial labels. These codes may be revised many times or further broken down into component parts (Bazeley, 2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Second level coding gathers the initial codes into broader themes (Bazeley, 2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This stage of analysis further refines themes and develops an analytical understanding from which theory emerges (Charmaz, 2006). Themes may be discarded, combined or separated at this stage.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe the coding process in thematic analysis by likening data to a blob of jelly. First level coding describes the surface that can be seen and touched whereas second level coding seeks to understand what gives the jelly these surface qualities. In practice, therefore, the first level of coding is more descriptive and identifies surface themes whereas the second level goes beyond the data to seek meaning and significance in the themes identified. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) differentiate between ‘splitters’ and ‘lumpers’, the first referring to researchers who initially look for ‘fine-grained themes’ and the second who look for more ‘overarching themes’ (p.71). I followed the former in carrying out detailed line by line coding and then abstracting from the codes identified. For example, during first level coding, I labelled some pieces of text ‘self-compassion’ and others ‘self-expectation’. In the second level coding, these were both subsumed under the theme of ‘perspective.’ It is important that the codes have ‘internal homogeneity’ and ‘external heterogeneity’, meaning that the data within themes should relate to each other whereas the data in different themes should be
distinct (Patton, 2002). On this basis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest two further phases of reviewing themes. Firstly, all the coded data within each theme are reviewed to determine whether they create a pattern and fit the theme. Secondly, the broad themes are reviewed to determine whether they represent the whole set of data. The emerging theoretical ideas are the start of a process of conceptualising and abstracting from the data.

Overall, when coding my data, the line by line approach used in first level coding generated a large number of themes and, as a result, the second level of coding went through various iterations in an attempt to organise and make sense of the data set. For example, I noted that many of the participants used metaphor to talk about their emotional resilience, and this led to a broad theme of ‘metaphors of resilience’. However, while this was an interesting observation and ultimately very informative in how I understood the participants’ conceptualisations of resilience, it was not effective in generating theory from the data set as a whole. What emerged eventually was the identification of four broad ‘domains’ of resilience; personal, relational, cultural and structural. This final phase in the process of data analysis was inspired by Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model of anti-oppressive practice (2006), with which I had been familiar for some time. Thompson’s model presents an analysis of sources of oppression on a personal, cultural and structural level; categories which seemed to offer an equally clear and concise way of considering emotional resilience. Importantly, the three categories encompass individual and contextual factors, which have been consistently highlighted as important in much of the current and recent resilience literature. Given the prominence of relationships in supporting or hindering the resilience of the participants, according to the earlier phase of data analysis, a relational domain was added. Additionally, the participants demonstrated a significant commitment to effective and ethical practice, which underpinned much of what they articulated about their understanding and experience of resilience. Thus, the four domains were set against a backdrop of ‘professional integrity.’ This adaptation of Thompson’s PCS model to create a ‘holistic framework of emotional resilience’ is more fully discussed at the end of Chapter Four when I present the framework in full.

The comparison of data is an essential component of qualitative analysis. By comparing similarities and differences within and between data by means of the different levels of coding, the researcher can arrive at greater levels of theoretical abstraction (Punch, 1998). It is important to accept that contradictions may arise and for this to be acknowledged as the reality of rich, but sometimes messy, data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The ‘messiness’ of data means that coding is usually a cyclical rather than linear process as contradictions arise, are reconciled and further contradictions arise again. As I collected more data and went through various iterations of coding, the use of memos enabled me to track emerging ideas. Memos are kept to record the thought processes associated with devising codes.
as well as identifying links with other codes (Rubin and Babbie, 2007). Punch (1998) suggests that coding is the ‘systematic and disciplined’ part of analysis whereas memo writing is ‘creative-speculative’ (p.207). Below is an example of a memo, which records my thoughts following an interview with a social worker.

Thinking about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and systems theory as the participant spoke about resilience.

Maslow - basic comforts need to be in place before other needs can be met. Similar to resilience in that some adversities need to be addressed (i.e. survival) before thriving and flourishing are possible.

Systems theory - personal factors and work factors are all in the same pot of resilience either contributing to it or depleting it. If factors in personal life begin to deplete resilience, something needs to change in work life to sustain resilience.

In the end, these ideas were fundamental to the overall conceptual framework I went on to devise. Thus, the ‘creative-speculative’ process of memo writing proved invaluable.

Although informed to some extent by the literature review, my study was interpretative and therefore the codes were devised ‘in vivo’, meaning that they arose from the data rather than the data being categorised according to an a priori coding template (Robson, 2002). Nonetheless, even first level, more ‘descriptive’ coding remains open to the interpretation of the researcher. For example, in my study, a statement made by a participant about supervision could simply be labelled ‘supervision’ or be broken down into more detail to refer to a particular function of supervision such as ‘emotional processing’, ‘reflection’ or ‘management guidance.’ In some instances, data were labelled under two or more categories to reflect the different ways in which they could be interpreted. I undertook some concept mapping (Rossman and Rallis, 2017) to assist in this regard. Where themes began to appear multi-faceted, a visual image of a central idea and its related concepts proved useful to clarify my thinking. Concept mapping was especially formative in separating out the four domains of resilience which I settled on as my final conceptual framework, presented in Chapter Four. Additionally, mapping of the concept of ‘resilience’ itself, was enormously helpful in understanding its relationship to concepts of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘stress’ and how it could be seen as a process, an outcome, or indeed both. The following is an example of one such concept map that I developed.
As I had gathered a large amount of data, I used the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, for data storage, management and analysis. Various warnings about the use of software are important to heed. Bazeley (2013) cautions that the technology of the coding process can become the main focus and detract from creative thinking. There may also be a tendency to over code due to the relative ease that the use of software affords (Richards and Morse, 2007). Furthermore, it is important to remember that software does not guarantee rigour in the analysis process but rather provides ways to manage, query, and visualise data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). As such, I remained aware that the software was to be used as a tool to ease the management of my large data set but that the analytical process was for me to undertake. Nonetheless, certain features of NVivo aided my analysis considerably. Word frequency searches helped to identify the prevalence of words such as ‘stress.’ This was useful in establishing the extent to which the participants answered questions about resilience in terms of stress, and subsequently led to an analysis of what this might mean in relation to their conceptualisation and experience of resilience. Undertaking ‘cluster’ analyses was also useful to identify if certain themes were more prevalent among social workers or managers. Additionally, using the ‘hierarchy chart’ function, I was able to see the extent of coding across each data source, from which it became evident that the diaries generated fewer codes than the interview data. Using the same function to analyse the content of each code, it was useful to be able to identify the most prominent themes within broader categories. For example, within the broad theme of ‘relationships’,
it was apparent that ‘peer support’ was coded most frequently. Likewise, in the category of ‘organisational demands’, ‘workload’ was by far the most prevalent.

Overall, NVivo was invaluable in the process of coding and enabled quick retrieval of codes and sub-codes. I did not rely on NVivo entirely, however. At various stages of the data analysis process, I wrote the codes on paper, cut them up and sorted them into categories. This exercise was essential in enabling me to consolidate my thinking, and complemented the analysis process carried out technologically by enabling a more visual and tactile engagement with the codes and themes.

3.7 Reflexivity

As noted throughout this chapter, the underpinning philosophical assumptions of my research point to a degree of subjectivity and interpretation. In the positivist paradigm of quantitative studies with standardised research procedures, the researcher’s influence in data collection is assumed to be limited (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In contrast, within qualitative studies such as mine, the relationship between researcher and participant becomes a central component (Richards, 2020). Researchers are arguably not ‘passive receptacles into which data is poured’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.15) and, instead, bring their own biography characterised by particular values and interests (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Thus, the researcher needs to strive for a high level of self-awareness to recognise their situated position in the research study and to develop ‘reflexivity.’ The term ‘reflexivity’ relates to ‘actions that direct attention back to the self and foster a circular relationship between subject and object’ (Probst, 2015, p.37) meaning that researchers recognise that any knowledge generated is partly constructed during the interaction between themselves and participants (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In discussions about reflexivity, it can be unclear whether its aim is to increase objectivity, or whether subjectivity is acknowledged as inherent but transparency about this provides rigour to the findings (Probst, 2015). In my study, objectivity is not the focus of the social constructionist paradigm, therefore subjectivity need not be considered an obstacle but rather an integral part of the construction of knowledge. Nonetheless, it did necessitate an awareness of the influence of my own position and a responsibility to reveal the context in which knowledge was created.

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) refer to the nature of the ‘embodied’ and ‘situated’ researcher, which inevitably impacts on the research process both in terms of the researcher’s thoughts and feelings, and the participants’ impressions and judgements of the researcher. We all have physical
characteristics of ‘embodiment’ that are immediately evident to others and we are ‘situated’ in terms of our background, experiences, preferences and life choices, which can be deeply rooted and influential on our thinking. In relation to my own characteristics, I am a White English woman in my forties. These demographics were similar to many of the participants particularly regarding ethnicity with all but one participant identifying as White and predominantly White British. Gender was perhaps the most likely characteristic to have an influence given the focus of my topic on emotion and the stereotypes that can exist around women as innately ‘emotional’ and men as ‘rational’ (Simon and Nath, 2004; Shields et al., 2006). Such stereotypes could have led to male social workers being more inhibited about discussing topics associated with emotions and feelings. However, as is apparent in the following chapters, both male and female participants generally appeared willing to engage in discussions about their resilience and share accounts of their perceived emotional vulnerabilities.

Overall, as an interviewer I strove to convey a non-judgmental attitude in order to encourage open expression, and used active listening skills to demonstrate validation of what the participants shared.

Regarding my ‘situated’ self, I am a former social worker having been employed for a number of years in local authority adult services in Scotland. I decided to introduce myself as a doctoral researcher and, in the spirit of transparency that characterises reflexive research (Probst, 2015), explain that I had also been a social worker. On reflection, I believe that this encouraged a sense of connection, enabling participants to go into greater depth in their responses rather than viewing me as someone outside of the profession with a purely academic interest. This was demonstrated by participants leading their responses with phrases such as ‘you’ll remember this’ or ‘you’ll know what I’m talking about’. Of course, my interpretations and assumptions of intended meaning had to be verified but there was a sense of shared understanding that seemed to foster an environment within which the participants felt able to express their thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, I acknowledged Shaw and Holland’s observations (2014) on the challenges that may arise when researchers gather data from their own professional field. They warn against assumptions that ‘being an ‘insider’ will by its very nature yield somehow ‘better’ results than being an ‘outsider’’ (p.35). This view, they propose, is based on the idea that insiders can access essential knowledge that outsiders cannot. They reframe the issue by suggesting that the distinct knowledge of both researchers and participants interacts and is complementary to the other whether the researcher is within their own professional field or not.

A further consequence of being a former social worker was that I personally knew several of the participants. This was not a coincidence since some of my former colleagues were keen to support me with my research and, when recruitment was initially slow, I drew on my contacts to help promote the study and encourage wider recruitment. In addition, those known to me may have been more
likely to agree to participate if they felt more comfortable talking to someone familiar. On the other hand, being known to participants can lead them to view the researcher as a competitor or someone they must impress (Probst, 2015). In the final sample, six out of the twenty-eight social workers were known to me as former colleagues; a relatively small proportion and therefore unlikely to have significantly affected the findings. In contrast, the majority of managers were known to me; five out of a total of eight. Mostly they were people I had worked with as social workers who had since been promoted to management positions. The interviews with managers were not as personal in nature as the interviews with social workers, therefore this familiarity was perhaps less relevant in terms of how emotionally open they felt able to be.

In addition, my position as a former social worker relates to my original motivation in conducting this study. My interest in the topic arose while I was still a practising social worker and becoming increasingly aware of colleagues struggling to manage the demands of the social work role, ultimately succumbing to these pressures myself. It is inevitable that I hold my own opinions about what supports and detracts from resilience in this context, and I therefore had to be mindful of how my prior experiences might have influenced the research design and conclusions drawn. For example, in the process of data analysis, Robson (2002) warns against looking only for corroboration of existing viewpoints and ignoring conflicting data. A degree of reflexivity about one’s bias and motivation is needed in order to avoid this. It is now several years since I was a practising social worker and I believe that this has provided sufficient distance to separate my own experiences from the research process. In undertaking this study, I was not seeking an opportunity for personal exploration or catharsis but was, instead, impassioned to study the topic in the context of the adult social work profession as a whole. That said, the interviews with participants did, on occasion, remind me of my own experiences of acute periods of stress and burnout but enough time had passed that these did not trigger difficult emotions for me personally. Rather, it consolidated my overall motivation for the study.

As a step towards reflexivity and recognising my part in the co-construction of knowledge alongside the participants, I used a research diary to note down my thoughts and feelings as the research progressed, which was useful in enabling a greater degree of self-awareness. Reflexive researchers are ‘in essence, gazing in two directions at the same time. As they attend to what is taking place in the field of study, they become aware of their own projections, attachments, assumptions, agendas, and biases - like an eye that sees itself while simultaneously seeing the world’ (Probst, 2015, p.38). Indeed, it was in the process of reflective writing, when I turned an eye on myself, that I became aware of the impact of my own experiences as a social worker, while immensely challenging at times, having dissipated. Re-reading my research diary, it was apparent that they contained primarily thoughts and
analysis without any significant need for emotional processing. While striving to be reflexive in all of the ways discussed, I also heeded Probst’s warning (2015) that excessive reflexivity may ultimately take the focus away from the study itself and become stifling to the research process. Too much inward focus may lead to a lack of outward focus and an inability to hear what the participants are saying.

3.8 Ethics

Before carrying out this study, it was necessary to formally present a consideration of various ethical issues in the research design in order to receive the ethical approval that was then granted by the University of Edinburgh. Initially, it was important that each person who expressed an interest in participating was fully informed about what would be involved. To address this, an information sheet was emailed to prospective participants detailing the purpose and aims of the study, and advising how the information they provided was intended to be used. As the participatory role of the social workers and managers was slightly different, two versions of the participant information sheet were drawn up (Appendix 6 and Appendix 7). Robson and McCartan (2016) suggest keeping this to a maximum of one page so that it is not overwhelming. However, a balance does need to be found between limiting the amount of information given and providing sufficient detail to enable a clear understanding of the project.

To provide this balance, I included all essential details in the participant information sheet and offered the opportunity for prospective participants to contact me to ask any additional questions. It was emphasised that participation was voluntary and that involvement could cease at any time without the need to give a reason. A consent form, again with slight variations for social workers and managers (Appendix 8 and Appendix 9), was also sent to prospective participants with a list of statements that they were required to signify their agreement to before data collection commenced. What constitutes ‘informed consent’ can be difficult to establish. Robson and McCartan (2016) suggest that a minimum of twenty-four hours is given to enable potential participants to read and process information about the project. Providing the information sheet at the start of the interview is, therefore, not good practice from an ethical standpoint. As well as sending out the information sheet and consent form a couple of weeks in advance of the interview to enable the participant to make a fully informed decision about whether to be involved, I began the interviews by reiterating the nature of the study and the participant’s involvement thereby providing a further opportunity for them to ask questions or choose
to withdraw. The consent form was then signed by each participant immediately prior to the interview.

In relation to the topic of my study, the participants were not specifically vulnerable due to age, cognitive impairment, learning disability or mental health, or by virtue of being part of a disadvantaged or disempowered group (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Despite this, it was important to consider the potential sensitivity of the topic and how the data collection methods may affect the participants’ wellbeing (Shaw and Holland, 2014). The definition of a ‘sensitive’ topic is open to interpretation but, as my topic explored experiences of and responses to adversity, it had the potential to trigger distress among the participants. At the start of each interview, I advised participants that they need only respond to the questions in ways that felt comfortable and they could choose to cease the interview at any time. This, I hope, set the scene for a supportive environment in which to proceed. As the findings will demonstrate, many of the participants did indeed share experiences of stress and distress in their working lives. During the interviews, I remained alert to any signs of distress with a view to asking how the participant was feeling and checking whether they wished to cease or continue.

One participant became tearful during the interview. I responded by listening to her attentively, and asked if she would like to cease the interview or take a break. She assured me that she wished to continue and felt able to do so. As we progressed, I confirmed at intervals that she still felt able to proceed. Later that day I sent her a follow up email to ask how she was. We engaged in a little more email communication and I was confident that she was being proactive in seeking support. In contrast to concerns that the interviews may cause distress, some of the participants commented that they had enjoyed the opportunity to articulate their experiences of adversity and resilience. Although the interview was not intended to be therapeutic, and it would not have been ethical to give this impression, it seemed that the space to be heard was an important one for some of the participants. This provided some key data in itself about what might support resilience. At the end of each interview, I suggested to participants that, if they felt distressed as a result of the discussion, they should consider seeking support from a trusted person or from the independent counselling service provided by their local authority.

Confidentiality was a significant consideration in my study particularly as the participants spoke about personal experiences as well as sharing opinions regarding their employing organisations, not all of which were positive. As such, pseudonyms were used to present the interview and diary data in order to protect anonymity. Any other identifying information was removed, such as the participants’ place of work and use of terminology that could link them to a particular local authority. The audio
recordings, transcripts and diaries were stored on a password protected computer with the personal
details of the participants recorded separately and matched by a numbering system known only to
myself as the researcher. Participants were given a range of options for returning completed diary
entries; by work email, personal email or post. The diaries were anonymous, however, it was
highlighted to participants that their work email addresses might be accessible by colleagues or
managers. Ethically, it was also important to inform the social workers participating in Phase One of
the study, that the ideas they raised about resilience would be discussed with managers in Phase Two.
I emphasised that broad themes would be shared rather than specific comments, and that the
anonymity of individual social workers would be fully protected. Interviewing participants from seven
different local authorities was useful in strengthening anonymity and making identification of
individual participants unlikely.

Issues of confidentiality and information-sharing can also give rise to potential power dynamics in the
relationship between researcher and participant (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). I intuitively felt that I
did not hold power in the researcher/participant relationship as I was a ‘guest’ in a setting familiar to
participants and I was reliant on them for data that they could choose to share or withhold. However,
I also recognised the potential vulnerability for participants in sharing information, the use of which
they could subsequently lose control. To address this power imbalance, I was clear about what would
happen to the data and how it would be used. I advised that direct quotes would be incorporated into
my thesis and any future publications but that names and identifying information would be removed.
Although this aspect of the study was covered by the consent form, I ensured that I reiterated it in
person prior to the interview to ensure that the participant had fully understood.

Risk and harm to myself as the researcher also needed to be considered. Physical risk was not a
concern, however, emotional distress was a possibility. Having been a social worker and personally
experienced stress and burnout, there was a risk of ‘vicarious trauma’ (Grant and Kinman, 2013)
through listening to the experiences of others over a sustained period of data collection. However, as
stated, the time that had passed since I was a practising social worker had enabled me to process my
own feelings and recover from burnout. Indeed, at the time of the interviews I felt energised and
motivated to study the topic. Certainly, some of the responses from the participants during the
interviews caused me to feel concern for them however this remained in the realm of professional
concern rather than personal or vicarious distress.
3.9 Limitations and Challenges

Every research design has various limitations and challenges. In my study, the self-selection of participants may have led to bias with only those interested in the topic choosing to be involved. However, this did not necessarily influence the data in any particular direction, as the participants may have chosen to be involved either because they felt they had something to offer on account of being resilient or, conversely, of feeling low in resilience. Self-selection entails a further limitation regarding the diversity of participants. Without specifying any criteria other than being a local authority social worker in adult services, there was no control over diversity in characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and length of practice. As stated, the final sample was not diverse in terms of ethnicity although did reflect a range of ages and different levels of experience in the role. While there were many more women participants, this broadly reflects the gender balance in social work as a profession. Overall, the lack of diversity in some areas limited the potential for comparisons to be made.

A related challenge and potential limitation of the study was the small sample size, which meant that the findings could not be deemed generalisable to larger populations, however, it is hoped that the identified themes may prompt thought and discussion in other similar groups. The data collection as a whole was carried out between September 2018 and September 2019, however only one interview was carried out with each participant, and the diary entries for social workers covered a time span of only two weeks. This meant that the data collection was cross-sectional in nature and represented a distinct moment in time, therefore no analysis of the longer-term development of resilience was possible. However, the study was not intended to examine the impact of certain practices on the development of resilience, which would require a longitudinal approach involving data collection at different time points. Instead, its aim was to explore the concept and experience of resilience within a particular professional sphere, which its cross-sectional approach was able to achieve.

In terms of data collection, there may be issues of ‘stake and interest’ (Potter and Hepburn, 2005) that occur in interactions which are not entirely natural. In social research interviews, the interviewer can be seen as the ‘observer’ of the participant’s comments and there may be something ‘at stake’ in the setting of the interview that has the potential to shape the interaction (ibid.). In my research, focusing as it did on the professional social work role, what was at stake might have been the participant’s perceived reputation, status and competency, particularly when opening up about emotional vulnerability. Data obtained through diaries can also distort reality somewhat, as written accounts of specific events may ‘alter attention to the phenomena of interest in one's environment, making
participants attend to their social interactions with more vigilance’ (Hyers et al., 2007, p.328). Realistically, some degree of control or filtering may have taken place during both the interviews and diary writing particularly in relation to the ‘social desirability bias’ referred to previously (Bryman, 2012). However, what is considered to be desirable in relation to resilience is debatable and perhaps, therefore, less influential on the findings overall. It might be thought desirable to portray an image of strength and infallibility or, conversely, to be open and honest about experiences of stress and work demands.

The use of a social constructionist perspective embraces the notion that knowledge itself is socially constructed and cannot be otherwise. It recognises that the interaction between participant and researcher will have an impact on the data, and aims to take this into account in the subsequent analysis. In this way, the influence of various factors on the data gathered, as discussed in the context of limitations and challenges, are made explicit and recognised as being a unique characteristic of the research process. In fact, some of these supposed limitations could be seen as data in themselves; what the social workers chose to portray in the interviews and diaries may say something about what they believed to be expected of them in relation to socially constructed concepts of resilience in the social work role.
4. DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK OF EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

4.1 Introduction

Conceptualisations of emotional resilience are complex and multi-faceted. Definitions in the literature, as explored in Chapter Two, demonstrate the diverse perspectives that have been taken by scholars from different disciplines. While there is much variance, most definitions of resilience concern successful coping and/or adaptation in relation to adverse experiences (Fletcher and Sarker, 2013; Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001; Padesky and Mooney, 2012; Seery et al., 2010). While my study is constructionist in its perspective and therefore open to meanings and definitions arising from the data, Chapter Two concluded with a commitment to exploring both individual and externally influenced factors of resilience, and a recognition that there are diverse approaches to it.

With this as a foundation, the remaining chapters present the findings of my study. The current chapter provides an introduction to the findings, firstly by briefly outlining the aspects of the social work role which the participants identified as providing job satisfaction and those considered to be sources of adversity. An analysis of the participants’ conceptualisation of resilience follows. On the basis of the data presented, it is suggested that the participants experienced adversity and derived resilience in multiple ways; from a personal perspective, in their relationships with others, within teams and in the context of the organisations for which they worked. This analysis leads to the presentation of a holistic framework of resilience encompassing personal, relational, cultural and structural domains as well as recognising the key role of professional integrity in shaping experiences of adversity and resilience overall. A justification is provided for the development of this model and each of the four domains are explored in detail from Chapters Five to Eight. In recognition of the interwoven nature of the different domains of resilience identified, Chapter Nine draws together the overall implications for enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services, highlights some key points and identifies areas for further research.

4.2 Adversity and Job Satisfaction in the Social Work Role

Since the concept of resilience entails experiences of adversity, the participants were asked to identify aspects of their role that they found particularly challenging. To achieve a more balanced view, and to avoid leading the participants down a more negative train of thought and recollection, they were also
asked about sources of job satisfaction. The social workers in my study all worked in adult services within local authorities. Some were based in generic teams working with adults over the age of sixteen or, alternatively, had various specialisms in the areas of mental health, addictions and learning disabilities. Others worked in specific settings, for example hospitals and ‘initial response’ teams dealing with urgent situations. Whatever the setting, the majority of the social workers and managers articulated a view that social work was inherently stressful.

MARY: It’s a stressful job and I don’t think there’s any areas of social work that’s going to be easy or not stressful. That’s kind of a given but I feel like there’s levels of that that’s acceptable and I think, yeah, the more resilient you can be, you learn to kind of manage that.

KATIE (Manager): I think it is perhaps one of the most challenging jobs. I think to be effective as a social worker, it is extremely demanding.

Catherine commented that people who were not resilient would need to do something ‘less multi-faceted and less stressful’, and Lizzie expressed a view that the job was stressful ‘on a lot of different levels.’ This is perhaps to be expected given that much of the recent research into the working conditions of social workers, outlined in Chapter One, reports high rates of stress across all areas of social work (Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Unison Scotland, 2019). A study undertaken by McFadden et al. (2018b) obtained survey data from 1359 social workers in the UK and compared responses from those in children protection roles (368 participants) to those working with adults with learning disabilities (77 participants). The child protection social workers reported higher levels of burnout, however, its prevalence was high in both groups. The social workers in the learning disabilities services tended to be older, perhaps consisting of ‘survivors’ and those who had developed coping mechanisms over time.

Despite acknowledgement of the stressful nature of social work, all but two of the participants were able to identify sources of job satisfaction. The links between job satisfaction and resilience were clear, as the way the participants answered direct questions about job satisfaction mirrored what they said throughout the rest of the interviews and in diary entries about what supported their resilience. By far the most significant source of job satisfaction was the experience of working with service users, specifically the opportunity to build relationships and support service users towards positive outcomes either by engaging in therapeutic interventions or finding solutions to presenting issues.

EMILY: It was hugely satisfying to get people through the mess stage and start seeing them, I don’t know, discovering themselves, having the potential, trying new things, being successful at things, sometimes getting off drugs and going to university, in one person’s case.
STEPHEN: When that’s been a positive process for somebody and I’ve seen it through from the beginning to the end - that gives me a lot of satisfaction.

Sometimes questions about job satisfaction were met with narratives about particular situations, which helpfully illustrated the impact of working directly with service users.

ERICA: I remember one of the first cases that I had. I had a wee lady and she was bed bound and her family were literally having to feed her and we got her into permanent care and I did a review and basically, I had to chase her down the corridor because she was up and mobile and bright and alert. She was still confused, but you know her quality of life was clearly vastly improved and for me, if it’s anything, it’s seeing someone’s quality of life improve.

It seems significant that Melanie and Rachel, the two social workers who did not feel satisfied in their jobs, explained that this was largely due to a perceived lack of time and opportunity to carry out meaningful work with service users due to organisational constraints. Rachel had found satisfaction in the past when there had been more scope to take on a therapeutic role but without this it was ‘just a slog.’ When the managers were asked from where they believed job satisfaction was derived for social workers, they too focused primarily on relationships and intervention with service users.

Several participants talked about having good relationships with their team members in relation to job satisfaction, and this was also mentioned by two of the managers. Emily expanded on this by saying that these team relationships, as well as relationships with wider multidisciplinary professionals, provided an opportunity to be innovative and creative, which contributed to a greater sense of effectiveness in social work practice. Satisfaction derived from feeling effective was a prominent theme overall. Eilidh, an experienced social worker, expressed a view that social work is a very skilled job and that it gave her satisfaction to utilise these skills. Julie, more newly qualified, welcomed the opportunity to continue to develop skills and experience. Opportunities for professional development were considered important for job satisfaction as they led to a greater sense of skill and efficacy. Isabel, one of the managers, commented that skills should be nurtured in the workplace, and Hazel and Katie, also managers, saw it as their role to provide positive feedback to social workers in order to support a sense of achievement.

Having variety and manageable challenges within their role was mentioned by some of the participant social workers as a source of satisfaction.

INT: Is there anything else that gives you job satisfaction?
KAREN: Being able to have a day that’s not usually the same, usually very different. Not massively different but sometimes you don’t know what’s going to come in over that phone call or email or somebody’s going to come running in and say, such and such has done this.

Catherine also enjoyed variety in her day-to-day work and had deliberately chosen what she described as a ‘high end’ role working in a community mental health team so that her interest and satisfaction would be maintained through taking on different challenges. In contrast, Mike characterised his role in a hospital setting as ‘a bit kind of samey, so there’s probably a wee bit of that where you just possibly need a new challenge.’ Emily felt that development and growth happened through being ‘challenged without being crushed.’ These comments reflect Crane and Searle’s suggestion (2016) that the experience of managing challenges can be associated with the enhancement of resilience, personal growth and job satisfaction. This is in comparison to challenges that are experienced as ‘hindrance stressors’ which can erode resilience and lead to lower job commitment (ibid.). Emily’s comment reflects this in highlighting that there may be a fine line between being challenged in a way that supports resilience and being ‘crushed’ by demands that are perceived to be beyond one’s capacity to cope. Similarly, Ungar (2018) emphasises that some degree of challenge or adversity can help to develop resilience but warns of the ‘tipping point between too little and too much stress’ (p.28).

Indeed, there were many examples given by the participants of moving beyond this tipping point into the realms of stress and unmanageable demands. They referred to an array of sources of adversity relating both to working directly with service users and wider organisational factors. The challenges of working with service users were generally expressed as emotional in nature and related to engaging with people experiencing distress and trauma. While this aspect of the role created some particular pressures that will be explored in more depth throughout the thesis, it was generally found to be manageable with strategies of support. Much more prominent in the data were the demands and stressors that derived from the organisation, reflecting findings from various other studies cited in Chapters One and Two (Audit Scotland, 2016; Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Unison Scotland, 2019). The stressors for the participants of my study involved various aspects of the policies, procedures and culture of teams and organisations as well as working with professionals from other disciplines. The pressure of a heavy workload was a significant theme and, as well as being stressful in itself, further impacted resilience by negatively affecting work and home life balance, reducing the scope for professional development activities, and making the prioritisation of tasks more difficult. Another significant adversity involved the value base of social work. Most of the participant social workers demonstrated a strong moral code by which they carried out their role. Ethical dilemmas arose when
the participants felt they were prevented from practising in a way that accorded with their personal and professional values.

This overview is intended to provide only a brief outline of the findings relating to sources of satisfaction and adversity in the social work role in local authority adult services. The themes are discussed further in the remaining chapters of the thesis, when a more in-depth analysis is presented and the implications considered. In this introductory findings chapter, the discussion now turns to the ways in which the participants understood the concept of emotional resilience.

4.3 Conceptualisations of Emotional Resilience

In the course of the interviews, the participants were asked whether they thought it was important for social workers to be resilient. The answer was an unequivocal ‘yes’ from social workers and managers alike.

*INT: Do you think that it’s important to be resilient as a social worker?*

*MAGGIE: If you want, well I think, if you want to survive basically.*

This is to be expected given the participants’ comments presented about the inherently stressful nature of social work, and it is interesting that Maggie couched resilience in terms of ‘survival’ rather than thriving. Nonetheless, most of the participants said that resilience was not a word often used within their teams and organisations. When asked if resilience was spoken about using different terminology, the general response was, again, ‘stress.’

*ZARA: We’d never talk about resilience, never talk about that kind of thing. We might talk about stress and we might talk about time management but we never talk about resilience.*

An analysis of the data revealed that the word ‘stress’ and variants of it (‘stressed’ and ‘stressful’) were mentioned 321 times across the interviews and diary entries. This was in spite of the fact that the interview questions were intentionally structured to focus on resilience rather than concepts such as stress and burnout. Although resilience was not a word commonly used in the professional lives of the participants, they were able to articulate a broad understanding of it and from this several themes emerged.

Before presenting these themes, it is important to reiterate that, in accordance with the social constructionist perspective of my study, I did not provide a definition of emotional resilience to the
participants. The hope was that how they articulated their responses within the interviews and diary entries would convey something about resilience in the context of their social work role. Indeed, when asked about their understanding of resilience, the participants responded with conceptualisations that were often intertwined with and inseparable from their day-to-day experiences as social workers. As the interviews progressed, I also became aware of the prevalent use of metaphor as a means of expression. The indirect nature of metaphor in language means that it is open to interpretation and therefore risks having meaning attributed that was not intended by the user. While wanting to avoid such a trap, I was curious about the extent to which similar metaphors came up across the interviews and keen to explore what they might say, indirectly, about the emotional resilience of social workers.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that ‘the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (p.5). In their view, metaphor is not merely a linguistic tool but operates at the conceptual level prior to the expression of an idea in words. As such, the language people choose to use to convey their experiences can illuminate underlying conceptualisations, beliefs and feelings about these experiences. In a later work, Lakoff (1993) suggests that metaphor is particularly prevalent when talking about abstract concepts and the norm when referring to emotions. It is not surprising that my study, focusing as it does on the emotional realm, would elicit a range of metaphors which, according to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory, may illuminate how social workers and managers think about, feel and experience resilience. The metaphors used by the participants were usually physical in nature and helped to portray the less tangible and more subtle characteristics of resilience in relation to emotional experience.

The toolbox of resilience

The ‘first wave’ of resilience research tended to focus on individual experience and emphasise personality traits rather than considering the wider factors that might have an impact (Hart et al., 2016). In my study, there was a general consensus among the participants that resilience is multi-faceted. While most of the participants, both social workers and managers, thought that personality may be a factor, they tended to describe resilience more holistically.

GEMMA: I think it’s a personality trait in some ways. Some people are better at it than others naturally. I think it can be learned and I think you can have things in place to help you with it. But I suppose it’s a mixture.

A metaphor used to describe the multi-faceted nature of resilience was one of a ‘tool box’ or set of tools.
TOM: I think you definitely increase your resilience by having more knowledge, by having experience and skills, by having a toolbox, a range of things you can draw on at different times and you’re always adding things to it, your skills and knowledge, so you get a whole range of spanners and screwdrivers and things that you can use.

LIZZIE: It’s almost like little pegs that need to be put into holes and if one or two pegs are in, it’s maybe not enough.

The toolbox metaphor helpfully draws attention, not only to the multi-faceted nature of resilience, but to the diversity of the social work role and tasks. There are a range of ‘holes’ that represent different aspects of the social work role and certain ‘pegs’ that support the social worker to fulfil these.

Given this diversity, what contributes towards resilience is likely to vary, reflecting the ‘many pathways’ approach highlighted by Padesky and Mooney (2012). Each social worker will have a unique set of tools and this will have implications for how they can maintain and develop their resilience.

LIZZIE: I think different people need different things to be resilient, like different things chime with different people. So, I think it would be difficult to say, if we do this, workers will be resilient, because I think there are so many tiny things that have to be done.

The discussion of resilience theory in Chapter Two highlights how emotional resilience is generally considered to be multi-dimensional and involve a range of traits, attitudes, skills and resources. It is important to acknowledge this diversity from the outset in order to make clear that any framework of resilience is unlikely to be applicable to every social worker in its entirety. Rather, some aspects may resonate with some social workers some of the time.

The impact of childhood

Many of the participants spoke about the impact of childhood experiences. For some, having a stable childhood was thought to contribute to their resilience as adults. This was presented from both a personal and more general perspective.

PIA: I think it’s probably mostly to do with your experiences growing up, going back to childhood, even back to things like attachment and those kinds of things. It starts there. If you’ve got a good solid base to start with then everything else is easier.

Research into the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has highlighted how abuse, neglect and household adversity can lead to poorer outcomes in physical and mental health, and a greater prevalence of health harming behaviours in adulthood (Couper and Mackie, 2016). Past trauma can be a motivating factor for people entering the social work profession and this is an important
consideration for organisations in supporting the resilience of their workforce (McFadden et al., 2015). However, for some of the other participants, resilience was perceived to have been strengthened by adverse experiences as children.

TOM: I think life experience has probably made me more resilient. I think some things I’ve been through in life, I think as we go through life we cope much much better and things that throw people off don’t tend to do that to my sister and I because we probably experienced more in childhood.

There was a recognition from others that difficult childhood experiences may positively or negatively influence resilience in adulthood.

KIRSTEN: I would say that positive childhood experiences give you a general grounding of resilience, that you’re able to maybe cope more with things that come along in life but I think sometimes negative experiences, if you’ve been positively supported and your personality is such that you have risen above things.

This non-predictive perspective is recognised in traditional texts on strengths-based social work (Saleebey, 1996) and is, in essence, what early researchers in childhood resilience focused on (McMurray et al., 2008): how do some children experience positive outcomes in adversity while others do not? There is a sense from the participants’ comments that difficult experiences could contribute towards resilience as long as other supportive factors were present. Indeed, many resilience scholars highlight the need for external support to boost resilience. Ungar’s use of the Cinderella fairy tale quoted in Chapter Two points to the fact that, when external support is neglected in conceptualisations of resilience, the ‘resourced individual is hidden in the footnotes’ (Ungar, 2018, p.17). This holds an important message for supporting the emotional resilience of social workers. While personal traits and qualities may be important to a degree, the demands of the social work role are likely to be more manageable if resources and supports which nurture resilience are identified. This thesis aims to draw attention to these external factors, bringing them out of the footnotes and onto the page.

The impact of life experience

Beyond the impact of childhood, experiences throughout life were seen as significant by a majority of the participants.

EILIDH (Diary entry): Resilience starts the minute one is born and builds throughout life and has to be thought about and constantly refined. It changes through life’s experiences and is an essential part of how life goes and in what direction.
As some of the resilience literature also suggests (e.g. Seery et al., 2010), the experience of adversity in adult life was considered by some of the participants to develop resilience and enhance one’s coping capacity for future adversity. Other participants expressed mixed views about whether adversity in adult life may support or deplete resilience.

**ZARA:** You can empathise more if you’ve maybe had significant bereavements and your client has a bereavement so you can be congruent and empathetic.

**INT:** Sure, so you think that if you’ve had a difficult experience, are you saying that that increases your resilience?

**ZARA:** Only sometimes, it depends. It can increase it because you think well, nothing is going to be as bad as that, or it can make you worse because you think, oh I can’t phone my mammy about this because she’s not here. So, it all depends.

As Zara’s comment suggests, even one specific adverse experience can have the potential to both enhance and deplete resilience.

General life experience, in addition to the experience of adversity itself, was seen as supporting resilience for some.

**TOM:** If you’re going through something at work, you’re really busy doing something and you’re struggling with it, the more life experience you have, you know you’ve not got much further to go until it will be better, therefore you’re maybe not drawing on your resilience so much. In the past, if you had to do that it would be like a mountain to climb because you hadn’t experienced it before, you didn’t know what the outcome would be and therefore you would be using more of your resilience.

The ways in which life experience was felt to contribute towards resilience appeared complex and was related to a myriad of factors associated with the acquisition of knowledge, awareness and understanding. Again, the multi-faceted nature of resilience was evident.

Despite the links made between general life experience and resilience, there was a belief expressed by some participants that higher levels of resilience and greater experience as a social worker did not necessarily correlate.

**LINDA:** There are many social workers who have been doing this gig for years and years and years, and they are kind of not able to be as resilient. They do kind of get a bit involved and a bit overwhelmed. I’m not saying I don’t from time to time, of course I do, and you meet, sometimes, new social workers who just seem to have it.
Certainly, in my study, it was not always the case that younger and/or more newly qualified workers expressed lower levels of resilience. For example, Gemma and Julie, both in their twenties and with under three years’ experience, described themselves as resilient whereas Ian, in his thirties with five years’ experience and Kirsten, in her forties with fifteen years’ experience, were more hesitant in identifying themselves as resilient. While the sample for this study is too small to make generalisations about a wider population, this may serve as a reminder not to make assumptions that more experienced workers are inherently more resilient than those who are newly qualified, while recognising that experience can play a part for some.

Coping with adversity

While there was some diversity in what the participants considered to be the impact of life experience as children and adults, they all thought that resilience was fundamentally about coping.

*Gemma*: I would say it is ways of an individual coping with certain issues or tasks, or anything really.

*Daniel*: I think it’s a big thing now, thinking about how social workers cope in the stressful environment that we work with.

The concept of ‘coping’ as an intrinsic aspect of resilience is widely referenced in the literature and is discussed in some detail in Chapter Two. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) make an important distinction between adaptive and maladaptive coping, the former reducing stress and the latter potentially increasing it. Likewise, Tobin et al. (1984 cited in Adamson et al., 2014) differentiate between engaged and disengaged coping mechanisms. Carver et al. (1989) go one step further in suggesting that ‘negative’ coping strategies are not aspects of resilience at all. Among the participants, it was only Hannah who explicitly made this distinction.

*Hannah* (Manager): An emotionally resilient person would be able to manage their feelings and their thoughts in response to stressful situations. They would be able to manage that in a healthy way and have healthy coping strategies round about that rather than unhealthy coping strategies.

Other research in the social work field further supports the view that the use of active coping strategies by social workers can support resilience and decrease the risk of burnout, whereas avoidant behaviours do not (McFadden et al., 2015).

As well as focusing on coping as a more reactive form of resilience, it was suggested in Chapter Two that proactive resilience may be nurtured by appraising adversity in a different way, in order to reduce its negative impact from the outset (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Rutter, 1993). Some prominent
philosophical and therapeutic approaches such as Stoicism and cognitive behavioural therapy were discussed, which highlight the importance of perspective and situational appraisal in maintaining emotional resilience. This was mentioned by several of the participants in my study.

ZOE: Certain people have personalities which, because of the type of outlook they seem to have and the type of, the way that they see things, that perception of things, it might bolster their resilience.

IAN: Being emotionally resilient for me is recognising the difficulties and negative thoughts and re-framing them in a more positive way.

These comments present the cause and effect of situational appraisal in different ways. Zoe seems to suggest that a positive perspective enhances resilience, whereas in Ian’s view, it is resilience which enables a positive perspective. It is possible that both effects come into play in a circular effect; positivity both enhances and is enhanced by resilience. Either way, it appears to be a significant aspect of emotional resilience and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Being anchored: Resilience as stability

Within the literature, some theories of resilience, notably Bonanno (2004), perceive it to be the maintenance of a healthy level of functioning. Many of the participants expressed similar views.

STEPHEN: Emotional resilience is maintaining our health, well-being and ability to engage in the work we are doing when we may feel stressed; worried or anxious about things.

HAZEL (Manager): Somebody who has the kind of staying power and the emotional capacity to absorb all of that and the emotional, just keeping going day after day and the emotional capacity within themselves to manage that.

Hazel’s use of the metaphor ‘staying power’ suggests notions of stability, steadiness and solidity, which were apparent in metaphors used by other participants.

PIA: People need to feel secure and that you are, we can be almost like a rock. People have made comments before where they’ve said, this worker was there and they were steady and they were with me throughout.

ANNE (Manager): Some people’s emotional resilience can be a really nice big barrier between them and the world and, if they are having a rough time, it can be a little thin veneer.

Vulnerability to stress and adversity was expressed as being ‘broken’, ‘worn down’, ‘spread too thinly’, ‘crushed’ or ‘tipped over’ and references were made to ‘having a melt-down’, ‘fraying at the seams’, ‘having a wee wobble’ and ‘crumbling.’ Resilience was described as being ‘anchored’ and ‘emotionally
tough’, and being able to ‘stand your ground’ and ‘pull your weight.’ Anne’s earlier quote suggests a fluctuating quality to resilience as it changes from being a ‘big barrier’ to a ‘thin veneer.’ In the literature, resilience is similarly defined in the metaphor of a ‘weeble’; a child’s toy that cannot tip over even when pushed or knocked (McMurray et al., 2008).

In physical terms, a material object may be able to withstand some degree of physical pressure but there is a breaking or destabilising point. Reflecting on this notion in terms of the emotional rather than the physical, it suggests that both the frequency and severity of challenges are significant; one small pebble thrown at you may have little impact but many small pebbles or one large rock may knock you down. As discussed in the following chapters, it was predominantly the everyday demands, the small pebbles, which were identified by the participants as detrimental to resilience. Significant one-off events were rarely mentioned although it may have been that such events were simply not called to mind during the interviews and in diary entries. Grant et al. (2014b) emphasise that low-level stressors are likely to offer little opportunity for recovery and may therefore have a greater impact on the resilience and stress of social workers whereas Crane and Searle (2016) maintain that everyday stressors can in fact increase coping ability and enhance resilience. It is perhaps significant that Crane and Searle’s assertion relates to resilience generally, rather than the social work role specifically.

The use of metaphors of stability and solidity sometimes took on connotations of assault and the armour required to withstand this.

**LINDA:** Experience tells you that that bomb could go off at any moment. So always being prepared for that so you’re not ambushed because I think being ambushed really destroys your emotional resilience.

**EILIDH:** Resilience isn’t visible, it’s like boundaries, it’s an inner thing. You’re building that armour.

Naomi (Manager) described the role as ‘hard hitting’ and Kirsten felt that she had been ‘slammed into this world.’ For Emily, resilience was about ‘not allowing yourself to be trodden on.’ Beckett’s observations (2003) on the ‘siege metaphors’ used by social workers in children’s services draw parallels with these comments.

When demands are persistently made on human beings that they cannot meet, a normal reaction is to begin to feel attacked. In order to articulate and ‘make visible’ these experiences we naturally turn to the most visible form of human conflict - war.

(Beckett, 2003, p.637)
For social workers to feel stable and not under ‘attack’, it is pertinent to examine the demands on them to ensure that they can reasonably be met rather than focusing only on their ability to cope and withstand such demands. As explored in Chapter Two, some theoretical perspectives of resilience propose an ecological rather than individualistic framework for understanding resilience, taking account of the influence of external factors on both resilience and adversity, and moving away from the idea of resilience as an individual responsibility (Garrett, 2015; Neocleous, 2013). This is a reminder that the resilience of social workers may be boosted, not just by requiring them to find appropriate coping strategies and be ‘steady’ and ‘tough’ but by addressing sources of adversity that may make them feel under siege.

**Staying afloat: Resilience as buoyancy**

Similarly, metaphors relating to buoyancy such as ‘drowning’ and being ‘swamped’ or ‘bogged down’ were used by the participants to describe their finite capacity to manage heavy workload demands. Mary characterised moving into her first social work post as being ‘chucked in at the deep end’ and Linda felt that under the demands of the role it was a case of ‘sink or swim.’ Some of the managers also used buoyancy metaphors to conceptualise resilience. In Peter’s view, resilience was ‘being able to float with the tide rather than fight against it’ and Anne recognised that the demands of the role could cause social workers to ‘go under.’ These metaphors are useful in highlighting the sustained efforts required to stay afloat under the pressure of everyday tasks and to ‘keep an even keel’, in Mike’s words, in the choppy waters of demanding situations. While the idea of ‘floating with the tide’ suggests that resilience may be maintained by adapting to current circumstances, in other ways the metaphor again calls for a consideration of the source of the demands. This is expressed aptly in Desmond Tutu’s widely cited quote, which uses a similar metaphor as a reminder to examine the root causes of suffering.

> There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.

(Goodreads.com, no date, online)

This is especially important given that what is seen above the surface of the water may belie what is happening underneath. Although not mentioned by anyone in the current study, in previous research into the emotional resilience of social workers (Rose and Palattiyil, 2020), references to the buoyancy metaphor alluded to being a swan or duck, appearing serene and composed, while frantically paddling below the surface of the water in order to stay afloat. This reflects Hochschild’s ideas (1983) of ‘surface acting’ which can ultimately lead to disillusionment, burnout and the erosion of resilience.
**Bouncing back: Resilience as recovery**

In contrast to ideas of stability, many theories of resilience suggest that adversity can have a negative impact and that resilience enables recovery from it. Crane and Searle (2016) propose that resilience is about adapting to adversity with a ‘short-lived’ impact on usual functioning (p.468) and Seery et al. (2010) emphasise that ‘adequate opportunity for recovery between stressors’ (p.1037) is necessary in order to maintain resilience. Many others use the metaphor of ‘bouncing back’ to illustrate this recovery (Grant and Kinman, 2013; Rajan-Rankin, 2014; Tugade and Frederickson, 2004).

In my study, the metaphor of ‘bouncing back’ was used by several of the participants to describe their understanding of resilience.

*KAREN: I suppose emotional resilience in my mind would be being able to bounce back, what you are able to deal with emotionally, not necessarily be a constant, at a constant baseline of emotion but being able to recover from the knocks and the blows, and highs as well, of the work that you do.*

In a physical sense, bouncing back entails having sufficient elasticity or flexibility to yield and adapt to a degree of pressure, however, too much pressure can lead to a ‘snapping’ point. All of the participants in my study defined social work as stressful and felt resilient to varying degrees. They generally saw themselves as able to tolerate the pressures of the role to some extent, however, in order to bounce back and return to a more stable level of functioning without snapping, there must be periods of time for recovery when little or no pressure is exerted. The idea of recovery being an intrinsic part of resilience perhaps offers a more compassionate approach than the idea of stability. It entails an acceptance that adverse and challenging experiences may give rise to difficult emotions and a temporary loss of usual functioning but that, with resilience, recovery is likely to follow.

**Topping up the tank: Resilience as finite**

Building on the idea that resilience is not absolute and that social workers may have a ‘breaking’, ‘snapping’ or ‘drowning’ point if demands exceed their capacity to cope, a sense of the finite nature of resilience was also conveyed. Again, it was metaphors used by the participants that alluded most strongly to this rather than literal statements.

*CATHERINE: When there is one thing after another you can feel battered and resilience is harder. It’s like going on a long journey, you have to keep filling up the tank.*
NAOMI (Manager): If you’re not firing on all cylinders or you haven’t got the ability to cope with firing on all cylinders, then you’re just going to crash.

The well-known term ‘burnout’ to describe workers experiencing emotional exhaustion, negativity, cynicism and reduced efficacy (World Health Organisation, 2019) is itself a metaphor which alludes to a fire burning itself out through lack of fuel.

The idea of resilience as fuel encapsulates some nuances of the finite nature of resilience in a way that the other metaphors did not. Lizzie spoke about having a ‘resilience tank and I strap it on every morning and I go out to my work.’ She stated that ‘some things deplete the tank and some things top it up.’ Generally, the participants did not seem to visualise one ‘fuel tank’ for their professional life and another for their personal life. Rather, their lives were viewed holistically. The fluctuating levels of resilience arose from an interplay between home and work with experiences in one potentially leading to higher or lower levels of resilience to cope with challenges in the other. Emily’s comment articulates the real life impact that may occur as a result.

EMILY: I definitely have to limit what I do outside work in order to be able to function at work so I’m quite careful about what I get involved in outside work. Probably two or three friendships have ended, not dramatically but just because those people were too demanding and I can’t do that at work as well. So, I’m conscious about trying to get what I need outside work in order to be able to be effective at work.

This idea of resilience as fluctuating is one widely held in the literature (Crane and Searle, 2016; Howe, 2008; Padesky and Mooney, 2012; Rutter, 1993) and can be seen to relate to the existence of risk and protective factors (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Masten and Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1993). If risk factors deplete the tank and protective factors top it up, it follows that resilience can be maintained both by reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors to ensure a resilient balance. As resilience appears to be multi-faceted, what constitutes risk and protection is likely to vary from person to person and may also change and fluctuate over time. Indeed, Rutter (1993) points out that it is more useful to think of ‘risk mechanisms’ rather than ‘risk factors’, as the effect of a risk will operate in different way depending on the situation and the person experiencing it.

The metaphor of currency was used by some of the participants with similar connotations of resilience as an exhaustible resource. Tom referred to resilience as ‘your personal capital’ and Lily characterised social workers as the ‘assets’ of the employing organisation. Anne (Manager) recognised that senior managers can become so disconnected from day-to-day social work practice that they do not realise the ‘toll’ that is taken on the wellbeing of social workers. The idea of resilience as currency adds to the
metaphor of fuel by introducing an element of exchange. It invites a question about what social workers expect in return for the personal capital they use in the course of their professional roles. This was only occasionally framed as monetary reward. Zara expressed a view that she was well paid and that this supported a good quality of life but other references to financial compensation were more negative.

**ZOE:** I feel I’m often here late anyway, many of us are. We’re doing the hours but we’re doing them for free and it’s not fair but it’s because we care about the people we’re trying to get things in place for.

**ISABEL (Manager):** I know that that stress will cause social workers to wake up at three o’clock and stay awake until six o’clock in the morning. And also, nobody’s paying them for that three hours that they’re thinking, how am I going to work that out, what am I going to do about that person? Nobody pays them for that.

More commonly the idea of currency expressed how the participants were using aspects of their ‘self’ as a resource and making a personal investment. What was sought in exchange for this was less a material or monetary compensation but more a sense of being personally valued. Chapter Seven examines what the social workers in my study were seeking in exchange for their investment of self and how this contributed toward their resilience.

**Being effective: Resilience as professional integrity**

Not immediately evident, but ultimately instrumental to my findings, was the extent to which an overall sense of doing one’s job effectively played an important part in sustaining the emotional resilience of the participant social workers. Efficacy was predominantly portrayed in relation to the impact on service users. Taking the quotes from Zoe and Isabel as examples, although they were used to demonstrate a point about lack of financial compensation, they also conveyed a sense that unpaid work was carried out in commitment to service users. Across the data, although some of the participants’ responses to questions about their emotional resilience related to personal wellbeing, there was also a great deal of reference to the need to feel effective in one’s role in relation to working with service users.

**JULIE:** I think it’s more about just self-care, protecting yourself, ensuring that you are fit to do the job and having that understanding that if you’re not fit in yourself to do it then how can you provide a service that you would be either proud of or happy to receive yourself?

**KATIE (Manager):** I think sometimes resilience is your confidence in yourself that what you’re doing is a good job.
Julie’s quote is striking in that self-care and being ‘fit to do the job’ are portrayed as essentially the same.

When metaphors of bouncing back and fuel were used, often there was a desire not only to bounce back but to have sufficient energy to continue moving forwards in order to be effective. Kirsten’s depiction of resilience was the ability to ‘keep going.’ She felt that without resilience, you just ‘plod along’ and achieve little. When there is too much pressure, it is possible to ‘lose your way’ (Rachel) or ‘it can freeze you’ (Linda). Katie (Manager) commented that, without resilience, ‘drift’ could happen in a social worker’s engagement with service users, and that ‘if a case is not moving forward, it’s often moving backward’ indicating that the social worker’s intervention is not having a positive impact. In other studies, resilience has been linked to efficacy in a similar way. A quantitative study of 162 child protection workers found an association between resilience and personal accomplishment, in terms of positively influencing the lives of service users (McFadden et al., 2019). As explored in Chapter Two, resilience need not be concerned only with recovery to a pre-existing baseline but can entail the potential to ‘bounce back and beyond’ (Youssef and Luthans, 2007, p.784). This may partly explain why positive outcomes for service users, mentioned earlier in the context of job satisfaction, were so important for the social workers in my study; such outcomes can provide a tangible manifestation and affirmation of efficacy.

This sense of efficacy was often bound up in notions of ethical practice and the upholding of social work values, again, particularly in relation to engagement with and support of service users. Social workers carry out their roles in local authorities and are accountable to these authorities in the work they undertake. However, it was interesting to find that, in addition to organisational accountability, some had developed ways of holding themselves personally accountable to ensure that they were performing in a way that met their own ethical standards.

CATHERINE: One of the things as a social worker I do to bring myself back to hopefully a non-judgmental, helpful approach is to pretend I’m being videoed. I used to do this in the duty sessions when I was in another council because you’d be like, Friday afternoon, oh no, someone else has lost their money and no electricity and I would be like, OK, just pretend you’re being videoed by social work students. They’re going to watch this. How do you want to project this sense of caring in this situation?

In some instances, individual and organisational priorities were based on different values and this created a mismatch between what the participants were expected to do and what they felt they should be doing. In the face of threats to individual ethical standards, resilience could be depleted. A less obvious metaphor of elasticity was reflected in Catherine’s comment that she felt ‘pulled in
different directions’ in relation to managing conflicting priorities and demands, again alluding to a snapping point if the pull became too intense. Many examples of these ethical tensions arose in the data and are returned to in the remaining chapters.

The focus of many of the participants on ethical practice points to a relationship between resilience, efficacy and professional integrity. Professional integrity is defined in the British Association of Social Work’s (BASW) Code of Ethics as the ‘responsibility to respect and uphold the values and principles of the profession and act in a reliable, honest and trustworthy manner’ (BASW, 2014, p.9). Banks (2004) explores the definition in more depth and presents a conceptualisation of integrity as reconciling personal and professional values and acting consistently within these values. Pawar et al. (2017) echo this in suggesting that professional integrity entails personal and professional values that are integrated and consistent. Personal values include honesty, truthfulness and non-harming behaviour, and professional values involve respect to others and a sense of responsibility and accountability. A social worker with integrity is one who ‘routinely demonstrates these qualities in combination’ (ibid., p.201). Fundamentally, professional integrity concerns a commitment to integrating social work values, ethical principles and standards into practice, even when these are challenged (Banks, 2016).

As Banks (ibid.) points out, it is important that there is scope for social workers to critically assess a situation to decide on the most effective and ethical way forwards rather than adopting an unquestioning adherence to overarching organisational and professional principles.

Only two of the participants used the term ‘integrity’ in relation to their role as social workers.

**ERICA:** My integrity as a worker is important to me so it’s good to be reminded that, do you know what, you’re doing your best and your best is good enough.

**LINDA:** We’re professionals, we work with integrity and commitment and we all have to trust each other.

While the other participants did not use the term directly, what they said in the interviews and diary entries often contained references to upholding personal and professional values. The opportunity to practice social work in an ethical way boosted resilience whereas situations that required ethical compromise were often considered to be sources of adversity. As such, it seems pertinent to give the role of professional integrity due attention in the development of a framework for maintaining and enhancing the resilience of social workers.
4.4 A Holistic Framework of Emotional Resilience

This chapter has outlined some of the sources of adversity and satisfaction for the social workers in my study, and presented the ways in which they conceptualised and experienced emotional resilience. Definitions of resilience were often bound up in narratives of their day-to-day working lives. When asked to define emotional resilience as a concept, most of the participants moved quickly to recollections of particular events and experiences. At times, this made it difficult to separate theoretical conceptualisations from the direct experience of being resilient. Nonetheless, it was informative in providing a rich and multi-faceted understanding of emotional resilience in the context of social work in adult services. The metaphors added substance to this in uncovering some of the ways in which resilience was construed in this professional setting. Generally, the participants, even those who stated that they were less familiar with the concept, defined resilience as the capacity to cope with the demands and challenges encountered in the social work role. This corresponds with much of the literature on resilience (e.g. Bonanno, 2004; Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013; Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001; Pooley and Cohen, 2010; Rutter, 1993; Seery et al., 2010; Ungar, 2008). While definitions converged to a large extent, there was also a sense of individuality within the research data and a recognition of the multiplicity of experience; social workers can feel challenged in different situations and have diverse ways of being resilient.

Importantly, none of the participants considered resilience to be infinite, nor to equal invulnerability. Whether an analogy was made with breaking, snapping, drowning or running out of fuel, there was a recognition that everyone is likely to reach a point beyond which they struggle to cope with pressure. The need to build in periods of recovery in order to maintain emotional wellbeing was very apparent. It was also the case, however, that some social workers expected themselves to maintain some form of stability in order to be the steady ‘rock’ for service users thus demonstrating a willingness to manage a degree of pressure. This may be helpful to resilience in the sense that moderate adversity has been shown to lead to more effective coping in future events (Seery et al., 2010) and can help to build a ‘psychological immune system’ (Gilbert et al., 1998), which strengthens resilience through moderate exposure to stressors.

Some of the metaphors used by the participants pointed to resilience as relative strength in relation to the weight of demands, which usefully draws attention to the individual’s coping capacity, the impact of external factors and the interplay between the two. There was a sense that the personal and professional lives of the participants were interwoven, with demands in one affecting their capacity to deal with demands in the other. The fuel analogy is particularly useful in conveying the
subtlety of this interplay between coping capacity and demands within and across the domains of personal and professional life. Some factors enhance resilience and others deplete it, thus resilience may fluctuate. If there are few resilience reserves left in the tank but little adversity to deal with, people are likely to be able to cope and maintain their wellbeing. If there is a great deal of adversity but a wealth of resilience, wellbeing may also be maintained. The risk arises when the tank is not sufficiently fuelled to manage the level of demand. This may be in the form of one-off stressful events which deplete reserves significantly, or in the drip feed required to manage frequent low-level stressors. Social work is widely recognised as an emotionally demanding profession due to the nature of working with service users who are often in distressing situations (Grant and Kinman, 2013; Grant et al., 2014a; Howe, 2008; Morrison, 2007; Ruch, 2018). However, it was striking how many of the demands identified by the participants of my study related to the ongoing ‘low-level’ pressures arising from organisational factors, and how much of their resilience-enhancing job satisfaction came from interpersonal relationships with service users. A key finding was that the ability to carry out their role effectively, which incorporated an inherent notion of ethical practice for many of the participants, and which I have characterised as ‘professional integrity’ overall, appeared fundamental to resilience and wellbeing.

Having considered how the participants understood and experienced emotional resilience in the context of their social work role, I began to think about a framework for maintaining and enhancing resilience that would encompass the wide variety of factors about which they spoke. In light of the number of stressors that were perceived by the participants to originate from the organisation, I was also mindful of resistance expressed in some of the literature to individualised approaches to resilience, which may place blame on individuals when they do not cope with external demands. Over the years in which my doctoral research was carried out, I observed this critique becoming ever more prevalent to the point where resilience appeared to be seen as an offensive term in some contexts. Various media reports, particularly in relation to issues of poverty and racism, voiced the plea ‘don’t call me resilient.’ This was generally made in protest against expectations on individuals to be resilient to social and structural inequality rather than the root causes of such inequality being addressed (Kaika, 2017; Martin, 2015). This mirrored some of the experiences of the social workers in my study. For many of them, their employing organisations, which they hoped would offer support to undertake the emotional demands of social work, instead placed yet more demands on them.

Proponents of a less individualised concept of resilience suggest a ‘systems’ approach in which ‘the individual and his or her environment interact to produce, and construct, outcomes’ in a ‘dynamic multilevel context’ (Hart et al., 2016, p.2). This seemed an appropriate starting point for a resilience
framework, as the social workers in my study also spoke about resilience in this multilevel way. During the period of data analysis, as discussed in Chapter Three, I decided to adapt Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model of anti-oppressive practice (2006), which suggests that there are three levels of oppression: personal (P), cultural (C) and structural (S). According to Thompson, the personal level refers to individual thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions. The cultural level is ‘shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing’ and ‘conformity to social norms’, and the structural level relates to institutions and ‘the fabric of society’ (ibid., p.26-28). These three levels are said to be ‘closely interlinked and constantly interact with one another’ (ibid., p.26). In relation to resilience, these levels provided a clear and appropriate way of understanding its different influences and the ways in which they may interact. I decided to refer to the levels as ‘domains’ to take away any notion of a hierarchy or one-directional influence that ‘level’ may allude to. This also accords with the terminology used by Seery et al. when they propose that resilience ‘can permeate across domains’ (2010, p.1026), inferring that building resilience in one situation can yield strength to deal with different types of adversity.

As the participants talked a great deal about their relationships with other people including service users, team members, managers and other professionals, I deemed this to require direct attention and added a ‘relational’ domain. While these four domains provide a holistic framework, a strong relationship between resilience and professional integrity also emerged from my findings. This seemed to span all of the domains and I therefore set them against a backdrop of professional integrity to reflect the fact that the resilience of social workers often appeared to be bound up in a commitment to carrying out their role ethically and effectively. This model is illustrated the following figure:

*A holistic framework of emotional resilience*
4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the challenges of the social work role as articulated by the participants, and the ways in which they found job satisfaction. Their conceptualisation and experience of resilience, often intertwined and inseparable, was presented along with an analysis of some common metaphors they used to describe it. This led to the development of a holistic framework encompassing personal, relational, cultural and structural domains, which recognises the multiple and varied ways in which emotional resilience might be maintained and enhanced. In Chapters Five to Eight, I address each of these domains in turn. In Chapter Five, I begin by presenting the challenges for social workers personally and discuss how a resilient self can be developed. As relationships are a key component of the social work role, I move on to discuss adversity and resilience in engagement with other people in Chapter Six. The relationships social workers have with service users, team members, managers and other professionals are explored. In Chapter Seven, I consider some of the less tangible aspects of culture that may have an impact on resilience. This is explored both within team and organisational culture, and the wider cultural climate of social work with adults in Scotland. This follows with a consideration of the structural domain in Chapter Eight, focusing on the impact of working within the structures, policies and procedures of local authorities, and the wider social and political context in which these authorities operate. Professional integrity, as a backdrop to all of these domains, is considered throughout. As demonstrated in the visual model of this framework, there is a recognition that these domains intersect such that they cannot be seen to stand alone but, instead, converge on and influence one other.
5. THE PERSONAL DOMAIN: The Emotionally Resilient Self

5.1 Introduction

The conceptualisations of emotional resilience articulated by the participants of my study highlighted the various ways in which they thought resilience could be maintained and enhanced. While they all saw external support and resources as important, a sense of a personal responsibility for one’s own resilience was highlighted to varying degrees.

ALICE: I would say it’s about recognising and drawing on resources you have to meet external issues or things that are coming at you.

INT: And what are the resources?

ALICE: What are the resources? So, I would say they’re internal things that, you know, that you have inside yourself.

These more ‘internal’ aspects of resilience will be considered in the context of the ‘personal’ domain which, as indicated, in Thompson’s PCS model (2006) refers to individual thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions. In this chapter, I firstly consider the role of knowledge and skill in enhancing resilience before focusing on the contribution that emotional intelligence may make, particularly in relation to the intrapersonal elements of self-awareness and emotion management. I then examine how certain perspectives seemed to contribute significantly to the way in which adverse situations were perceived
and managed, and resilience maintained. I move on to explore the extent to which the personal and professional sense of self was felt to be holistic or separable, and how this influenced resilience. Finally, the importance of embodied health for resilience will be presented with attention to the impact of different practices that can promote physical and mental wellbeing. As highlighted in Chapter Four, having a sense of professional integrity appeared to underpin many aspects of the participants’ resilience, and will be considered throughout.

5.2 Skills and Knowledge

Reflecting on the metaphor of resilience as a toolbox it seemed that, for some of the participants, the ‘self’ was one of the tools.

**EILIDH:** *If you want to last in the long term you have to keep working on yourself, like you sharpen your tools to clip a hedge.*

**PETER** *(Manager)*: *You know, you sharpen your axe when you’re chopping wood. If you carry on chopping wood with a blunt axe, you’re only going to end up injuring yourself and not chop very much. We’ve got to re-sharpen.*

For many of the participants, this attention to ‘working on yourself’ was about possessing and developing skills relevant to the social work role. The importance of professional skill came across more clearly in the diary entries, which were designed to gather data on specific instances of practice.

**CATHERINE** *(Diary entry)*: *A full repertoire of social work skills has to be used when seeing this person typically, as willingness to take responsibility is not common.*

Similarly, Jill referred to the importance of communication skills to manage a challenging situation.

**JILL** *(Diary entry)*: *Well-developed communication skills also helped me feel resilient, as I was able to answer questions and queries without feeling intimidated and was thus able to contain the informal carer’s anger and anxieties.*

Several participants pointed to the benefits of training in counselling to develop interpersonal and communication skills. Zara had recently completed a counselling course and found that the skills she had acquired were useful in a situation in which she had to show empathy to a service user alongside being direct and firm. Eilidh mentioned that her previous experience as a counsellor had equipped her with an understanding of emotional transference, which enabled her to ‘take a step back’ when dealing with a service user’s dissatisfaction and not to take it personally. Caroline *(Manager)* also
thought that basic counselling skills were beneficial to social workers in building awareness of the emotional content of interactions so that they did not ‘walk away with all the baggage.’

In addition to skills, the possession of knowledge also boosted resilience for some of the participants, primarily by contributing towards feeling of confidence and preparedness. Ian stated in a diary entry that ‘my knowledge and understanding of service users, my role and legislation helped me feel more confident.’ For Lizzie, it was being ‘familiar with discharge protocols and processes’ and having ‘a good working knowledge of local care homes and services.’ Jill commented that her resilience had been supported by ‘in-depth knowledge of the social work recording system, of the carer’s legislation, process, eligibility criteria etc.’ In the context of a complex adult protection situation, Zoe succinctly stated that her resilience had been boosted because ‘I knew my stuff.’ These comments were all made by social workers with more than six years’ experience, and, although it was not evident from the findings of my study that the more newly qualified participants felt less resilient overall, the possession of knowledge did not emerge as a significant factor for them. Given the apparent connection between relevant knowledge and resilience, supporting social workers to feel informed and prepared at all stages of their career, and perhaps newly qualified workers in particular, may be one way to enhance their resilience.

Some of the managers in my study were keen to celebrate the skills and knowledge of workers. They recognised that this could enhance resilience by identifying and valuing social workers as experts in a particular area.

NAOMI (Manager): I think we recognise the experience and stuff, and we’ll say to, for example a social worker today, I said, go and speak to that CCA (Community Care Assistant) because they’ve done that before. So, try and share the experience so people feel respected and oh yeah I am, I can do this, I can share my skills.

Isabel spoke about seeing the ‘hidden talent’ of a worker in her ability to engage effectively with service users and families, noting that the worker gained satisfaction from doing her job well. It was encouraging that the managers in my study recognised the links between skills, knowledge and resilience, as line management supervision was seen by some of the social workers as providing a forum to nurture and consolidate these.

JO: Just having that space and not feeling that you’re undervalued or that you are not, that you don’t have something to offer and that you’re not, you’re coming away feeling skilled and buoyant, not down and deskilled. I think all those are important to me.
These comments point to the potential resilience-enhancing benefits of social workers undertaking more specialised training, and becoming ‘champions’ and sources of expertise within their teams. Grant et al.’s resilience diagnostic tool (2021) also highlights the importance of valuing individual social workers’ particular skills but warn that tokenistic measures of appreciation are not sufficient.

Overall, professional development activities were welcomed by many of the participants as a way of increasing their knowledge, skills and experience and, indirectly, their resilience.

*TOM: Particularly in mental health officer work, when I did the training, which I loved, it was really good, that was great, that helped me a lot. That helped my resilience because I was gaining knowledge and placement skills and all these sorts of things. So, when I came back to do my main grade job with service users, it helped me working with them.*

It is interesting to note that, in Tom’s comment, the acquisition of skills is directly related to effective social work practice with service users, thus feeding into a sense of professional integrity. However, in attending to skill development for the sake of good practice in social work, it is important to turn attention towards oneself too. Julie stated that the development of knowledge and skills through experience in an initial response team meant that ‘I definitely feel a better worker, a more stressed worker, a sicker worker but a better worker.’ This could serve as a reminder that the enhancement of knowledge and skills may boost and deplete resilience in different ways. Recalling messages from the wider literature, experiences of moderate adversity can lead to development and growth (Crane and Searle, 2016), however, if knowledge and skills develop as a result of particularly challenging working environments, the benefits to resilience may be offset by the impact of the demands.

### 5.3 Emotional Intelligence

In addition to the association between resilience and a range of skills and knowledge, aspects of emotional intelligence were a prominent theme in the data. As already stated, research into the emotional resilience of social workers is either generic or tends to focus on the context of children’s services. Anne (Manager) thought that there existed a common, yet misguided, assumption that working with adults was less emotionally demanding than other areas of practice, which perhaps reflects the lack of research dedicated to this area.

*ANNE (Manager): I think they get looked at disproportionately and we don’t look at adult protection and the impact that has on workers. That’s quite different. Yes, children, it’s grim, but adults can be grim and quite complicated.*
The emotional impact of working with adult service users was certainly a key theme in the data and was mentioned by both social workers and managers. Linda felt that resilience was required in order to cope with the ‘really sad situations’ of service users. For Jill, it was ‘the dark, difficult things that people are experiencing’ and for Kirsten, ‘the complexity of people’s lives.’ Mike was somewhat more specific and commented that ‘it’s not particularly nice things that you’re dealing with on a day-to-day basis’, and cited sexual abuse, domestic abuse, addiction, homelessness and poverty as issues that he had encountered in the lives of service users. Simon (Manager) described social work as ‘emotionally charged’ and Naomi (Manager) commented that ‘you come across some absolutely horrendous situations and a little bit of that will be left with you in every case that you do.’

The impact of engaging with service users in distressing situations had a variety of consequences for the participants.

*JO: Being in a situation where you’re hearing people’s emotional distress on a regular basis, I think that if you don’t have a level of resilience, I think that you would be leaving yourself very vulnerable. And I think that that vulnerability might not come out specifically at work but that vulnerability will come out somewhere because it’s got to go somewhere, it’s got to reappear somewhere, it can’t always just be bottled up inside, there’ll be some point where a crack will appear and the vulnerability will come out.*

*RACHEL: I just think because you’re dealing with people’s complex lives and needs, I think it would be so easy to get sucked into all that and lose yourself in that somewhere.*

These references to vulnerability and a loss of self highlight how the emotional impact can go beyond the immediate experience of a distressing situation, and may affect social workers on a deeper, personal level that can impact on other areas of their lives. The possibility of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma as a result of involvement with service users was discussed in Chapter Two (Branson, 2019; Fahy, 2007) and, for the participants of my study, triggers to difficult experiences in their own lives were also a concern.

*RICHARD: If somebody hasn’t completely dealt with whatever’s happened to them previously in the past, then they could be bringing those issues and allowing them to affect the work that they are doing.*

While Chapter Four highlighted the job satisfaction that arose for many of the participants in their relationships with service users, there also seemed to be a need for resilience to manage the emotional impact of this aspect of their role.
Only one of the social workers and three of the managers mentioned the term ‘emotional intelligence’, however, much of what the other participants said about managing emotional demands related to its different components. Emotional intelligence can be seen to encompass a range of factors; self-awareness, management and understanding of emotions in oneself and others, expressing emotions appropriately, reflective ability and regulation of mood (Goleman, 1995). Morrison (2007) categorises these various factors into intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. The intrapersonal domain relates to self-awareness and emotion management and will be the focus of this chapter. Awareness of and response to the emotions of others belong to the interpersonal domain and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six when resilience within relationships is explored.

The self-awareness required to recognise one’s emotional responses was a common theme in the data.

JILL: I get to a point where I’m like, right I’m getting really stressed, I’m getting really agitated, I’m becoming a bit grumpy, I’m getting frustrated with people and then I have to sit myself down and think, right what’s going on, why are you feeling like this, why are you behaving like this and what are you going to do about it?

Alongside this, there was a recognition by some participants of the potential impact of a lack of self-awareness.

MARY: I wasn’t necessarily noticing how stressed I was getting. It took other people to tell me, like I think this is kind of getting to an unreasonable level of stress here.

Various strategies to promote resilience through an increase in self-awareness were mentioned. Those participants who had completed training courses in counselling had found them useful in developing emotional awareness as well as the skills previously discussed.

EMILY: You had to be really very open about where you were at. We looked at things like transference and things like that, and projection. I think that probably has helped in terms of self-knowledge.

Some participants had team meetings in which a focus on sharing emotional experience was built into the agenda. This seemed to allow a space to increase self-awareness that might not otherwise have been found.

PIA: You just go round and say, right, where are you coming from today? What are you feeling? And for me that was quite a surprise. I had to have a wee think about it because I didn’t know.
Several of the participants spoke about the benefits of mindfulness practice in enhancing resilience through greater self-awareness.

*GEMMA:* *I think just being aware of myself, knowing if I’m feeling stressed, having that time to say, OK, this is what I’m feeling, that’s fine and I can cope with that.*

Research into the impact of mindfulness on social workers reflects these findings in highlighting how the self-observation that is integral to mindfulness practice can increase self-awareness (Lynn, 2010; Wang et al., 2016).

Awareness of one’s emotions is a necessary precursor to managing them; another key aspect of emotional intelligence and one that enables people to ‘choose effective emotional responses in complex social situations’ (Howe, 2008, p.20). Various examples were given by the participants about emotion management as a facet of resilience.

*JILL:* *I can’t function effectively in my work in that constant state of frustration, agitation, stress because then I just become ineffective and I can’t provide the service that I want to provide.*

*RICHARD:* *We work with people who are in quite difficult situations and it’s managing the emotions that those deal with and supporting people who have sometimes been through quite horrific things but managing the emotions that those will bring out in you so that you’re still able to be an effective worker really.*

Likewise, Pia felt that it was ‘not fair’ to express emotions such as anxiety to service users, and Gemma described being upset and shocked by some situations she encountered but refraining from showing this in order to convey a non-judgemental response. It is interesting that the participants tended to emphasise the importance of emotion management in terms of effective and appropriate practice rather than personal wellbeing, further demonstrating the links between professional integrity and resilience.

Emotion management was also spoken about by some of the participants in the context of overall confidence in their role. Maggie talked about dressing smartly when attending formal meetings to help her manage anxiety and lack of self-belief. She used this physical presentation to convey what she viewed as a professional persona. As a result, she felt more able to adopt this persona and develop a ‘sense of being in control.’ Similarly, Erica talked about presenting herself with confidence to service users even if this were not how she felt. She found that this tended to engender more trust on the part of service users resulting in her gradually feeling a genuine increase in confidence. These examples of emotion management are what Hochschild (1983) would refer to as ‘surface acting’ in
which a person displays the emotion that they believe is expected of them. Both Maggie and Erica had a sense of the emotion and persona that they believed to be professionally acceptable and made conscious attempts to convey this. They subsequently appear to have transcended the façade of surface acting and begun to emotionally inhabit the persona that they had set out to portray. This alignment of felt and displayed emotions is, in Hochschild’s words, ‘deep acting’ and is thought to reduce the likelihood of emotive dissonance and consequential burnout that can be associated with surface acting (ibid.).

Generally, the emotions that the participants wished to manage were those they found difficult and uncomfortable. Anxiety, fear, agitation, frustration and stress were some examples. As well as increasing self-awareness, mindfulness practice can develop one’s capacity to tolerate discomfort by bringing about an awareness of emotional and physical sensations as they occur but without reacting to them (Wong, 2004). For some of the participants, this was an important aspect of emotion management.

MAGGIE: That’s, I suppose, where the mindfulness comes in for me as well. This isn’t going to last forever, it’s only going to be for a while, sit with that discomfort, and I think that plays a big part.

CATHERINE: It gives you the freedom to know that, at any point, you can come back to the very moment you’re in, so you have control of feeling that. You can examine the feelings you’re feeling from a distance then. You can feel them and come back from them, and you can stay in the moment, and that’s kind of a protective thing.

If mindfulness allows us to be present with ourselves through discomfort, surface acting may be less likely to induce emotive dissonance, in the sense that the felt emotion does not need to be suppressed in order to outwardly express an emotion that is thought to be more appropriate to the situation. Instead, the felt emotion can be recognised and allowed to be present without a need to react to it. For example, if a social worker feels anxiety when speaking to a service user, they may be able to recognise and accept this but by not reacting to the anxiety they may more genuinely, and with less effort, be able to maintain a calm composure. Furthermore, mindful attention to emotions and the physical sensations that accompany them can reduce their intensity and thus make them easier to manage (Neff and Germer, 2018; Wong, 2004).

Nonetheless, when the suppression of feelings involved in surface acting does occur, there can be a greater risk of stress and burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Judge et al., 2009; Quinones et al., 2017). For this reason, some form of emotional expression is useful alongside emotion management. It was certainly
important for the resilience of some of the participants to openly express their emotions, and this was often framed as a means of emotional processing.

_LINDA_: If it was really bothering me, I would phone a colleague friend in the office and say, this is what happened.

_INT_: Talk it over?

_LINDA_: Yeah, then I can close it and leave it and get on.

_INT_: What do you think happens when you’re talking it over? What’s going on that has a positive impact on your feelings?

_LINDA_: I’m processing it, I think. I’m processing it.

In Erica’s interview, she spoke in length about the unequal allocation of work in her organisation. At the end of a narrative about this, she commented jokingly that ‘this is now my supervision.’ My role as the interviewer was clearly not one of supervisor and there was no indication that Erica thought differently but having the space to express her frustrations seemed to be helpful in itself. Mike reflected that, although emotional support was important, he was not always inclined to talk about his feelings. He recognised that this may be a form of repression and that his resilience would likely be sustained by a greater degree of emotional expression. He wondered whether there was a gender difference in this respect, with women being more likely to be emotionally open. Although the sample size for this study is too small to make meaningful generalisations, the potential for gender norms to influence emotional expression in the culture of social work is explored in Chapter Seven.

While emotional processing was considered beneficial by the majority of the participants, further analysis showed it to be more nuanced in its impact. Some social workers talked about the benefits of emotional processing but later in the interview mentioned the need to distract themselves from their emotional responses, without recognising the possible contradiction. Many talked about hobbies and spending time with family and friends as a distraction from work and ‘a way of just focusing on something else’ (Richard). This appeared to be sustaining to resilience in many cases, however, it sometimes amounted to short-term escapism that did not appear to fully support resilience. For example, Jane was confident about her ability to switch off from work but added ‘don’t get me wrong, I will sort of wake up in the middle of the night some nights thinking, I forgot to do that or, you know.’ Kirsten conveyed a similar experience:

_KIRSTEN_: I suppose resilience is about the ability to keep going and to remain well yourself, to be able to switch off at some point, to say, well you know, I’m going home now, and this is my time. I mean we all have
the waking up at two in the morning thinking, oh I haven’t done that, oh my goodness what’s going to happen with that?

While a conscious detachment from work may have been achieved, a subconscious one perhaps had not.

Conversely, not being able to conclude the processing of emotion was noted by some participants to lead to rumination that was not perceived to support resilience.

NAOMI (Manager): Our parents’ generation, they just got on with it but, then again, that wasn’t a particularly good thing in some ways because obviously people had a lot of hidden issues there. Whereas now, everyone is much more open about stuff but in some ways possibly that’s gone too far and people now can’t just get on with stuff.

Although both emotional processing and distraction could potentially support resilience, it appeared to be unclear for some of the participants at what point one should cease and the other begin. It seems that there is an optimal balance to be found between processing emotion sufficiently in order to switch off but not to the extent of rumination. A few of the participants seemed to have found a balance that worked well for them. Maggie stated that, even if she found herself thinking about a work issue at home, she did not generally articulate this. She felt that this was neither avoidance nor distraction but ‘getting it into perspective’ and ‘not dwelling on it’, indicating a shift of attitude rather than short-term escapism. This balance also seemed to have been struck by Catherine. In a diary entry, she talked about debriefing herself following a difficult conversation with a client and afterwards she ‘left the emotions and moved on to the next task.’ This self-regulation points to there being an appropriate time and place to effectively process emotion. It is not that the emotion is ignored but rather that it is put aside to be addressed at another time. The need for teams and organisations to create space for emotional processing to happen in working hours as a measure to enhance resilience is explored in later chapters.

Throughout this chapter, it has been argued that self-awareness, emotion management and emotional processing are associated with greater resilience. Reflective ability, as a means to enhance the capacity for all of these three components, may therefore also enhance resilience. This connection is highlighted in research by Grant et al. (2014a) who found that reflective writing made an important contribution to the resilience of social work students by enhancing emotional intelligence and empathy, and decreasing psychological distress. Definitions of reflection and reflective practice are varied but are generally about learning from experience to derive new understanding and increase practice wisdom (Pawar and Anscombe, 2015) as well as exploring one’s sense of self and the
emotional impact of the social work role (Ingram, 2015b). Additionally, reflection can have a wider reaching social justice focus by enabling practitioners to unearth assumption and bias that may unwittingly disadvantage service users and influence decision-making (Pawar and Anscombe, 2015). This latter aspect of reflection has parallels with ‘ethical intelligence’ (Carey and Mazerolle, 2016, p.5), which denotes the ability to respond reflectively and critically to practice situations to support the best possible outcomes for service users, and which may be pertinent, alongside emotional intelligence, for social workers who strive to be effective practitioners.

Many of the participants, both social workers and managers, mentioned reflection as a means of remaining resilient in the social work role. Although they did not elaborate on their definition of reflection, what they said about its benefits suggested various key themes which largely accord with those in the literature. Primarily, it involved debriefing, gaining a greater understanding of one’s emotional responses, considering one’s practice including the possibility of different approaches or different interpretations of a situation, and extracting learning from the reflective process as a whole.

Mike: Reflecting on, well why did I make that decision, what could I have done better, have I thought of this? So, I think the reflection part of that emotional stuff is massive.

The link made by Mike between reflection and effectiveness in the role was a common theme in the data suggesting, again, that resilience is bound up in notions of professional integrity and ‘ethical intelligence.’ While some of the participants found space for reflection informally with colleagues and in supervision with their line manager, others were concerned that there was little scope for it at work and, as such, it spilled over into their personal time and, again, detracted from the capacity to ‘switch off.’ The opportunity for reflection within working hours therefore appears to be an important element of social workers’ resilience. Related to the concept of reflection is ‘reflexivity’, which encourages a broader awareness of ‘the psychological and social determinants of social life’ and ‘locates the inquirer within much broader, power-infused, ideologically-driven, systemic domains’ (Houston and Marshall, 2020, p.4). The capacity to be reflexive provides a way of bridging the gap between the personal and cultural/structural domains of resilience, particularly in reference to challenging the power structures that may impact negatively on the development of resilience. These cultural and structural factors and their impact on the resilience of social workers in adult services will be discussed further in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Although reflective practice was generally mentioned by the participants as having a positive impact on resilience, there were apparent limits. Linda commented that too much reflection means that ‘you just continually question yourself, you’d send yourself mad and you’d think I did it all wrong and I can’t
do this again.’ For others, too, there seemed to be an underlying punitive element in using the reflective process to emphasise what they could have done better.

**ZOE:** I think I kind of do the reflective bit in the shower but it’s kind of nice that it’s going to happen in the morning before I come in. So, it’s almost like I’ve had a reckoning before I come in and I might approach something in a different way or feel like I’ve processed it.

**JULE:** Constantly reflecting on your practice because that’s the only way you’re going to notice these flaws in your practice.

Although learning from aspects of social work practice that did not go well may be useful, reflection can also encompass the consideration of more positive aspects. Indeed, its point is to both improve and replicate practice (Pawar and Anscombe, 2015). In other words, an important aspect of reflection is recognising what was effective in one’s practice and seeking to incorporate such approaches again. This more balanced view of reflection is likely to sustain resilience by giving equal emphasis to learning from what went well and avoiding a ‘reckoning’ before the day has even begun. The need to be realistic in one’s self-expectation and develop a self-compassionate attitude in terms of what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ are examples of certain perspectives that can support resilience, and to which the discussion now turns.

### 5.4 Perspective and Attitude

Changing one’s perspective of stressors can be a useful coping mechanism and is referred to as ‘dispositional resilience’ (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008). In the literature review, this was discussed in reference to some philosophical approaches, notably Stoicism, which proposes that it is not an event itself that causes distress but the meaning attached to it (Graver, 2007). Similarly, from a Buddhist perspective, suffering is said to arise, not directly from a situation, but in our response (Dorjee, 2010). Resilience, therefore, may be enhanced by means of a re-evaluation of a situation to view it more positively and thus reduce the likelihood of a negative impact. Finding resilience by not dwelling on events and, instead, ‘getting it in perspective’ was a strategy mentioned by Maggie, one of the participants in my study. Within the research data, there were many examples of the participants fostering specific perspectives and attitudes that enabled them to view situations more favourably. Those that appeared to sustain resilience were a sense of realism, manageable self-expectation and self-compassion.
As discussed in Chapter Four, the majority of the participants reported that a large degree of their job satisfaction arose from supporting service users towards positive outcomes and a better quality of life, a finding that emerged in another recent study (BASW NI et al., 2020).

INT: What, if anything, about your role gives you job satisfaction?

KAREN: Just helping people bring about change in their lives, positive change, that’s the goal. No matter what you do, you’re an enabler of change and just being able to, even if it’s just a wee thing for somebody that’s been really chaotic, if you’re able to just achieve that wee thing, brilliant, that’s really good.

The link between job satisfaction and resilience has been made previously, however, a reliance on positive outcomes as a source of job satisfaction seems rather precarious. Yates et al. (2015) suggest that part of the appeal of concepts of resilience is the emphasis on ‘attainable goals of competence, rather than optimal performance, and focusing on positive goals, rather than problems and pitfalls’ (p.777). The issue for many of the social workers in my study was that the consequence of not performing optimally was often seen to fall directly on the lives of service users thus they tended to set themselves high standards. While it is hard to deny that social work strives to facilitate positive change in service users’ lives, relying on this as a source of resilience means that a lack of positive outcomes can be experienced as adverse.

KIRSTEN: There are ones that you think you’ve journeyed with them a long time and the eventual outcome is really good and then there are cases that are very difficult and you feel like you’re just wading through treacle, and there’s no satisfaction in that because you don’t get anywhere.

This quote draws on the metaphor of resilience as fuel to sustain a journey, explored in Chapter Four. Without sufficient resilience, the journey is slow and laborious, akin to ‘wading through treacle.’ With further analysis of the data, it appeared that the perspectives of optimism, realism and pessimism had a significant role to play in the relationship between resilience and job satisfaction.

In essence, optimism is about having positive expectations for the future alongside the belief that these expectations will materialise (Bennet, 2015). It is, in Bennet’s words, a ‘stronger version of hope’ (p.10). Optimism is often associated with resilience (e.g. Grant and Kinman, 2013), however, for some of the participants of my study it could lead to feelings of disappointment. Julie, a social worker with three years’ experience, characterised herself as leaving her university social work programme with ‘rose-tinted glasses.’ She felt that she had been ‘put in bubble wrap’ during field placements and protected from some of the harsher realities of social work practice that she had gone on to
experience as a qualified worker. Being set up with an optimistic sense of the profession had evidently not wholly supported her resilience. In a similar way, Tom described having begun his social work career highly motivated by the potential for positive change in the lives of service users and, although he felt he had retained this to some extent, he spoke about feeling disappointment when service users did not use the support offered to them. With sixteen years’ experience as a social worker, mainly in addiction services, Tom observed that this had become easier over time.

*Tom:* I guess I’m a wee bit more accepting of things now. I don’t know if that means I’ve given up, or just worn down by it.

Although Tom framed this perspective as sustaining to resilience, his comment also hints at an awareness that his acceptance may have been straying into the realms of pessimism. His use of the metaphor ‘worn down’ certainly does not call to mind the robustness and solidity of resilience. These examples from the data suggest that neither optimism nor pessimism alone are sustaining to resilience but that a balance between the two may be more effective.

In contrast to the idea that optimism is associated with resilience, some scholars do emphasise the need for it to be balanced with realism (Claus-Ehlers, 2008; Grant et al., 2021; Kearns and McArdle, 2012; Yousef and Luthans, 2007). In my study, a healthy middle ground seemed to have been found by some of the participants whose resilience was boosted by a sense of realism in which there was hope of the possibility of change for service users that did not depend on its actualisation. Daniel reflected that, although he felt good when there were positive outcomes for service users, ‘sometimes when things don’t go really well, I still think actually, I’ve done the best I can.’ Maggie spoke about a commitment in her role as a social worker to ‘give it the best shot’ and, regardless of the outcome, she was then able to ‘let it go.’ Julie expressed a similar view.

*Julie:* I think the expectations I hold for myself now are a lot more realistic than they were before. I don’t think I’m as hard on myself anymore as I was at the start, and I think as long as I can go home and I can sleep soundly because I’ve done my job, then I’m quite happy with that.

It was interesting that, while not all of the social workers had found this balance, it was very much advocated by the managers.

*Anne (Manager):* I’m not saying we shouldn’t have idealism because that’s really important but we have to have a realism to go with it because, otherwise, how do you support them to have emotional resilience if you’re training them to be idealistic and not training them to be realistic because then you get people who are lost along the way and that’s not fair.
This perspective, which I would call ‘hopeful realism’, suggests that resilience is being derived from process rather than outcome. It maintains a sense of hope that positive outcomes are possible but not that they will certainly occur and, instead, attends more to the effort and commitment directed to the task. Several philosophical perspectives propose more robust ways of seeking satisfaction and fulfilment than focusing on ends and outcomes. For example, Aristotle’s concept of ‘eudamonia’, referred to in Chapter Two, is bound up in action rather than external sources of pleasure and satisfaction. It is about pursuing goals that are considered meaningful but focuses on the process by which these goals are attained and the opportunities provided for reaching one’s potential, rather than any prescribed outcome (Hall, 2018). Similarly, in mindfulness practice, the focus is on allowing moment by moment experience to unfold without judgement (Dorjee, 2010) rather than on striving for an end result. This is found, too, in the ‘flow’ states proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (2002), and the notion of ‘autotelic’ tasks (p.67). An autotelic task is experienced as an end in itself and joy is derived from being absorbed in it whatever the outcome. In contrast, striving for an ideal that is unattainable can impact negatively on resilience due to the ‘failure’ to achieve it. As Park and Folkman (1997) point out, goals that cannot be met but are not abandoned are likely to lead to a negative emotional impact.

In this depiction of ‘hopeful realism’, goals may still be held but hope is linked to determination in the face of obstacles and ‘mitigates a self-inflicted sense of guilt and personal responsibility when the constant emergence and escalation of blockages and problems threatens to render a goal unachievable’ (Youssef and Luthans, 2007, p.779). In the words of Peter, one of the managers interviewed, ‘the operation succeeded but the patient died, kind of thing.’ This is a hard-hitting but apt way of articulating that success and positive outcomes are not necessarily the same thing. As reflected in the quotes from Daniel, Maggie and Julie in the previous paragraph, giving it their ‘best shot’ meant that, in the absence of positive outcomes, resilience could be maintained through satisfaction in the process. This is reflected in studies where links have been made between job satisfaction and different types of goal orientation. ‘Mastery orientation’ emphasises the development of skills and competence, and tends to be associated with job satisfaction and persistence in the face of obstacles. Conversely, ‘performance orientation’ which is based on outcomes, provides lower levels of job satisfaction (Adamson et al., 2014; van Yperen and Janssen, 2002). These distinct types of orientation add weight to the notion that an emphasis on process and a sense of realism may be better placed to support resilience in the social work role.

When outcomes for service users have not been positive and goals remain unmet, it can be useful for social workers to reflect on what more could have been done or whether a different approach might have been successful. However, it was noted earlier in the chapter that some of the participants used
reflection as a means of self-criticism and to expose apparent ‘flaws’ in their practice. The reflective self may, it seems, be a harsh critic. Several of the participants viewed their tendency for self-criticism as a threat to resilience. For example, Richard spoke about his experience of supervision with his line manager, and how it had been helpful in counteracting this tendency and ‘finding the positives as well.’ Other participants had made a conscious attempt to manage their self-criticism but there was a hesitancy for some that suggested the weight of high self-expectation remained.

JULIE: You’re not expected to fix everything and it would be great if you could and it would make life so much easier if you could, but actually you can’t beat yourself up about it. But on the flipside, sometimes you need to give a kick up the bum to yourself and say, you know, you should have done that quicker or why didn’t you phone them first or why didn’t you do this first?

Julie’s point about the need to avoid complacency is an important one, however, it seems that there is a balance to be struck between complacency and unrealistic self-expectation.

At the more extreme end of self-expectation is perfectionism, which can be described as ‘a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations’ (Stoeber and Damian, 2016, p.265). It has been linked to reduced productivity, lower levels of job satisfaction and a tendency to ruminate, making it difficult to detach from work (ibid.). Perfectionism is often associated with risk and resilience in physical and mental wellbeing (Sirois and Molnar, 2016) and is, therefore, highly relevant to my study in which the participant social workers appeared to be very committed to carrying out their roles to high standards with some associated threats to their resilience. According to Sirois and Molnar (ibid.), there is a difference between ‘perfectionistic striving’, involving the setting of high personal standards and striving for excellence, and ‘perfectionistic concern’, which centres on self-criticism, fear of the negative judgement of others and lack of satisfaction even when successful. Perfectionistic concern is associated with burnout, however perfectionistic striving can promote work engagement which decreases the likelihood of burnout. While none of the participants defined themselves as a perfectionist, the level of self-criticism that some held may stray into this territory. Identification of such dispositions may be useful for social workers to bring awareness to perfectionist tendencies that are likely to deplete or enhance resilience.

There were many examples in the data of realistic self-expectation enhancing resilience, and this was often expressed as an awareness of the boundaries of the social work role.
JANE: I think when you start as a social worker, you’re trying to save the world, you’re trying to do everything and then as you go on, you realise you can’t and, for your own health, you have to know when to stop.

ZOE: I think you need to be able to be resilient as well in the way you see yourself. You know, you need to be clear that you’re not always going to be acting perfectly and you need to just deal with that, and like deal with your, the ideal versus the reality.

However, there is a big gap between trying to save the world and being satisfied with one’s input particularly in the absence of tangible positive outcomes. For resilience to be enhanced and a belief in one’s effectiveness maintained, it may be important to find a balance along this scale. Awareness of what is within and outside of one’s control seemed to provide an answer for some.

IAN: Recognising that the situation’s difficult and there isn’t always a solution and sometimes that can be the hardest part when I, yeah I always want to make things better, or to give an answer to a family when they’re asking, or I feel that they’re asking me for help.

Ian was aware of certain situations being beyond his control but found this to be ‘the hardest part’ and, again, this struggle was bound up in a desire to carry out effective social work practice with service users. In many instances, it was organisational issues, particularly the lack of availability of resources, which were identified as outside of the social worker’s control.

JANE: You have to know what you’re responsible for and there’s absolutely no way I can create another fifty beds for people who are needing care home beds, so no matter how much the hospital shout at me, I just have to say, I’ve done all I can do.

Letting go of responsibility for what is beyond one’s control seems entirely logical. Nonetheless, there is caution needed in taking such an individualistic view and expecting social workers to modify their perspective in order to deal with structural issues. Richard, one of the social workers interviewed, summed this up in a critique of Stoic philosophy with its focus on personal acceptance of social injustice rather than addressing its underlying causes.

RICHARD: It’s very easy for the nobility to practice being philosopher kings but it doesn’t affect the main problems and issues on the ground.

The notion of ‘problems and issues on the ground’ will be returned to in Chapter Eight when the structural factors of resilience are explored.

Most of the social workers who appeared to have achieved a more realistic level of self-expectation and reduction of self-criticism were those who were older or had many years of professional experience. Jill, a social worker in her forties with six years’ experience, commented that it had taken
her a long time to reach this resilience-sustaining perspective. Tom, who was in his fifties and had been a social worker for sixteen years, spoke about how he had developed a more internal sense of his own merits over time to the point where, in relation to other professionals’ opinions of him, ‘I’m not going to be bothered if they think I did a mediocre job or a brilliant job. It’s what I think about it that’s important.’ Newly qualified workers may benefit from specific input on managing expectations at a time when they are more likely to wish to prove their skills and abilities. Forums for group reflection or mentoring from more experienced colleagues could be useful in this respect.

For social workers who are affected by unrealistic self-expectation and undue self-criticism, adopting a perspective of self-compassion may contribute towards enhancing resilience. In a survey study of 306 social workers in the UK, self-compassion was found both to have direct benefits to wellbeing and to protect against the negative effects of emotional demands (Kinman and Grant, 2020). In addition, there are links between self-compassion and greater attention to self-care (Miller et al., 2019), which may also sustain resilience. If compassion is an awareness of suffering and a desire to alleviate it, self-compassion is the same but ‘directed inward’ (Germer and Neff, 2013, p.856). It is linked to resilience in the way that it can moderate responses to challenging events by fostering acceptance and a reduction in negative thinking (ibid.). As mentioned in Chapter Two, self-esteem has consistently been associated with resilience (Carver et al., 1989; Grant and Kinman, 2013; Howe, 2008; Rutter, 1993), however, Neff and Germer (2018) point out that self-esteem can lead to comparison with others, narcissism, defensiveness, anger and prejudice. In addition, ‘it tends to be contingent – it’s there for us in times of success but often deserts us in times of failure’ (ibid., p.3). They suggest that self-compassion is more helpful to wellbeing as it reduces feelings of inadequacy, and enables coping with what is beyond one’s control. Furthermore, it can encourage acceptance of mistakes and a sense that difficult feelings are part of a shared universal experience (Kinman and Grant, 2020). While four of the participant social workers mentioned the importance of compassion to others in their interviews and diary entries, none spoke about self-compassion directly. However, some of their responses related closely to its core elements.

**ERICA:** Somebody said to me once, and I tried to hold on to it, is you wouldn’t talk to your friend the way you’re talking to yourself, so speak to yourself the way you would to your pal. So, I try to do that.

**RICHARD:** Sometimes being able to take that step back and just look at it that way, such as be kind to yourself, be patient with yourself, that’s been quite helpful.

Catherine described her practice of mindfulness as primarily being about reducing self-criticism and nurturing self-acceptance. Similarly, Maggie found mindfulness beneficial in ‘just getting the time to
think, you know it’s not the end of the world’ rather than engaging in self-critique. Hannah, the only manager who mentioned mindfulness as a way to boost resilience, described it as a means of ‘quietening down your thoughts’ and ‘trying not to catastrophise or think everything’s about you.’ Mindfulness practices specifically designed to foster self-compassion (Neff, no date; Neff and Germer, 2018) may be beneficial for social workers to help them build resilience, and address issues of self-criticism and self-blame.

Self-compassion is said to nurture the ability to see things with a ‘soft gaze’, which takes account of the bigger picture and reduces the tendency to see imperfection in the smaller detail (Germer and Neff, 2013, p.862). For a couple of the participants, having a religious faith enabled them to gain a similar sense of the ‘bigger picture’, which was sustaining to their resilience by promoting a more realistic and accepting view of their own limitations.

\[ \text{KIRSTEN: I suppose it sustains me in the fact that there's a purpose to what I'm doing. It might feel like I'm getting absolutely nowhere and, again, maybe there's a purpose in individual people I come across. I can effect change in that way and I suppose it gives me that bigger picture.} \]

Other studies on the resilience of social workers have found similar views on the importance of faith (Adamson et al., 2014) and, more generally, faith is said to provide frameworks of meaning which can support people’s wellbeing in positive ways (Park and Folkman, 1997). Overall, in whatever way feels meaningful to the individual, it appears to be important to the resilience of social workers to engender kindness and compassion to themselves alongside a sense of purpose tempered by a healthy dose of realism.

5.5 The Personal and Professional Self

This study focuses on the emotional resilience of social workers in their professional role, however, some of the discussion to this point has drawn attention to the apparent crossover between their personal and professional lives in relation to resilience. This was demonstrated in the metaphor of a ‘resilience tank’, discussed in Chapter Four, and is apparent in examples throughout this chapter, such as rumination about work-related issues impinging on home life. To some extent the participants were striving to create a clear distinction between their personal and professional lives in order to support their resilience. A common theme in the data was the importance of outside interests and activities. The activities mentioned were diverse and included travel, hillwalking, sport, reading, watching films, singing, dancing and spending time with friends and family. The potential pitfall of distraction
techniques without sufficient emotional processing has already been discussed, but it was also suggested by some of the participants that the mental absorption afforded by certain activities could provide a way of genuinely detaching from work concerns.

*RICHARD:* I've got a lot of sports that I get involved in, climbing, boxing, stuff that you have to focus completely on. You're not able to think about what happened previously that afternoon otherwise you're going to fall off or get punched.

*ALICE:* I go to a rowing club. I go quite a lot at weekends, so I like that. It's quite good for your mental health as well because you have to concentrate.

These comments echo those in relation to the benefits of mindfulness on resilience. In some cases, as well as enjoyment of the activity itself that promoted resilience, it was the need to pay attention to the present moment experience that the activity entailed. For those to whom a formal mindfulness practice does not appeal, similar qualities may be found in ‘mindful’ activities in this broader sense. For others, activities outside of work were about maintaining social networks that served as sources of support, keeping fit in order to maintain physical and mental wellbeing, having fun as an antidote to the pressures of work and enjoying the peace of nature.

Time spent away from work was considered necessary by the participants not only to pursue other activities but to have a break from the demands of the social work role. This accords with the various theories of resilience as ‘recovery’, as well as studies which have drawn attention to the need for a separation of personal and professional life in order to maintain resilience (Adamson et al., 2014; Wendt et al., 2011). The metaphor of resilience as ‘fuel’ highlights how social workers benefit from regular breaks to ‘recharge’ in order to be able to continue on their journey. However, for the large majority of the participant social workers, heavy workloads detracted from such opportunities, with many stating that they completed substantially more than their contracted hours. Even taking a period of holiday provided only a short-lived resilience boost for some. In Daniel’s words, a return from annual leave was often met with ‘five cases waiting for you on top of the cases that you had before.’

Assertiveness was felt to be required by several of the participants in stating to managers that they did not have the capacity to take on more work. It was the participants with more experience who tended to speak about assertiveness as a protective factor, and the managers in my study demonstrated some empathy in recognising that newly qualified workers may find this more difficult.

What complicated the relationship between workload and resilience, even for those who felt able to be assertive about workload capacity, were ethical considerations towards service users. Working
above the contracted number of hours meant that resilience could be depleted due to insufficient recovery time but, at the same time, resilience often arose from satisfaction at having completed tasks. This fed into a sense of professional integrity, in terms of fulfilling responsibilities towards service users. Conversely, working within contracted hours meant that there was time for recovery but guilt about not having completed tasks. For example, Julie spoke about staying at work until late in the evening on occasions. This supported her resilience due to the satisfaction of having completed an urgent piece of work but also depleted it through the exhaustion that working long hours entailed. Lily tried to avoid working above her contracted hours but did not always succeed in this. She described working on a public holiday ‘but that was also my choice and I just kind of had to do it.’ There is an inherent contradiction in the message that this was both a choice and something that had to be done, perhaps indicating the internal struggle that social workers may experience in deciding whether to use their own time for work tasks.

There appears to be a fine line to tread between maintaining a sense of effectiveness and professional integrity, and allowing recovery from the daily demands of the social work role.

ERICA: Just juggling all the stuff you need to do, deciding whether to sacrifice your own time, whether or not to do it, deciding yourself who you’re not going to speak to today because you don’t have the time and can they wait until tomorrow, and then stress out about that because you’re a reasonably decent person and you don’t like to leave people in the lurch.

Erica’s comment highlights that, for social workers, the consequence of a task not completed often falls on a service user who is left ‘in the lurch.’ This is likely to exacerbate the feelings of guilt that a social worker may have, especially if they possess a strong sense of professional integrity and commitment. Overall, workload was one of the most prominent themes in the data and was considered by all of the participants, including managers, to be a significant source of adversity. This is discussed further in Chapter Eight when attention turns to the structural domain of resilience.

A balance between personal and professional life was found by some of the participants in working part-time.

ALICE: I decided to reduce my hours for my own sanity. It just gives that small amount of space to think about what else I want to do in life.

Additionally, in most of the local authorities where the participants were employed, flexible working conditions had been introduced giving staff a degree of autonomy regarding their working hours. This was considered by the participants to be useful in making their personal lives easier to accommodate,
for example attending health appointments and managing informal caring roles. Home working, although mentioned briefly by a few of the participants, did not seem to be a common practice and certainly did not feature greatly in the research data. However, the data collection for my study was carried out prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the prevalence of home working that occurred during the government-imposed lockdown. If home working continues, as it has for many organisations, it may be pertinent to consider how this blurring of boundaries between home and work may affect the ease with which social workers ‘switch off’ from their working day. Ferguson (2020) proposes that, in the absence of the usual journeys social workers make between home, the office and visits to service users, ‘transitional’ spaces should be created to artificially reinstate these boundaries. He suggests leaving the house to go for a walk or listening to music that replicates the transitions, such as a daily commute, that would usually be built naturally into the working day. In Ferguson’s earlier ethnographic study (2016), in which he travelled with children and families social workers on home visits, he notes that one of the benefits of journeying between physical spaces is the opportunity for reflection and the processing of emotion. In line with Ferguson’s study, the commute to work was also seen by some of the participants in my study as a valuable time for processing the experiences of the day and demarcating the domains of work and home, which contributed significantly towards their resilience.

Although many of the participants sought to find resilience through a separation between their personal and professional lives, for others it seemed that these components of their lives, and the sense of ‘self’ living this life, were intertwined and inseparable.

*ANNE (Manager): We come with our whole selves and how we use ourselves is how we work.*

Certainly, the metaphor of ‘fuel’ presented in Chapter Four appears to suggest that the resilience required to manage challenging experiences in both spheres of life is drawn from the same tank. Experiences in one sphere were often felt to influence one’s capacity to deal with experiences in the other. For example, Lizzie commented on her resilience during an adult protection case conference.

*LIZZIE (Diary entry): On a personal level, my kids are both in school and my parents had texted earlier so I knew that all my family members, for whom I am responsible, were safe. I also knew that this meeting would finish within two hours allowing me time to pick up my children.*

For Lizzie, stability in her personal life left more resilience to manage challenges at work but equally, demands in one’s personal life could lower resilience at work. Julie spoke about initially trying to keep her work and personal life separate but found that, in her current role, ‘my lines have certainly been
blurred.’ She described emotionally taking work home with her but also being affected at work by personal concerns. Having developed strong friendships with team members, she found that her resilience was maintained by the emotional support she received from them regarding both work and personal issues but it had also, as she described, blurred the boundaries in a way that had the potential to deplete resilience by not enabling a clear ‘switch off’ point in either direction. For some, work and personal life were so intermingled that it was difficult to determine the exact source of an emotion.

ALICE: It all feels like combined stress when you just feel stressed and you can’t really sometimes put your finger on it. It’s just so many factors and in a bit of a muddle, so then you react to things but you’re like, why did I even react to that, it wasn’t even about that, it was about all this other stuff.

Importantly, the merging of personal and professional lives was acknowledged by some of the managers who recognised that the social work role may be experienced as particularly difficult ‘when there's other stuff going on within your life as well’ (Naomi, Manager). This may have implications for some of the cultural and structural aspects of teams and organisations, such as supervision and work allocation, which will be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Given that it was common for the participants to experience resilience as holistic in terms of the personal and professional self, it is perhaps more realistic for social workers not to aim to find a complete separation. Instead, there may be one ‘resilient self’ and multiple roles within this.

RACHEL: I like to have my dancing and things like that. I can just be Rachel if I’m not a social worker. No one wants to know about your job or what you’ve done in the day. I can just talk absolute inane rubbish with somebody.

Being ‘just Rachel’ doesn’t seem to imply any degree of separation, just that in non-work settings the social work role is not prominent. Other participants had similar views in relation to their role as a parent, which directed their focus away from work and onto their home life.

KIRSTEN: As soon as I’m in the door, I’m having a little person, you know it doesn’t matter what the day’s held, there’s a ‘dress up as Pudsey’ day tomorrow, so you have to be on it. So, actually it takes your mind away.

In a small qualitative study of seven social workers (Reupert, 2007), all the participants saw their personal and professional selves as merged. However, there did not appear to be a sense of full integration for the participants in Reupert’s study as they reported feeling the need to suppress aspects of their personal self within their social work role, for which they felt they had to present a ‘better’ self. Hochschild (1983) recognised the potential for challenges to the sense of self in relation
to emotion management. The flight attendants whom she studied encountered a dilemma between their desire to identify with their professional role and the need to avoid becoming overwhelmed by it. This entailed attempts to separate the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ self for emotional protection, however, ‘maintaining a difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain’ (p.90).

In contrast, Fineman (2000) questions the assumption there is a ‘true, essential, self’ that is ‘compromised or consumed under certain emotion-management work regimes’ (p.6). He points out that, instead of the self being considered innate and at times repressed by cultural norms, it can be seen as comprising of different aspects that reflect different cultural settings. This idea is supported in other literature, which suggests that the self is not solely self-defined but influenced by context and culture (Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008; Trevithick, 2018). Ultimately, a more integrated sense of self can engender feelings of authenticity and protect against the emotive dissonance that can arise from conflict between different ‘selves’ (Fineman, 2000). These debates will be an important consideration when the culture of social work and issues of ‘normalisation’ of emotion and behaviour are discussed in Chapter Seven. Furthermore, there is a post-modern constructivist idea of ‘self’, which proposes a relational model involving multiple selves and identities co-constructed in relationship with others (Bressi and Vaden, 2017). This may be highly relevant to social workers who engage in relationships with various people as part of their day-to-day role, and is explored in the ‘relational domain’ of resilience in Chapter Six. As resilience appears to be connected to having a sense of professional integrity, it is also helpful to consider that social workers might have an ‘ethical self’, which concerns their capacity to be ethical in their roles and actions, and within their relationships with others (Weinberg and Banks, 2019). Certainly, in my study, this is a thread that runs through all of the domains of resilience and is reflected throughout the thesis.

Rajan-Rankin (2014) adheres to the notion that resilience interconnects with self-identity and points out that many studies of resilience neglect to engage with the idea of ‘self’. This may be important to address, given that the ‘use of self’ is considered a key social work skill and is referred to several times in the revised Standards in Social Work Education (SSSC, 2019a). In social work, the ‘use of self’ is often understood to mean the self as a ‘tool’ for engagement with others (Kaushik, 2017; Reupert, 2007), which accords with some of the comments made by the participants of my study and presented at the beginning of this chapter. Ferguson (2018) warns that the self may also be viewed as an ‘apparently limitless resource that the worker taps into and uses to help service users’ (p.416). Indeed, when the metaphor of currency was used by participants, as discussed in Chapter Four, the terms ‘personal capital’ and ‘assets’ indicated that some viewed themselves as the currency or resource. This was
usually expressed in the context of their resilience being eroded by feeling poorly compensated. Presumably, for social workers who gain a great deal of job satisfaction through engagement with service users, the use of self in this respect may contribute towards resilience. However, for many of the social workers in my study, to give a part of their ‘self’ and receive nothing in return appeared to be felt personally and deeply.

This sense of an ‘exploitation’ of the self perhaps accounts for the difficulty that many of the social workers in my study had in identifying how they may feel valued; the self is an elusive resource, and offering compensation for its use is far from clear. It was apparent that gratitude from service users, although much appreciated when offered, was not expected particularly when service users were in situations of crisis and distress. The need to feel valued in a tangible way was directed more at their employer. Several of the participants touched on the desire to be treated as an individual rather than a faceless member of their organisation or, in Linda’s words, a ‘cog in the machine.’ How individual employees may be valued within the culture and structure of large local authorities is a topic addressed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

5.6 Embodied Health

These ideas of ‘self’ focus on the intangible elements of how it is constructed in the social spaces of work and home. This more ethereal self of a social worker is physically embodied, however, in my findings, attention to physiological wellbeing was conspicuous by its relative absence. The extent to which participants mentioned their physiological health as a component of emotional resilience was significantly less than the other aspects of personal resilience discussed throughout this chapter. When direct connections were made, references tended to be brief and often only emerged when the participants were prompted with general questions such as ‘are there any other ways in which you maintain your resilience?’ Exercise was mentioned by a few of the participants, and getting sufficient sleep was mentioned by one social worker and one manager. Both are certainly worth considering, since there is a great deal of scientific enquiry demonstrating the associated physical and mental health benefits. Links have been made between adequate sleep and protection against impaired cognitive functioning, compromised immunity, diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer and depression (Irwin, 2015; Walker, 2018). Similarly, there is evidence that physical exercise and good nutrition have a range of mental as well as physical health benefits including a reduction in symptoms of anxiety, depression and age-related cognitive decline (Penedo and Dahn, 2005; Walsh, 2011). Some
participants also referred to the need to avoid ‘negative’ coping strategies such as drinking too much alcohol, smoking and overeating.

**LINDA:** You develop coping strategies, usually gin. No, I’m joking.

**HANNAH (Manager):** Trying to find healthy coping strategies and not unhealthy ones would be important. Not going home and downing two bottles of wine because you’re stressed.

It was acknowledged that these strategies might provide short-term comfort and stress alleviation but would be likely to detract from physical health in the longer term.

Despite limited data in my study on the relationship between physical health promotion and resilience, some more subtle connections became apparent. Comments made by a couple of the participants were interesting in demonstrating how resilience and physical health had a bidirectional influence. In some instances, poor physical health impacted on resilience at work and in others, the strain on resilience due to work demands impacted on physical health. For example, Linda recalled feeling a great deal less resilient at work following a period of absence due to significant health issues. This was bound up in the emotional toll that her illness had taken on her with limited reserves available for the demands of work, even when she felt physically fit enough to return. For Julie, the impact was in the other direction with the effort of coping with work demands contributing, in her view, to a susceptibility to physical illness.

**JULIE:** My physical health is affected because of stress. I need to understand that that’s my body telling me I’m not OK, because although I feel fine and I can do this job, my body is like, no you can’t do this.

More specifically, Karen talked about experiencing the immediate physiological effects of stress while engaged in a process of emotion management.

**KAREN:** I always try to be mindful of how I’m sounding on the phone and what the tone of voice is and the speech pattern, even the breathing on the phone. But I suppose there are times when you can feel yourself going, this is not accurate, you’re not listening, you’ve not taken on the information that’s been provided to you, however often that has been. It’s hard, a wee knot in the stomach, a wee flush, even a trickle of sweat.

The interplay between emotional resilience and physical health has very little, if any, focus within most of the relevant social work literature. Greer (2016), having written an entire book on the resilience of social workers, does devote a chapter to health and wellbeing although only a page and a half of this relates to physical health, specifically sleep and exercise.
Within scientific and medical fields, however, there is a growing recognition of the link between emotion and physical health. Stress has been associated with physical health issues and disease vulnerability involving decreased immunity, high blood pressure and heart disease (Gianaros and Wager, 2015). Recent research has led to ideas such as polyvagal theory, which highlights the influence of the nervous system on emotional and social behaviour, particularly regarding how we behave when we feel safe or threatened (Spence, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). This is particularly the case regarding trauma survivors whose perceptions of threat may be heightened (Loizzo, 2015). The suggestion is that, as well as our emotions having an impact on our physiology and physical health, our physiology has the capacity to influence our behaviour and emotions. The focus of the participants in my study was more on the emotional elements of their experience, which accords with the emotionally demanding nature of their role. Nonetheless, the connection between physical health and mental wellbeing points to the potential for a more dualistic perspective to offer some further insights regarding the enhancement of resilience.

Since there is such strong evidence for a connection between physical health and emotional wellbeing, embodied practices such as yoga which incorporate physical activity and stress relief may have an important role to play in promoting resilience. Two of the participants used yoga as a way of boosting their resilience and sense of wellbeing, and this was generally expressed as a mind/body approach.

STEPHEN: I think it helps just to clear the mind and steady us, and it gives us a breathing space. It helps us to engage with our bodies again. If our bodies are feeling tense and tight, then it raises our awareness of that. I find myself repositioning my seating quite a lot. In the office, I sometimes kind of stare off into space just for a minute or two and take a few deep breaths if I'm feeling a little bit agitated.

A small scale narrative study of social workers engaged in a programme of regular yoga practice, suggests that yoga can, among other benefits, increase self-awareness (Mensinga, 2021), a characteristic associated with emotional intelligence and resilience. Additionally, research into the wellbeing of UK university employees indicated that yoga was effective in increasing resilience and reducing stress (Hartfield et al., 2011). The study was a randomised control trial of forty-eight participants half of whom were offered a six-week yoga programme. The group who had undertaken the programme reported a host of benefits including increases in self-confidence, life satisfaction, clarity of mind and energy. A similar study into education professionals in the US (Dyer et al., 2020) demonstrated an increase in self-compassion, positive affect and feelings of empowerment. Interestingly, the practice of yoga has also been shown to bring about a healthy level of detachment from the outcome of a task and a tendency to become more effort-orientated (Karmalkar, 2017). This
is highly relevant to the participants of my own study who were often concerned with outcomes but whose resilience did not seem to be boosted by this. Mindfulness is another embodied practice that, as indicated, was mentioned by several of the participants and was promoted in some of their organisations as a way to manage stress. Many of the benefits of mindfulness have already been discussed in terms of its impact on increased self-awareness, regulation of emotion, tolerance of difficult emotion and an increase in self-compassion and self-acceptance. The practices of yoga and mindfulness are unlikely to be favoured by everyone and there are various other approaches which may have a similar mind/body impact such as tai chi, walking, art, music and dance (Spence, 2021). What unites these approaches is their dualistic perspective, which attends to both mental and physical wellbeing and the interconnection between them.

5.7 Conclusion

There are various ways in which an individual social worker can attend to their own resilience. Developing skills and knowledge can support resilience by engendering feelings of confidence and preparedness in the social work role and tasks. The emotional demands of the role appear to be mitigated to some extent by developing emotional intelligence and its components of self-awareness, reflective ability and emotion management. The opportunity to process emotions was seen to be important, and personal life distractions were only useful when this processing had been carried out sufficiently to detach from work-related concerns. Additionally, certain perspectives were associated with greater resilience, particularly that of ‘hopeful realism’. While the goal of social work should certainly be to improve the quality of service users’ lives, and it is important to strive for this and hope that it may be possible, basing one’s resilience on positive outcomes for service users did not seem to offer a robust approach. The findings from my study support the view that a perspective of confidence and pride in contributing one’s best efforts is, arguably, a more solid grounding for resilience. Related to this sense of hopeful realism about what could be achieved was a nurturing of realistic self-expectation and self-compassion, which appeared to enhance resilience by encouraging an acceptance of one’s limitations and the boundaries of the social work role.

To some extent a separation of work and personal life supported resilience, however, this was somewhat contradictory to the idea suggested by many of the participants that their resilience was holistic and fed into all domains of their lives. It was proposed that the ‘resilient self’ can be more usefully conceptualised as an integrated self undertaking different roles. There may be some separation between these roles, but experiences in one domain of life are likely to impact on resilience
in the other. The deep and personal use of self in social work practice was felt by many of the participants to require some form of compensation. Nonetheless, what was sought as compensation was not clearly defined by the participants other than as a desire to feel valued by their organisations.

This chapter was written with an awareness that some resilience scholars warn against a focus on the individual, arguing that it detracts from the need to address structural issues (Garrett, 2015; Webster and Rivers, 2019). Indeed, it is evident from the discussion in this chapter that personal strategies and approaches do not happen in isolation but in the context of relationships with other people, organisational culture and the broader structures within which social work practice takes place. For example, a self-compassionate approach can be sustaining to resilience but might be difficult to achieve in a team culture that does not promote it. Likewise, a heavy workload that impinges on time for ‘recovery’ in one’s personal life is likely to relate to a cultural or structural issue within the organisation. As long as these personal approaches are taken within a recognition of the wider context, they may have the potential to provide empowering ways in which individual social workers can enhance their resilience. The holistic framework of emotional resilience presented in this thesis draws explicit attention to this wider context and will be considered in the following three chapters when resilience is set within relational, cultural and structural domains.
6. THE RELATIONAL DOMAIN: Emotional Resilience in Relationships

6.1 Introduction

After deciding to use Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model (2006) as a framework to explore the resilience of social workers on a personal, cultural and structural level, I became aware that so much of what the participants spoke about concerned their relationships with others. Engagement and interaction with other people were significant sources of job satisfaction and resilience for most of the participants but could also give rise to challenges. A similar finding has been noted by McFadden (2020) in a qualitative study into resilience and burnout in child protection social workers in Northern Ireland. Relationships with managers and peers were reported to be crucial in contributing towards resilience. However, if they were experienced as negative and unsupportive, they could contribute to burnout. Indeed, Neff and Germer (2018), who have written extensively about compassion and self-compassion, comment that ‘most of the pain in our lives occurs in relationship and is alleviated in relationship’ (p.865).

In the profession of social work, there has long been a focus on the relational aspects of practice, not just between social workers and service users, but also within and between groups and organisations (O’Leary et al., 2013). Yet, according to Adamson et al. (2014), relational aspects of resilience tend to be downplayed in the literature. To reflect the impact that relationships appeared to have on the
resilience of the social workers in my study, and to fill a gap in resilience literature more generally, I added a ‘relational’ domain to Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model. While Thompson’s model does not explicitly exclude the consideration of relationships, they are subsumed under the other categories. The unique importance of relationships for the social workers in my study seemed to merit direct attention rather than being considered a sub-category of another domain. The participants spoke about their relationships with various people, most prominently service users, team members, managers and multidisciplinary professionals. The term ‘service user’ can be a contested one, however, I am opting to use this in order to descriptively refer to people who use social work services, including informal carers. The four groups identified are, of course, not homogenous and there are both commonalties and differences in the relationships that social workers develop with people within and across these groups. However, the nature of the social work role differs with each one and gives rise to distinct factors associated with resilience. For this reason, they are considered separately.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship of social workers with each of these groups in turn, drawing out the challenges that can arise as well as the sources of resilience. I begin by recognising that, for many of the participant social workers, a significant amount of their job satisfaction derived from relationships with service users. There were some challenges within these relationships too, in terms of the emotional demands of engaging with empathy, and dealing with conflict. I then consider relationships with team members, which were a primary source of support for all of the participants but could also take a toll on resilience if not mutually supportive. The discussion moves on to explore the relationships between social workers and managers, a theme in which there was some variance among the participants. Immediate line managers were a source of support for many but only when based on a foundation of trust and respect. In contrast, there was a prevalent sense of disconnect with more senior managers that was not felt to be supportive. Social workers in adult services have a great deal of contact with professionals from other disciplines and many are based in multidisciplinary teams. The chapter ends with a discussion of the impact of these inter-professional relationships. For many of the participants, these relationships were highly valued when they engendered more innovative approaches to practice and drew on the combined practice wisdom of different disciplines. On the other hand, some misconceptions of the social work role by other professionals had a detrimental impact on resilience.
6.2 Engagement and Empathy: Relationships with Service Users

There is a recognition that, however varied the input of social work may be, it ‘would always begin and end with a human encounter between two or more people’ (Ward et al., 2018, p.13). This ‘human encounter’ was an aspect of the social work role that many of the participants in my study cited as the most enjoyable, and which provided the primary source of job satisfaction.

LILY: I’ve arranged it so that on my shorter working day I tend to be out of the office for most of it. Like, I’ll go and do lots of visits and stuff or, yeah usually that, so I’m often not even in and that just doesn’t feel like work.

JO: Most of all I like meeting people and hearing their stories. That’s a huge bit of the job satisfaction, just hearing the story of where they are now and where they’ve come from. It’s very much the people part, it’s not the paperwork.

The opportunity to develop relationships with service users was missing for Julie who was part of a short-term response team dealing with urgent situations.

JULIE: We don’t get that sort of deep connection with people anymore, which I think is not sustainable for long either. Do you know what I mean? You need to have those because you come into social work to have relationships with people. That’s what you’re good at.

In the wider literature, there is a recognition that the wellbeing of social workers may be enhanced by building compassionate and empathetic relationships with service users (Tanner, 2020) and can lead to compassion satisfaction (Adamson et al., 2014; Kinman and Grant, 2020) and vicarious resilience (Pack, 2014). Additionally, for the participants of my study there was a sense that engaging in relationships with service users was a core feature of social work and the fundamental basis on which meaningful work could be carried out.

JO: I have to quickly establish a relationship and also the likelihood is that we’re going to be having, at some point, a difficult or challenging conversation about things and then deciding what the next step is.

The diary entries were particularly useful in providing concrete illustrations of this. For example, Catherine commented that, when visiting a service user to tell him that he had been banned from a public shopping centre, a key factor of her resilience in managing this interaction was ‘knowing the person and having a level of rapport.’ Eilidh described visiting a service user in hospital to discuss a move into care. She stated that ‘the way I felt resilient is that I am engaging with him’ and specified
counselling, family therapy and remaining client focused as specific facets of this resilience, all of which entail relational qualities. Overall, having a positive relationship with service users was seen to contribute towards more effective social work practice and, as has been highlighted throughout the thesis, feelings of efficacy appear to have a strong association with resilience.

Although the majority of the social workers in my study placed emphasis on the importance of building relationships with service users, this was not always reflected in their use of time. Most stated, with some disappointment, that they spent only twenty to thirty percent of their time in direct contact with services users with the remainder on office-based tasks. This is reflected in other areas of social work too. A study carried out by BASW in England (BASW, 2018) found that, for social workers in children’s services, around twenty percent of their time was spent with service users with the remaining eighty percent completing bureaucratic tasks. They were reported to feel negatively about this and a campaign was launched aiming to reverse these percentages. It is not only social workers who appear to regret the lack of time spent on interpersonal engagement. In the BASW study (ibid.), many children stated that they did not see their social worker frequently enough. Similarly, other research has shown that the quality of the relationship with a worker is often the aspect of social work intervention most valued by service users (Howe, 2008).

In the wider climate of social work practice, Ruch (2018) notes that a welfare approach to social work in the UK existed until the 1980s when neoliberal principles took precedence and introduced a market-based structure, which was ultimately reflected in the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. This had the impact of transforming service users into consumers and brought about a ‘contractual’ rather than therapeutic relationship with social workers. In contrast, ‘relationship-based practice’ advocates for an approach in which social work intervention is provided, not just by means of the provision of services and resources, but directly within the relationship between the social worker and service user (ibid.). Likewise, Turbett (2014) reflects that twenty years ago there was a ‘universal and uncontested assumption about the importance of relationships’ in social work, however, relationship-based practice now seems to be considered more of a radical approach (p.130). The impact of these cultural shifts in social work, and the consequences for the resilience of social workers more widely, are discussed in Chapter Seven.

Alongside the emphasis that many of the participants placed on their relationships with service users was a recognition of the related emotional challenges. Service users are often vulnerable or in particularly difficult situations when input is sought from social services. Within these human encounters, social workers are not passive recipients of the potentially distressing information that
service users disclose about their lives. Instead, they are required to respond and engage actively. It is in this context that the interpersonal elements of emotional intelligence, that is the awareness of and response to the emotions of others (Morrison, 2007), become useful. These elements can be encapsulated in the concept of empathy. A discussion of empathy was presented in the literature review and defined as an understanding of the emotions of another person from their unique perspective (Rogers, 1961). It occurs when we ‘see and feel the world from the other’s point of view, attempt to understand it, and seek to convey that understanding’ (Howe, 2013, p.9). It is clear from many of the participants’ comments that empathy was seen as an important aspect of the social work role.

**STEPHEN:** I think you have to be able to experience somebody else's plight or their own despair. You want to try and kind of alleviate that and provide some kind of intervention to make it better. I don’t think you can be very effective if you’re not able to want to do that.

**KATIE (Manager):** My belief is to be really and truly effective is that you can’t be distanced from the work that you’re doing, and the minute that you start to be very emotionally removed from the work you’re doing, then my thoughts are that you are losing your ability to be effective, because you’re losing your humanity and you’re losing the old-fashioned term that we used to use, ‘empathy’.

The importance of empathy for social workers is also reflected in its inclusion in the Standards in Social Work Education (SSSC, 2019a), which provides the framework for professional social work training in Scotland. It seems that, despite Katie’s view of empathy as an old-fashioned term, it is very much embedded in the present day rhetoric of social work.

While there was a strong emphasis on the key role of empathy in being an effective social worker, many of the participants also recognised the risks to resilience of becoming too emotionally involved.

**KIRSTEN:** In the previous team I was in, it’s such long term work, we’re nearly part of the family in some situations because we were so involved with them and I think sometimes it can be more of a challenge to be resilient within that.

**RICHARD:** Often people are in quite difficult situations, the level of risk and sometimes the level of distress as well. So, it can be quite difficult not to carry that home with you.

While engaging and empathising with service users can engender a sense of job satisfaction, and compassion satisfaction more specifically, there is a great deal of research into the risk of vicarious or secondary trauma and compassion fatigue that this can entail (Fahy, 2007; Grant and Kinman, 2013; van Heugten, 2011). It was interesting to note that the concepts of vicarious trauma and compassion
fatigue were not mentioned by any of the participants. Secondary trauma was mentioned only by Mary, who felt that it should be more directly acknowledged in adult social work. This may indicate that the prevalence of these issues is lower than in other areas of social work, or that within adult social work they are less well recognised, as Mary’s point suggests. Further research into these risks in the specific context of adult services would be useful.

In order to protect against emotional overwhelm when demonstrating empathy for service users, there was a recognition that some degree of detachment was required in order to sustain resilience. Some of the metaphors of resilience used by the participants were helpful in further illustrating this. Lily characterised resilience as being ‘thick-skinned’ and Anne, one of the managers, spoke of a ‘buffer’ that could either be ‘a nice big barrier’ or ‘a little thin veneer.’ In a diary entry, Eilidh defined resilience as ‘an invisible thing to be built like boundaries.’ In some ways, these characteristics of ‘stability’ and ‘solidity’ were seen as beneficial in relationships with service users. The ability to ‘take that flux, the rollercoaster of emotions that people bring with them for whatever reason and try to be the stable person’ was cited by Karen as important in the social work role. Emily commented that, in the face of emotional distress expressed by service users, a social worker needs to be ‘kind of steady, stable, trustworthy, reliable’ and Pia described social workers as being a ‘rock’ for service users.

On the other hand, concerns were expressed by participants about the potential for a veneer to be so rigid that it was to the detriment of relationship-based practice. Julie talked about ‘putting that wall up and being like, that’s fine, it’s just a job’ indicating a level of self-protection that compromised the capacity to engage with service users. Indeed, a lack of empathy was often seen as the antithesis of good social work practice. Emily stated this strongly in recalling social workers who had ‘become detached and callous in order to function’ and, on the occasions when she had observed herself becoming detached, her sense of job satisfaction had decreased thereby depleting her resilience. Emotional detachment and its impact on the efficacy of social workers is recognised by Ferguson (2017) in his ethnographic study of social workers involved in child protection visits. He observed how ‘emotional and sensory overload’ (p.1008) could lead to detachment for self-protection, however, this often meant that the assessment process was not as robust. An important question to consider, then, is how being emotionally ‘tough’ fits with the so-called ‘soft skills’ of relationship-based social work.

What became apparent in the findings of my study was that, in order for resilience to be maintained, there seemed to be a delicate balance between empathising with service users to fulfil one’s role as an effective social worker while avoiding empathising to the point where emotional overwhelm become a risk. While resilience is likely to be maintained by a level of emotional detachment, this may
reduce the sense of efficacy that is often important for resilience. Alternatively, social workers who are sufficiently engaged with service users to demonstrate empathy and feel effective in their role, which can boost resilience, may potentially transgress protective emotional boundaries and thus feel less resilient. These apparent contradictions present a fine line for social workers to tread. Much of the literature on resilience in social work recognises the balance between empathy and emotional detachment. Kinman and Grant (2011) emphasise the importance of developing ‘clear emotional boundaries’ in order to guard against personal feelings of distress for the social worker (p.271), and Gerdes and Segal (2011) urge social workers to ‘turn off’ empathetic concern rather than become over-involved (p.146). Where the ‘off’ switch can be found, however, appears far from clear.

Many of the participants in my study reflected on where the appropriate balance between empathy and detachment may lie.

*PETER (Manager)*: You can’t over-empathise with somebody who comes across the door. On the other hand, you can’t be overly protective and sort of snub people. You’ve got to be able to take on board a certain amount of that to help them.

Peter recognised that it might be easier to depersonalise service users but that this reduced people to ‘widgets’ and was ‘impersonal and horrible.’ In his view, personalising the situations of service users constituted good practice but he recognised that this might take a toll on resilience. Other participants made similar statements about the balance of empathy and detachment:

*RICHARD*: I suppose it’s twofold, understanding what’s going on with the service user, but also understanding how that’s affecting yourself and not allowing the ability to empathise to draw you in so much that you’re burning out, you’re struggling to perform the role.

For some, this balance was the very essence of resilience itself. The overall definition that Stephen gave in his diary was ‘managing ourselves so that we can be compassionate, understanding and empathetic with clients in distress. Being able to separate ourselves from the work we do when needed to look after ourselves first.’ Linda’s definition of resilience, given in an interview, was similar:

*LINDA*: Emotional resilience is to be able to engage and empathise and be committed to some extent to an individual who requires support or has needs but whilst always checking in and reflecting with yourself, how you are in that process and keeping, trying to keep the two separate.

The slight hesitancy at the end of Linda’s comment, in qualifying that it is about trying to find separation, suggested that this was not considered an easy task. Melanie thought that ‘a lot of social workers err on one side or the other’ and, for Emily, it was more fluid.
EMILY: It's not a fixed point. It kind of moves and I suppose it moves with how much sleep you've had and what else is going on in your life and your knowledge of your own capacity. I think that boundary has to be flexible and, do I recognise where it is? Sometimes, but not always.

Again, there was a hesitancy in finding this elusive balance between over-empathising and being too emotionally detached.

There are various theoretical perspectives on empathy that may provide useful guidance. Grant and Kinman (2011) identify different types of resilience and suggest that ‘perspective taking’ and ‘empathetic concern’ can support resilience while ‘empathetic personal distress’ does not. In addition, Thompson (2015) makes a useful distinction between sympathy and empathy, suggesting that sympathy involves sharing the feelings of another person whereas empathy is about recognising but not sharing these feelings. In this sense, there can be a separation of oneself from the service user which enables active listening, potentially leading to greater interpersonal connection while protecting the worker from emotional distress. Similarly, Howe’s (2013) distinction between ‘affective empathy’ and ‘cognitive empathy’ suggests that social workers may be able to cognitively understand why others feel the way they do without moving into the affective realm in which these emotions are actively and personally felt. Empathy may also be defined as a ‘nonparallel emotional response’ in which the worker is not feeling the emotion of a service user but rather ‘sensing’ and seeking to understand it (Siebert et al., 2007, p.48). For example, actively feeling fear to understand the fear expressed by a service user is unlikely to be supportive to them and may instead intensify the service user’s feelings. In contrast, cognitively understanding the service user’s fear may be very helpful, as the social worker can listen and support without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. These conceptualisations of empathy can perhaps help social workers overcome the negative connotations of ‘detachment’ and, instead, lead to a greater awareness of the type of empathy that is most conducive to facilitating engagement with service users alongside sustaining their own resilience.

There were some participants who seemed to have found this point of balance between detachment and emotional overwhelm. In Eilidh’s diary, she described a particularly challenging meeting with the daughter of a service user and drew on past experience as a counsellor to understand the daughter’s projection of emotion onto her, stating that she ‘adopted a firm but supportive stance with the daughter to deflect from her emotions.’ There was no sense that she was not able to fully engage and feel effective in her role but there was a very clear boundary between the daughter’s feelings and her own. Emily seemed to have found a similar boundary but explicitly avoided framing this as ‘detachment.’
EMILY: I guess it’s about being able to retain, not a detachment, but sufficient separation from both your cases and what’s going on around you in the office, to be able to remain objective and effective and to be able to continue doing that without becoming unwell.

For some participants, this objectivity was about a clear sense of caring for service users in a professional rather than personal way. Kirsten’s earlier comment regarding the emotional challenges of becoming so involved that she felt like part of the family were in contrast to other participants who were clearer on their boundaries. As Melanie succinctly stated, ‘I’m not their mother.’

Although by far the most prominent theme regarding relationships with service users concerned empathy and the nature of emotional involvement, a few participants talked about experiences of conflict with service users including verbal aggression and threats. This is perhaps a key difference between social workers in adult services and those working with children and families, the latter reporting greater frequency of ‘negative behaviour’ from service users (Ravalier et al., 2021). Maggie and Linda both spoke about the pressures of working with people who were expressing anger through shouting and swearing. Jane found it difficult not to take verbal aggression personally as ‘you’re the one that gets it in the neck.’ Similarly, Catherine commented that ‘as the frontline worker I can be the target for anger and frustration.’ Other participants reported similar experiences.

MELANIE: We’re working with pretty scary people. My clients are the ones that everybody, when they’re walking down the street, they cross the street because they don’t want to see that person and we’re going into their home. So, things happen.

There was concern expressed by a few of the social worker participants about the potential risks of visiting service users alone. In my own experience of social work practice, it was notable that social workers carried out home visits alone unless there was an identified risk whereas other professionals such as the police, housing officers and district nurses always worked in pairs. In some of the participants’ teams, a policy had been implemented whereby two workers visited a service user who was unknown to the service as well as when there was a known risk. This was appreciated by the social workers involved and felt to be supportive and sustaining to their resilience. Unsubstantiated accusations and complaints were a further concern for some of the participants. Zoe talked about having been ‘threatened with lawsuits’ and, in a diary entry, Catherine wrote about a visit to a service user who was suspicious about the local authority’s handling of her finances and had made accusations of theft against her personally. Catherine commented that financial issues may best be dealt with by someone other than the allocated social worker to ‘avoid muddying the relationship with potentially inflammatory issues such as financial control, budgeting etc.’ Conflict in taking on the
role of financial assessment alongside building relationships with service users was also noted in a previous study on the resilience of social workers (Rose and Palattiyil, 2020).

It was interesting to note that when aggression was mentioned, the concern of social workers was only partly about their physical safety. Often the challenge arose in reflecting on whether they had done their best in managing the situation and responding to the service user’s anger thus further demonstrating the association between resilience and a sense of efficacy and professional integrity. The ability to be assertive was mentioned by some participants as a useful way to manage such situations and there was a strong emphasis on using relationship skills for conflict resolution. In the following quote from a diary entry, Eilidh described a visit to a service user.

EILIDH: This is the start of the journey for me to see what he is like. Having this knowledge of him first off tells me what kind of approach we will need to take. I am a good facilitator with such discourses, and I can do this sensitively and helpfully due to my conflict resolution skills.

This returns the discussion to the sentiment expressed by Neff and Germer (2018) that pain and the alleviation of pain are both found within relationships. In the context of the conflict that may arise in interactions between social workers and service users, it is perhaps within the relationship between them that both the conflict and its resolution may occur.

6.3 Friendship and Camaraderie: Relationships with Peers

For all of the participants in my study, relationships with peers seemed to have a very significant and positive impact on resilience, a finding reflected in several other studies (Ingram, 2015a; McFadden et al., 2015; Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2021). The term ‘peers’ is used here to denote other professionals within the immediate team who may or may not be qualified social workers but excluding those in management positions. The prominent role of peers in boosting resilience was reflected in many of the participants’ comments that, although the term ‘resilience’ was rarely used within their teams, it was a concept manifested in the practice of caring for and supporting each other.

STEPHEN: We don’t use the term ‘emotional resilience.’ We talk about people, you know, are they doing OK, are they managing it, everything that’s happening, is there anything we can do? I think we say these things and we discuss these things from a supportive perspective.

Rachel’s perspective on peer support was that ‘my job would be unbearable without it’ and Julie expressed this in similarly absolutist terms.
JULIE: I think you can have all the knowledge in the world, all the confidence in the world, all the provisions in the world, all the resources in the world, but if you don’t have the support around you, then there’s no way I could do it, absolutely no way.

The negative impact on resilience of the absence of these relationships was also noted. For example, Stephen reflected in a diary entry that he had been working alongside new colleagues whom he did not know well. This had left him feeling isolated, to which he attributed his decreased capacity to cope with difficult situations that day.

A couple of the participants used the term ‘camaraderie’ to characterise relationships among peers.

EILIDH: There is a lot of, in this team, there’s a lot of camaraderie you know and it feels good, it feels celebratory of you.

LILY: People do make sure that you are OK and ask if you’re feeling alright and the camaraderie is what helps with resilience, but people don’t say ‘I’m feeling resilient today.’

What they seemed to be expressing by the term ‘camaraderie’ was a familiarity with and understanding of each other. While some references were made to resilience gained from relationships with family, partners and friends outside of work, support from peers was spoken about in much more detail. It was a shared understanding of each other’s experiences in the professional context that appeared to contribute to resilience as ‘it makes you realise you’re not alone’ (Richard) and provides a ‘sense of solidarity’ (Erica).

ERICA: It’s good to be reminded that, do you know what, you’re doing your best and your best is good enough. And getting that from someone who doesn’t know the role for whatever reason, you know, the sentiment would mean a lot but it wouldn’t talk me down as much because they don’t really understand.

In many cases these peer relationships had become so strong that genuine friendships had developed.

EMILY: I think it was a very empathetic team, nice people who cared about each other and everybody felt that. So, it was fairly close to friendship I would say.

JULIE: I’m quite lucky that a lot of my colleagues here are my best friends and I adore them. I rely heavily on them for a lot of support, so I think that’s kind of, we do a lot of peer support.

Some local authorities for which the participants worked had undergone major organisational restructure in recent years. This had led to the dissolution of some well-established teams in which
supportive relationships had flourished over many years. One of the most significant sources of stress for Linda following an office relocation was having been ‘separated off from my pals.’

The physical environment was felt by some participants to affect peer relationships. Most of the social workers interviewed were based in large open plan offices with a hot-desking system in operation. There were mixed feelings about this. It was partly seen as beneficial for team cohesion as everyone was visible and easily accessible therefore connection between colleagues could develop more fluidly.

MAGGIE: It’s like working in a call centre sometimes, it’s awful. I mean, and it’s good at other times because sometimes if you’re wanting a wee bit of sort of banter you can, you know you’re walking past somebody and you want to check something out with somebody you, now like you can just sort of stand up and speak to people, so you get an immediate response.

Other participants commented that hot-desking had been detrimental to peer relationships forming as they were not always in close proximity to other members of their team. Resilience could be enhanced, in Lily’s view, by a more cohesive sense of team that would have more scope to develop ‘if we were maybe all sitting not at the four corners of the office.’

The benefits of connection between team members were recognised by all of the participant managers, some of whom had observed these supportive friendships grow.

HAZEL (Manager): I think that direct colleague, the relationships develop, some of them become friendships and that helps even more because people can be very open and honest with each other.

A couple of the managers mentioned the importance of enabling such relationships to develop. Even though social conversation could seem like a diversion from work tasks, they generally viewed it as an essential aspect of social workers’ resilience and wellbeing. In addition, organised social activities to foster team relationships were considered to be important by social workers and managers alike.

KAREN: We depend on one lovely guy and he organises all the social nights, and we all go and we all have a good time, and that’s our looking after one another.

The participants who spoke most emphatically about the benefits to resilience of having formed strong friendships with peers were in teams with a low turnover of staff or those which had not undergone significant restructure. Therefore, supporting the resilience of social workers to reduce attrition due to work stress, may have the exponential benefit of maintaining the cohesion of teams which further supports resilience. The significance of peer relationships to social workers’ resilience is
also a factor that organisations may wish to consider in decisions about restructuring and team location.

Openness, and the need for trust alongside this, were other important elements of supportive peer relationships. There appeared to be less of a perceived need to present a ‘front’ and engage in emotion management with peers, with the potential drain on resilience that was discussed in Chapter Five.

_KIRSTEN: I think just that nurturing and that understanding. Like nobody would tell you just to get a grip and get on with it. I think it's just that ability to be a bit vulnerable._

_GEMMA: I think just having that support and having the close working relationships to be open with one another and be comfortable enough to ask questions, and I think if I was in a team where I didn't feel comfortable, I would have a lot of stresses in my head and I would be thinking, oh gosh, what could I do in this situation and be scared to ask._

A mixed-methods phenomenological study conducted by Ingram (2015a) gathered interview and survey data from 112 social workers within one Scottish local authority regarding the emotional aspects of practice. The findings are similar in indicating that peer relationships were highly valued by social workers, in part due to the emotional support they afforded without the feelings of vulnerability more often experienced when being emotionally open with managers. Brene Brown (2010), in her work on the ‘power of vulnerability’, suggests that being open about one’s vulnerabilities can lead to positive feelings of authenticity and belonging that can be enriching to life rather than shameful and exposing. As surface acting is associated with burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Judge et al., 2009; Quinones et al., 2017), such authenticity may offer greater resilience.

Humour was a further resilience-enhancing characteristic of peer relationships that was prominent in the data.

_KAREN: This job can be really serious. It is very serious but you have to see a bit of light in it. You have to have that bit of fun._

At times, the humour described was dark in nature but, in some cases, seemed to provide a release from the more difficult aspects of the social work role.

_JILL: In the duty team, it's quite a black sense of humour. We're like, somebody died, we might get that package of care, it'll free up that bed or this kind of thing. We'll have these kinds of jokes because that's how we deal with it, but it's also the reality._

Humour has long been considered to contribute towards stress reduction by moderating the impact of negative life events (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983) and has been noted as a contributor towards
resilience in social work teams (Adamson et al., 2014; Thompson and McGowan, 2020). Nonetheless, Thompson and McGowan (2020) warn against ‘gallows humour’, characterised by cynicism, which can have the opposite effect and undermine morale in teams.

Peer relationships were generally expressed by the participants as reciprocated between colleagues and mutually beneficial. For example, in a diary entry, Ian wrote that his resilience had been boosted both by receiving and providing support to a colleague. However, some of the participants spoke about occasions when their resilience was depleted by supporting colleagues emotionally, and listening to what they perceived to be ‘moaning’ (Mike) and negativity.

_JILL_: Sometimes you find yourself in the role of the giver, so you’re providing the support, you’re listening, you’re maybe exploring or giving advice or putting forward different perspectives and, if that’s not reciprocal, that can become even more draining.

Jill’s reference to the experience as ‘draining’ points to a metaphor of ‘containment’, which is useful in further exploring the impact of peer relationships on resilience. In Chapter Four, the participants’ use of the metaphor of fuel was discussed in relation to the idea of resilience as a finite resource. With further analysis, this metaphor also encapsulated a more nuanced idea of a fuel tank that stores and ‘contains’ the fuel of resilience while releasing what were felt to be ‘negative’ emotions including stress. This is encapsulated in Catherine’s interview.

_CATHERINE_: I visualise emptying negative feelings and filling up with patience and thoughtfulness.

Tom thought that his resilience could ‘leak’, and a few other participants referred to the possibility that it ‘drains away.’ This metaphor suggests that, when the resilience tank is low, there is space for stress and other difficult emotions to ‘seep in’ in contrast to high resilience which means that the potential stress of challenging situations is ‘water off a duck’s back’ (Lily) with less risk of being absorbed. Jo suggested that ‘bottling up’ stress was unhelpful and many of the participants saw it as supportive to have an ‘outlet’ or ‘release’ and to be able to ‘vent’, ‘let off steam’ and ‘filter through stuff.’ Tom reflected that ‘if resilience is an organ or something you’re getting the poison out of it, even if it’s just offloading a wee bit.’ Peter (Manager) acknowledged the need for such an outlet when he commented that ‘it’s fair enough, we put too much into your pot and it’s pouring over the edge.’

A few participants expressed the expectation on them to ‘absorb’ the stress of their colleagues, to the point where, in Lily’s words, you are ‘saturated.’ Mike talked about colleagues who were not able to ‘contain’ negativity leading to a detrimental impact on the wellbeing and resilience of those around them. The metaphor of containment suggests that some social workers feel that stress and difficult
emotions may pass directly from one person’s ‘tank’ into another’s through a process of offloading. If one person offloads difficult emotions, it may result in a more favourable balance of resilience in their tank, but perhaps at the expense of such a favourable balance in the tank of the recipient. In reference to peer support, Maggie stated that ‘a problem halved is a problem solved.’ Indeed, this might be the case for the person with the problem but those in the supporting role may have acquired half a problem that they didn’t previously have. These findings suggest that the ability to absorb the stress of another person may be manageable if recipients have plenty of resilience of their own but more difficult if they are low on reserves. Some of the participants were well aware of the possible negative impact on colleagues of releasing their own stress and negative emotion. In a diary entry, Jill talked about striving to ‘contain any frustrations’ and Stephen felt that it was important not to let his ‘annoyance leak out.’ Catherine recognised that there were appropriate times to express difficult emotion and times when you had to ‘put it back in the box.’

Although relationships with managers will be explored in the following section, one particular comment is relevant here.

**ANNE (Manager):** I do think that offloading is important but I also think that workers need to learn that they shouldn’t just offload and hand it over. That’s where if you’ve got a really good senior, they can work with someone to work on it rather than, I’ll just give it to you and I’m alright but you’ve now got it all. It needs to be, it’s in the middle of the room, we’re working on it.

To sustain resilience, consideration may need to be given to ways in which stress and other difficult emotions can be discharged more neutrally rather than relying on informal peer support, which may place a strain on colleagues. Bion’s ideas of containment (1962 cited in Ferguson, 2017) may be useful in considering how to address stress ‘in the middle of the room.’ Bion’s theory proposes that safe spaces for emotional expression help people to integrate feelings and thoughts in order to make sense of situations that are complex, unpredictable and uncertain. The individual or group to whom the emotion is expressed acts as a ‘container’ for that emotion. In social work practice, according to Ferguson, the worker is supported to make links between thoughts and feelings by means of a process in which ‘a trustworthy person accepts and takes in the anxious person’s feelings and returns them in a digestible form which helps them to think more clearly’ (2017, p.1011). Although it is not the aim of Bion or Ferguson to address the impact on the person acting as the ‘container’, the fact that the feelings are ‘returned’ to the bearer suggests that they are not being absorbed by the recipient. Some of the participants in my study worked at a local authority which had set up a peer support scheme providing employees with access to trained ‘listeners.’ This is one possible way of providing more
structured support to complement informal peer support within teams. Other examples were weekly ‘check-ins’ or peer supervision which focused on wellbeing and provided a designated space for all team members to share their feelings within a group.

A further way of protecting colleagues against the emotional demands of supporting each other might be the practice of ‘internal supervision’ proposed by Casement (1999 cited in Ferguson, 2018). While emotional support from external sources may be invaluable, Casement proposes that over reliance on it can be counterproductive. He suggests that workers may benefit from developing an ability for more autonomous ‘internal supervision’ that helps them to maintain their functionality. According to Ferguson (2018), internal supervision has parallels with reflection-in-action in the sense that both involve being able to understand what is happening whilst simultaneously being aware of one’s own response. For social workers, this could be explored in terms of personal strategies such as mindfulness and reflective practice that enable both an awareness of present moment experience and the capacity to understand and process it. As discussed in Chapter Five, and again alluding to metaphors of containment and release, Ferguson (2016) describes the journeys that social workers make between physical locations, particularly by car, as ‘containers’ for the emotional effects of the role. Such journeys provide a ‘crucial liminal space’ for ‘vital emotion work’ to be done (ibid., p.197), and offer a neutral space for offloading and processing emotion without relying solely on other people. In summary, alongside a recognition of the enormous benefits that peer support appears to bring to resilience, it is important that social workers are not expected to be the sole source of support to each other alongside the other emotional demands and complexities of their role.

6.4 The Front Line and the High Towers: Relationships with Managers

In addition to peer relationships, which provided informal support, friendship and a sense of solidarity, relationships with managers were also a prominent theme across the interviews. Reference will be made to ‘line managers’ denoting the person in a management position who directly supervises the social worker and ‘senior managers’ who are in positions senior to the line manager. For most of the social workers, regular planned ‘supervision’ sessions were scheduled with their line managers in addition to more ad hoc and informal guidance and support that occurred day to day. The dual roles of the line manager in overseeing the workload of social workers to ensure accountability alongside support to manage the demands of the role, means that there is much to unravel regarding the impact on resilience. This is important to dissect since studies have indicated that a positive relationship
between a social worker and line manager can significantly contribute towards retention of workers and reduce the risk of burnout (McFadden et al., 2015). More senior managers, without line management responsibility for social workers, were felt by the participants of my study to be more distant but also affected resilience in some respects.

Mixed views were expressed by the social workers in my study regarding the extent to which emotional support was sought from their line managers or was a desired component of supervision. For a few, it was important to have the space and opportunity to discuss the emotional impact of the work.

GEMMA: Because our managers and senior are very aware of how we’re feeling and they make sure we’re not over stressed and we are dealing with things well, they’re able to pick up on it if we’re not. I think that’s really, really useful.

RICHARD: Supervision is a dialogue and it allows us to feedback, and having that relationship with the seniors to be able to say, actually no, I’m not coping just now.

Most of the managers also talked about the importance of making space for emotional support within supervision while recognising that not all social workers would wish to make use of it.

HAZEL (Manager): I would always start with, how have you been, tell me what’s been happening? I wouldn’t start with, you know, what happened to Mr Jones? We’ll get to Mr Jones. We’ll soon enough be talking about Mr Jones. I start with that and that’s always, sometimes people share and sometimes they don’t.

Likewise, Isabel (Manager) recognised that taking on a therapeutic or counselling role with the social workers whom she supervised was not appropriate but she ensured that there was the opportunity in supervision for them to talk about any personal issues that were impacting on their work.

A minority of participants were not seeking emotional support from their managers at all. They tended to be social workers with more years of experience who felt that they no longer required it. However, further discussion revealed that this was often partly due to the nature of their relationship with their manager.

JANE: I’m not very good at the supervisions where they’re all touchy feely.

INT: OK, what effect does that have on you then?

JANE: Well, you know I don’t mind people saying, are you all right, are you coping well? Yeah, fine you know. I suppose it’s different here because I’m just a locum and I’m just sort of passing through. In my
previous job, I probably had a closer relationship with my manager because I’d been there two and a half years, you know, so we probably had those more in depth conversations about my life and things that were impacting upon me.

Additionally, emotional support offered in supervision was uncomfortable for some as it was felt to transgress professional boundaries.

*RACHEL*: I’ve always been very clear that unless it was affecting my work, my private life is my private life and I don’t really want to talk about that in supervision. I can remember one manager I had and he would talk all about what’s going on in your private life and I was like, no we won’t be. That’s not the way I work. You’re not my friend and I’m not going to be yours.

For others, a lack of trust was an inhibition, an issue that has been noted in other studies (e.g. Beddoe, 2010).

*ERICA*: Would I prefer you buy me a doughnut and ask me how I am? Of course, but nobody’s got the time for that, and again I would only really want that from a manager whose position I trust. I think my manager gives me lip service.

Particular caution was expressed by some of the participant social workers about stress or other emotions being perceived negatively by their managers, which prevented them from seeking support.

*JULIE*: If you don’t have that relationship with your manager, it’s not great. It doesn’t work very well and I think it is still a really taboo subject in here. I think people are scared to say they’re struggling.

This reluctance to be emotionally open is reflected in other studies in which social workers were uncomfortable about admitting that they felt stressed or under pressure (Grant et al., 2014a; Rajan-Rankin, 2014).

However supportive the manager, there may remain an acute sense of the hierarchy of management and the need to portray a professionalism that makes talking to peers a safer option. Certainly, it is questionable how much such open expression can occur when a power imbalance exists within the supervisory relationship (Houston and Marshall, 2020). This was not reflected in the views of the managers in my study who gave the impression that emotional expression was acceptable and would not count against the professionalism of the social worker.

*ANNE (Manager)*: When they’re in a room with their line manager, that’s often where people will be distressed or upset, and it’s that relationship I think is vital. If you don’t have a good relationship with your line manager, I don’t think you’ll get the best out of the worker, and I don’t
think they will feel emotionally supported, and I don’t think we’ll be helping with their resilience.

The managers in my study were self-selecting, and it is possible that they had a particular interest in resilience that was reflected in their management style. From the small sample, it is difficult to say whether managers more generally are open to offering this kind of emotional support. There were certainly some accounts from the participant social workers of unsupportive supervisory relationships, therefore it is likely that this is not the case across the board.

In addition to more formal planned supervision, it was important for many of the participant social workers that their managers were accessible for consultation. Most of the managers interviewed were aware of this and sought to make themselves as available as possible, potentially at a cost to their own workload and resilience.

**NAOMI (Manager):** I know I need to get things done but I don’t want to be somebody who says, I can’t speak to you, because I think the team need to have someone they can speak to.

For the social workers, the accessibility of managers for consultation was generally bound up in their sense of accountability and a desire for shared responsibility. They were keen to know, in the words of several participants, that a manager ‘had my back.’ This highlighted one of the key differences in social workers’ relationships with managers in contrast to peer relationships. While relationships with peers could be beneficial for informal practice discussion, it was within the social worker/manager relationship that resilience could be boosted by the sharing of accountability.

**MELANIE:** If any trouble came down, my manager always took the position that, Melanie’s a very good social worker, she’s been working with me for a long time and, if something has happened, it’s not her fault. That was his bottom line and now it’s always, what have you done wrong, why did this happen, why did that happen?

When talking about a particularly supportive manager earlier in her career, Emily recalled that ‘I could go out on a limb but I could go out on a limb with a bit of a rope attached.’ She talked positively about the opportunity to be creative in her practice and try different approaches in the knowledge that her manager would support her. More generally in my study, it was notable that this need to feel tethered by management backing and ad hoc consultation did not appear to change depending on the experience of the worker. As Emily also pointed out, the complexity of the work allocated tends to increase as the social worker becomes more experienced, therefore the need for guidance and feedback remains constant.
Concerningly, there were also some reports of bullying by managers. Linda described having been bullied in a previous team. Zara, although not having experienced this personally, was aware of colleagues who had ended up taking sickness absence due to the stress caused by bullying. She expressed an underlying concern about finding herself in a similar situation. Erica spoke about the impact of her relationship with a senior manager although this was not someone who was currently in a direct supervisory role.

**ERICA:** I’m relatively confident, or I’m good at pretending that I am, but this woman has me quaking in my boots. If anyone’s ever made me cry at my work it’s her and it’s led me to become less, not aggressive, less assertive than I am with anybody else, and probably that perpetuates the cycle and she’s just like, well I can walk all over you if I want.

Workplace bullying in social work, as would be expected, has been found to increase the likelihood of depression and a loss of self-confidence (van Heugten, 2011). Greer (2016) notes that it is often the culture of the workplace that enables bullying to occur despite various policies around respect and whistleblowing. This highlights how the different domains of resilience presented in this thesis may intersect and influence each other. Whistleblowing policies at the organisational level are all very well but may be ineffective if workplace culture tolerates bullying, or does not adequately address it, thereby enabling power plays to be enacted within individual relationships.

Overall, the qualities that the participant social workers were looking for in their relationships with managers emulated those that they strove to convey in their relationships with service users. This was often about a sense of humanity, and being treated, understood and valued as an individual. In the following quotes, Pia and Zoe reflect on the positive characteristics of managers within their organisations.

**PIA:** They’re available, they listen, they’re human. They take what you say seriously, always have here. I don’t think I’ve had a bad experience of managers here.

**ZOE:** He balanced the professional with the caring for you as a person, an employee and a person. He just seemed to do it quite effortlessly.

Being seen as an individual meant that there was a perceived understanding on the part of managers that social workers could be affected by personal issues and that these may have an impact on their performance at work.

**MAGGIE:** I suppose some sort of compassion, you know compassion, an awareness if there’s other stuff going on in your life at a particular time, that they’re sort of tuned into that a wee bit more.
The fuel tank metaphor explored in Chapter Five is a useful indicator of how social workers may see resilience holistically. Using fuel to cope with issues in their personal lives is likely to deplete that available to manage work-related stressors. Acknowledgement of this by managers, perhaps leading to temporary adjustments to workload, may therefore help to maintain wellbeing when resilience is at a low ebb.

A clear understanding by managers of the social work role was important for some of the participant social workers. A few participants had managers who had recently been promoted from main grade social work positions and, despite a potential lack of experience at management level, this was appreciated as it was perceived that they had direct experience of social work practice and were ‘one of us’ (Rachel). In contrast, relationships with more senior managers were seen as unsupportive and uncompassionate by the majority of the participants largely because this understanding was perceived to be missing. This was expressed mainly in terms of a sense of ‘disconnect’ on the part of senior managers about the day-to-day reality of being a ‘frontline’ social worker.

ERICA: The manager forgets that in all the time she’s dilly dallying or micromanaging where my flexi is or whatever, there’s somebody out there who needs a service. Or I’m about to have a mental breakdown and you’ve not even noticed.

LINDA: We’re not seen as individuals, as people. I don’t think anybody who gets above a certain level understands what this work is, and how difficult and challenging it can be, and that doesn’t feel good and it does gnaw away at resilience.

Dwyer, in a reflective article on the emotional impact of social work, comments that the demands of emotion work are not always acknowledged at senior management level, and are instead ‘confined exclusively to the inner psychological world of the individual practitioner’ (Dwyer, 2007, p.50). Seemingly, for the participants of my study, it is important for their resilience that such demands are indeed recognised throughout the management hierarchy. Without such an understanding, it was difficult for some of the participants to feel supported by any expressions of gratitude offered to them by senior managers. To Karen, these came across as ‘disingenuous.’

KAREN: I think if you’re really grateful, you’ll come down out of your high tower, and you’ll come down here and say thanks. You come down and see how the team operates instead of sitting in your high tower and telling us on a blog.

In many of the organisations for which the participants worked, it seemed that there was a need to address the gap between frontline workers and senior managers. As Karen suggests, a blog or other remote form of communication may not be sufficient to bridge this gap. If the ‘high tower’ of
managers is seen as a space protected from the harsher realities of life on the ‘frontline’, it may be more appropriate for senior managers to take the time to directly connect with the experience of being a social worker in order to gain a greater understanding of what supports their resilience. This act of ‘walking the floor’ can help to foster positive relationships between social workers and senior managers, and help to build a sense of shared mission and purpose (Grant et al., 2021, p.58).

6.5 Collaboration and Conflict: Relationships with Multidisciplinary Professionals

In the course of their day-to-day working lives, social workers come into contact with a range of professionals from other disciplines. The participants of my study talked primarily about their relationships with health professionals, reflecting the fact that the implementation of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) Scotland Act 2014 has brought about, in many cases, co-located teams and closer working partnerships. Other relationships, such as those with staff from support agencies, were also mentioned but with a great deal less frequency. Like the other key relationships discussed in this chapter, relationships with multidisciplinary colleagues entailed both benefits and challenges to resilience. When good relationships had been built up, they were perceived by some of the participants to be collaborative and to form the basis of creative and ‘innovative’ social work practice.

In a diary entry, Emily noted that her resilience in a difficult adult protection situation was boosted by colleagues in a mental health team who were ‘always supportive and helpful.’ Also in a diary entry, Catherine reflected on the benefits of joint working during a visit to a service user.

CATHERINE: I think that it can help to have more than one worker involved with an individual, or to visit jointly with someone to change the dynamic at times. A community psychiatric nurse used to alternate visits with me and we planned interventions together so the perspective was ‘fresher’ and more objective at times.

In this sense, the input by professionals of other disciplines was experienced as enhancing the nature of interventions with service users and, in doing so, creating feelings of professional efficacy that are associated with higher levels of resilience.

The challenges of working with other professionals emerged most significantly in relation to differences in perspective, which could result in conflict rather than creativity and collaboration. Many of the examples given by the participants are somewhat inseparable from the broader domain of professional culture, a topic which is returned to in Chapter Seven. In the current chapter, the focus will be on how this manifested on a relational level. Predominantly, conflict was reported to surface
in relation to the value base that social workers strove to maintain in their practice, especially around promoting the self-determination of service users. Ian gave an example of his health colleagues being more directive to service users about what was considered to be in their best interests, whereas he believed that choice and self-determination should be given more priority.

*IAN:* I think we can support families to change or to, and guide them as best we can but there’s a certain amount of choice and maybe from a social work point of view, the balance of what I would give for choice, for some other professionals, for health, they would say it would be more, saying to families, this is what should happen.

Other participants had similar views about their role in supporting service users with positive risk taking while health colleagues tended to be more risk averse.

*LIZZIE:* We are quite comfortable with people taking risks. We’re quite comfortable with the idea that, yes this person is likely to fall over, yes this person has given their nephew all this money but, in actual fact, we can quantify that, we can qualify it and we’re quite comfortable with that happening, and health just aren’t.

Karen illustrated her depth of feeling about the importance of self-determination for service users in describing how she sometimes felt like standing on a table shouting ‘have you heard of the Human Rights Act?’ to health professionals operating from risk averse principles. These comments point to varying ethical standpoints taken by different professional disciplines with the potential for tensions to arise within working relationships. This tension is itself held within the social work Codes of Practice in Scotland (SSSC, 2016) which require social workers to ‘support the rights of people who use services to control their lives and make informed choices about the services they use’ (Code 1.3) as well as to ‘respect the responsibilities of colleagues who follow different professional codes’ (Code 6.8). Given that professional integrity was strongly associated with resilience for the participants of my study, negotiating inter-professional relationships in which conflicting values arise is likely to create challenges to sustaining resilience.

Additionally, the differing priorities and expectations of professionals were described by many of the participants as a source of conflict and stress. Generally, the reason for this conflict was considered to be a lack of awareness on the part of other professionals concerning the scarcity of social work resources and the time-consuming bureaucratic and statutory procedures they were required to follow. For Maggie, one of the main challenges of her role in a mental health team was the ‘hassle’ she received from other professionals in terms of what they expected to be achievable. Similarly, Mike, who worked very closely with health professionals in a hospital setting, stated that conflict between them was ‘a daily occurrence’ and centred on negotiating different priorities. He gave an
example of health professionals expecting an entire adult protection intervention to be carried out in order to facilitate a person’s imminent discharge from hospital, with little sense of the breadth of a social worker’s statutory duties under the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007. Within the interviews, it was relatively common to hear social workers talk about receiving several calls a day from health professionals requesting an update on home care services for a patient who was waiting to be discharged from hospital. While the social workers in my study seemed to be well aware of the general demand on hospital services and the need for prompt discharge, they felt they were working hard to resolve situations regarding individual service users. They expressed frustration about challenges to their personal practice that, in fact, related to the broader structural issues of funding and resources, which is discussed further in Chapter Eight.

The lack of understanding of different professional roles was explored in a study by Pearson and Watson (2018), drawing on data from focus groups and interviews with over seventy professionals from both health and social care disciplines. A pertinent example of such misunderstanding related to a discussion between a health worker and social worker regarding ‘assessment.’ After some forty-five minutes, it became clear that ‘assessment’ meant entirely different things to each professional. Although my study focuses only on the social work perspective, Pearson and Watson’s findings (ibid.) suggest that there may be a mutual lack of understanding between professionals in health and social work which, if addressed, could lead to a greater awareness of the distinct characteristics and pressures of each role. It is perhaps relevant that the integration of health and social care, although on the Scottish Government’s policy agenda for some years, has only been formalised more recently. The increased proximity of working relationships between health and social work colleagues is therefore relatively new, and it remains to be seen whether this will foster a greater mutual understanding. Reflecting this, some of the social workers in my study recognised that they had a part to play in communicating their role and making efforts to understand the role of their health colleagues.

MIKE: Some are very good, some are very supportive, some aren’t and we’re probably guilty of that as well, the pressure on nurses or doctors or physios to give us information. So, I think maybe a lack of understanding of where each profession’s coming from. In terms of promoting, it’s probably that kind of integrated working, do you know, so that when you do get a working practice within certain wards, or workers or whatever, again you can almost kind of have empathy for what they’re dealing with, what you’re dealing with, a kind of common ground.

Maggie recognised the ‘educational role’ that is useful for social workers to adopt in order to assist workers in health disciplines to gain a greater understanding of the social work profession. She was
one of the few participants who had noted the increased clarity of health professionals regarding the nature of the social work role, which suggests the possibility of such understanding developing over time.

Additionally, within the context of health and social care integration, there were many comments from the participants about the relatively low status and lack of respect afforded to them as social workers. The following excerpt from Catherine’s interview is in reference to working with health colleagues in a mental health team.

*CATHERINE: Sometimes in a multidisciplinary context they can think that your role is not as important as theirs, and the way they do that is quite insulting and yet you still have to work with them over and over in different cases.*

Eilidh made a similar remark in which she reflected on working alongside a doctor.

*EILIDH (Diary entry): I am clear in my boundaries to know when I am not being respected. This is how I have felt during this case from the doctor. I knew when enough was enough. I felt OK to speak up and say that I was not being invited or included, and not fearful to do so.*

She went on to comment that ‘I felt patronised by them and as if I was not important enough to be included.’ There were many more examples of social workers feeling excluded from decision-making processes by health professionals. In a diary entry, Lizzie gave an example of what she described as being ‘overlooked’ by a doctor when she was not invited to a multidisciplinary meeting to discuss a potential care home placement for a service user. Mike noted what he perceived to be a lack of equity in decision-making, and described this as a ‘hierarchical structure’ with health professionals positioned higher than social workers. The link between low status and resilience was not made particularly explicit by the participants of my study, however, it seems apparent from the data that issues of professional pride and respect for the role were implicated. If resilience is enhanced partly through professional commitment and integrity, it is likely to be important for this to be recognised and respected by professional partners.

Like Eilidh, Mike stated that he felt sufficiently assertive to challenge health colleagues when he felt disrespected but speculated that it may be more difficult for social workers with less experience. However, there was not an obvious correlation between assertiveness and experience in the research data. For example, Kirsten, a social worker with fifteen years’ experience noted the fragility of her professional confidence and felt that ‘it can be undermined very easily, you know literally in minutes or seconds by someone saying something.’ This is a reminder to avoid assumptions that only newly
qualified workers need support in this respect, as experienced social workers may continue to struggle in the face of unequal status in professional relationships.

6.6 Conclusion

Relationships appeared to be very much part of the participants’ professional lives and everyday practice, despite apparent shifts away from relationship-based practice towards more office-based tasks. The most significant relationships for the participants of my study were those with service users, peers, managers and other professionals. Their relationships with service users were often described as very fulfilling, although resilience could be challenged by the need to engage with empathy and, to a lesser degree, when conflict or threats arose. Relationships with peers were generally considered a significant source of resilience for social workers. What the participants said about these relationships was largely positive except for those occasions when the emotional support asked of them by peers was felt to outweigh their capacity to provide it. To maintain the capacity to offer support to peers, it was important that these relationships were reciprocal. The picture was more mixed regarding relationships with line managers. There were reports of feeling understood, validated and supported, which contributed positively towards resilience. Some of the social workers felt that they had backing from their manager and a sense of shared accountability whereas others were in fear of being blamed unfairly. Relationships with more senior managers were not spoken about positively by most of the participants. It was perceived that there was a disconnect that engendered a lack of understanding on the part of managers about the realities and challenges of ‘frontline’ social work, which was seen as unsupportive and invalidating. In the context of multidisciplinary relationships, there was again a mixed picture. Collaboration, and the innovation that could come with this, was greatly welcomed but, on the other hand, different perspectives could lead to misunderstandings about the social work role and unrealistic expectations that increased stress and pressure. Perceptions of social work as low in status were seen to thwart the participants’ sense of being respected and valued in their inter-professional relationships. As is highlighted throughout the thesis, threats to an overall sense of professional integrity were often experienced as threats to resilience.

The relationships that social workers engage in on a daily basis play out within a wider context of teams and organisations. What happens within engagement and communication on a personal and relational level can be influenced by this wider context. Some of the key points discussed in this chapter will be revisited in the following two chapters in which the cultural and structural domains of resilience are explored.
7. THE CULTURAL DOMAIN: Emotional Resilience in Social Work Culture

7.1 Introduction

The sample group for this study is social workers employed within local authority adult services. The participants were based in a range of settings including generic adult services, addiction services, learning disabilities teams, mental health teams, short-term response teams and hospitals. Some of the factors they referred to as supporting or limiting their emotional resilience related to the less tangible aspects of working within these settings, and within the social work profession as a whole, which might be construed as ‘culture.’ In Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model, the cultural level refers to ‘shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing’ and ‘conformity to social norms’ (2006, p.27). The participants rarely articulated characteristics of ‘culture’ in a direct way, however, they did highlight various aspects of their working lives that supported or detracted from resilience, and which appeared to denote the ‘shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing’ to which Thompson refers. While each of their workplace cultures may have had specific features, some broad themes were prevalent in the data. Other themes related to notions of culture pertaining to social work with adults more generally, or to the profession as a whole.
Much of what will be discussed in this chapter is embedded in the ‘managerialist’ culture that has come to characterise social work with adults. As outlined in Chapter Two, a managerialist culture in social work is based on principles of individualism and a market-based economy. This has had a significant impact on social work practice such that ‘transactional and economically driven approaches replaced the therapeutic and interpersonal stance that historically has been the dominant characteristics of practice’ (Ruch, 2018, p.30). In such a culture, the role of social workers in adult services is one of ‘care manager’, signifying a move towards overseeing rather than directly providing care and support (Collins, 2008; Gregson and Holloway, 2005; Ruch, 2018). The managerialist culture of adult social work appeared to have a range of influences on the culture within the teams and organisations of the participants in my study, and a subsequent impact on their resilience. This centred on a few key tensions within their role as well as certain aspects of professional identity.

In this chapter, I firstly discuss the relationship between a managerialist culture and the ‘human’ quality of social work, and suggest that resilience may be supported by a more personalised culture in relation to both social workers and service users. The discussion moves on to consider how the bureaucracy of managerialism can stifle opportunities for creative practice and, in doing so, reduce both job satisfaction and resilience. Within this context, the extent to which social workers are willing and supported to ‘bend the rules’ regarding organisational procedure is examined. The emotional nature of social work is explored with consideration of the extent to which emotional expression is encouraged and valued within the culture of social work teams and organisations. The chapter ends with a discussion of professional identity, examining how a positive and resilience-enhancing identity may be established within the culture of adult social work. In a broader sense, social workers are likely to come from different cultural backgrounds and have diverse identities regarding race and gender for example, which may influence their conceptualisation and experience of resilience. This was less apparent in the data for my study given the small sample size and relative lack of diversity, particularly regarding ethnicity, but is addressed where relevant.

7.2 Humans and Robots

As the interviews with the participants progressed, I was struck by how many of the social workers protested that they were not ‘robots’ but human beings, as though this were not inherent. I wondered what this might say about the culture in which they worked and why their humanity was not self-evident, particularly in the context of a welfare profession such as social work. Some of these
protestations of humanity concerned the impersonal way in which the participants felt that they were treated by their organisations.

LINDA: We’re not machines you know. We’re not computers but all they’re interested in is being seen to be meeting the stats, meeting the requirements.

Lily stated that ‘we’re just like robots to be used until we drop’ and Julie made a similar point in stating that workers are ‘just a number and will be replaced in a minute.’ Zoe speculated that the task-based focus of the organisation for which she worked meant that ‘the needs of the service trump my need to be healthy.’ Some of the managers were aware of an impersonal culture within their organisations, and generally saw this as emanating from the levels of management above them.

ANNE (Manager): It’s very important that we don’t have staff off sick but occasionally people are sick, and sometimes very bad things happen to staff sadly, but very high up we’re very concerned about the numbers and we’re forgetting that that number is a person who’s maybe got cancer, that number is a staff member who’s maybe just had a bereavement.

Simon, also a manager, commented on the importance of recognising the emotional impact on social workers ‘both as a human being and as a professional.’ It was interesting that he framed the humanity of social workers as separate from their professional role, whereas for social workers they were very much entwined. The main message conveyed in these quotes is of an organisational culture in which social workers felt that they were one more component of an anonymous workforce. In order to support resilience, they seemed to be asking to be treated as individuals with their own needs and finite capacities, rather than machines designed to meet the needs of the organisation. This is a point clearly reflected in Grant et al.’s resilience diagnostic tool (2021), which has, as one of its key principles, the notion of a sense of appreciation in which workers feel valued as individuals.

Many of the participants felt that service users were subject to a similar process of depersonalisation within organisational culture. The focus on relationships and associated people skills that they tended to value highly were not always thought to be reflected in the culture of some of their teams and organisations. Peter, one of the managers, was concerned about the potential for organisational practices to ‘slide into almost a managerialism of the situation’ which he described in the following quote.

PETER (Manager): I think in our organisation here, one of the biggest problems we have, particularly in older people’s services, is churn. They reduce the skill level to one of automaton, you know they’re actually just churning assessments, and not actually properly engaging with people as clients as they used to do. I think that’s a problem that they should do
something about, because that’s where you can reduce people to names, and from names to numbers, and it’s about how many cases have you got as opposed to how many problems have the people got. I think the pyramid is on its head.

Peter went on to say, with apparent irony, that ‘until we’re replaced by robots, then it’s going to be personal and interface issues that are going to deliver service.’ Indeed, many of the participants sought to hold onto the more ‘human’ elements of social work.

ZARA: I spend quite a lot of time with service users to the detriment of my paperwork. I don’t want to lose that. I quite like to get out of the office. I like to go and have a wee chat and a cup of tea. I enjoy that, I don’t want to lose all of that. I don’t want to be like a robot.

However, the ‘robotic’ automaton of bureaucratic tasks and procedures were often perceived to thwart this. For example, Mike commented that in the hospital setting in which he worked, ‘it’s a dark joke now but there’s a big print out of delayed discharges and names, and that’s all that gets spoken about.’ Jill described organisational bureaucracy as ‘the tail wagging the dog’ in the sense that administrative tasks seemed to take precedence over the welfare of service users, Similarly, Jo experienced the process of completing assessments with service users as ‘quite an in and out process’, which did not allow time to build relationships.

These examples are illustrative of managerialism in social work culture more generally, which is seen to favour rational-technical skills over interpersonal engagement (Hennessey, 2011; Ingram, 2015b). Ferguson (2017) has noted a similar tendency in the culture of child protection social work. His research highlights how the social workers he observed were, at times, in a ‘bureaucratically preoccupied state’ (p.1019) during direct contact with service users, which affected interpersonal engagement and the quality of the assessment undertaken. Likewise, Munro (2011) concluded in her review of child protection in England, that such a culture leads to a view that ‘the more important part of social work is carried out on a computer’ (p.36), a situation lamented by many of the social workers in my study. Such a preoccupation with bureaucracy is likely to have a detrimental effect on the resilience of social workers especially if, as Trevithick (2014) suggests, it is within relationships with service users that social workers aim to understand their experiences and support them towards positive change. This aim has been highlighted throughout the thesis as a key source of job satisfaction and resilience for the social workers in my study.

At the more extreme end of the scale, some of the participants conveyed a feeling that the bureaucratic and procedural elements of the social work role were essentially not social work at all.
**EILIDH (Diary entry):** In the hour and twenty minutes, we had identified the real root of the stressors and had begun to look at self-care for this lady. I really enjoyed it, and relished in doing such an activity, and it made me feel more like a social worker.

**ALICE:** A lot of my job isn’t social work, it’s admin.

This sentiment was also reflected in Linda’s interview in which she spoke about returning from an extended period of sickness absence to find that she had forgotten the procedural elements of the role but ‘I hadn’t forgotten how to be a social worker.’ A different perspective was found in an online survey of 997 social workers in Wales, constituting eighteen percent of the Welsh social work workforce, in which the majority perceived office-based tasks to be equally as important to their role as direct contact with service users (Pithouse et al., 2019). Nonetheless, when such a dissonance in role and values does occur, it can lead to stress and burnout (Fenton, 2012; Rajan-Rankin, 2014), and may therefore be a key consideration in nurturing a more resilient organisational and professional culture. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter Six, it is not only social workers who call for greater emphasis on relationships. There is research to suggest that positive relationships with social workers can be seen by service users as an integral part of the support they receive (Beresford et al., 2008). Without relationships, in the words of one service user, ‘you’re just another bit of paperwork’ (Weinberg and Banks, 2019, p.362) and a ‘case’ to be closed (Pescod, 2020).

Trevithick (2014) questions why the social work profession advocates attachment theory as a way to understand the emotional experiences of service users while its own managerialist culture downplays the importance of relationships between social workers and service users. She calls for the culture of social work to be ‘humanised’, mirroring the views expressed by many of the participants in my study. Although it may be understandable, in times of austerity and cuts to the funding of local authority social work services, for organisations to prioritise the management of scarce resources, Ruch (2018) suggests that cost-saving and relationship-based practice need not be mutually exclusive. She argues that it is within the interests of the organisation to view the relationship between social workers and service users as an important resource especially when material resources are limited, although she emphasises that this should not mean a transfer of burden onto individual social workers to compensate for a shortfall in funding. Unless relationships are valued alongside material resources, ‘relational austerity’ may occur alongside financial austerity (ibid., p.24). If, in Peter’s words, ‘the pyramid is on its head’, a more resilient culture could be nurtured by shifting priorities so that human engagement forms the broad base of the pyramid, and bureaucratic tasks exist to facilitate the fundamental role of supporting service users. Bureaucracy may then be seen as a vehicle to good social work practice, rather than its core purpose.
As well as the perceived impediment of bureaucracy and procedure to effective social work practice, the emphasis placed by many of the participants on outcomes and statistics was a significant theme. The term ‘outcomes’ in relation to service users is prominent in the rhetoric of self-directed support (Scottish Government, 2019b), and aligns well with what the participants said about the ethical importance of promoting self-determination for service users. However, it was organisational outcomes that seemed to steer the practice of the social workers in my study, and evidently these were not always perceived to be aligned with the outcomes identified by service users.

ZOÉ: It all comes down to tasks for most people, most managers. It’s why didn’t you do this, why is that not here, where is such and such, why have you not..? Why is it that everything is about you being a whipping boy as opposed to, how are things coming along? For the most part, it’s just focusing on outcomes and actions.

Zoe went on to say that, in this kind of organisational culture, the priority seemed to be ‘ticking items off a list’ rather than working with people. Likewise, Peter (Manager) stated that the local authority for which he worked was ‘driven by outcomes’ in terms of how many assessments were completed and cases closed. The main question posed to workers was ‘how long did it take?’ rather than ‘how did you deal with that?’ He alluded to the misalignment of service user and organisational outcomes by pointing out that ‘I’ve never had anybody say to me in my social work career, you didn’t tick my box properly.’ In some cases, identified organisational outcomes were seen to be of no benefit to the service user at all. For example, Zara spoke about her organisation’s requirement for care plans to be produced in partnership with service users. However, in her view, the format of the document was so organisationally driven that the response of the service user would likely be ‘what are you going on about?’

These findings support the view that, in a managerialist culture, practice can become governed by what is auditable ‘rather than doing a ‘good job’ overall or for being a morally good practitioner’ (Banks, 2004, p.21). The latter is what Parrott (2014) might refer to as ‘practical-moral social work’ in contrast to the ‘rational-technical’ stance of managerialist social work with it outcomes focus (p.17). The trend towards a focus on auditable outcomes is also recognised by Clapton.

The deployment of outcomes can serve as a seeming assurance of efficiency. This is to the detriment of less technocratic, softer, more uncertain, yet more realistic and humanist, efforts to describe change and growth.

(Clapton, 2021, p.223)
He argues that within a managerialist model, ‘if it’s not quantifiable or measurable, it doesn’t exist or holds little meaning’ (ibid., p.227) and that, within the social work profession, the ‘outcome of Outcomes’ should be considered. In other words, what is the consequence on social work practice when organisational outcomes take precedence over those determined by service users? A related question concerns how unmeasurable concepts such as emotional intelligence and empathy fit with the certainty and fact required by the measurement of outcomes. Although drawing mainly from children and families social work, Clapton (ibid.) recognises that these issues are likely to relate to social work as a whole, and specifically mentions the challenges of agreeing outcomes in integrated health and social care settings. What is chosen to be evaluated and how it is measured may vary depending on what is deemed to be a priority. Some of these dilemmas have already been touched upon in the context of relationships between health and social work colleagues, and others will emerge as structural issues in the following chapter.

This discussion resonates with the so-called ‘Goodhart’s law’, taken from the principles of the economist Charles Goodhart, which suggests that ‘when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’ (Anzil, no date, para.6). The implication is that as soon as a target is identified, behaviour becomes focused only on meeting the target. Applied to social work, the danger is that practice becomes more organisationally orientated with less regard for the process by which it is achieved. Peter’s earlier comment about the ‘churn’ of carrying out assessments for service users is a prime example of this. If organisations set targets for the number of assessments to be completed, the priority is for social workers to complete them quickly rather than take time to develop relationships with service users to gain a more in-depth understanding of their situation. While not all organisational targets may be contrary to service user priorities, what the participants of my study seemed to be saying was that the overall ‘outcome of Outcomes’ has been a move away from relational-based processes of engaging with service users. A ticked box may be a clear measure of a task completed and an outcome achieved but says very little about the extent to which a service user feels understood and supported by means of a human encounter with the social worker. These ‘softer’ elements of social work practice are less measurable but perhaps immeasurably more important. Overall, in creating a conflict with the participants’ sense of integrity in their role and the essence of what it meant to them to be a social worker, the priorities inherent in organisational culture can be felt to undermine resilience. Incorporating attention to the process by which tasks are carried out may instil a greater sense of ‘procedural justice’, an aspect of organisational justice that focuses on fairness in procedure whatever the outcome (Kim et al., 2012). Since organisational justice is associated with
lower levels of burnout (ibid.), it follows that it may also provide scope for the enhancement of resilience and wellbeing.

It may be surprising that a more humane and compassionate ethos does not already prevail in the culture of social work considering that it is a welfare-orientated profession. However, as suggested previously, it is possible that social work organisations as ‘living complex systems’ can become emotional overwhelmed just as social workers do (Farragher and Bloom, 2010, p.131). In response to this collective experience of stress and trauma, defence mechanisms may be used, which could explain why the organisation as a whole is not always seen to respond compassionately and sensitively to its members. This is an important issue to be addressed since it seems unreasonable to ask social workers to engage with the distress of service users within an organisational culture that does not recognise the emotional impact of this and is, instead, seen to create additional challenges. Farragher and Bloom (ibid.) suggest a ‘Sanctuary Model’ for organisations that centres on a commitment to non-violence, emotional intelligence, social learning, open communication, democracy, social responsibility, growth and change. To enhance the emotional resilience of social workers, further research might usefully explore the impact of organisational trauma and consider how to collectively provide ‘sanctuary’ to the individuals within.

7.3 Creativity and Rigidity

According to Beddoe (2010), ‘the profession of social work hovers in uncomfortable places, always caught between transformative aspirations and bureaucratic constraints’ (p.1292). This is apt in describing how some of the participants experienced the bureaucratic and procedural elements of managerialist social work culture as inhibiting a flexible approach to their practice, which they found to be an adverse aspect of their role.

*TOM: When the systems, like the NHS or the social work systems, when they stop things from happening, I think over time I've grown a bit more accepting of it, you know we could do that, there's no reason why we couldn't do it other than resources, the systems don't allow it.*

*LIZZIE: I think social work used to be a very kind of broad, creative kind of job and I think it's shrunk to little more than people policing and accessing finance, you know. I think that we can be creative within that but not as much, and we have very little with which we can be creative.*

Greer (2016) argues that a resilient organisation needs to ‘foster the sort of creativity and dynamism which allows it to respond to changing and challenging circumstances while providing a supportive
environment which protects staff from undue stress’ (p. 136). However, within the constraints of bureaucracy and procedure, the scope to carry out effective and responsive social work practice with individual service users can be limited (Moffatt, 2019). Some of the participants spoke about the need to manipulate organisational procedure in order to better serve the priorities of service users.

In a diary entry, Eilidh recounted abandoning the format of a carer’s assessment as ‘it seemed rather rude and formulaic.’ What followed was an informal interaction that Eilidh felt was emotionally supportive and beneficial to the carer and, as a consequence of feeling effective and ethical in her practice, increased her resilience. Kirsten spoke about a culture in her team in which social workers went ‘slightly outwith the remit’ in order to achieve what they perceived to be in the best interests of service users.

Morley et al. (2019) advocate for social work practice that promotes creativity, emotional intelligence and critical thinking rather than rigid adherence to formulaic rules, which offer little scope for professional autonomy and judgement. Also using a robot analogy, they speculate, aptly but ironically, on the capacity of robots to perform the functions of a social worker within such a culture, echoing the sentiments of some the participants of my own study.

Why pay human social workers to do this work when robots (who apparently do not suffer the same impediment of thinking or the limitations of emotion and, instead, calculate precisely according to the algorithm with which they are programmed) can do this technical role much more accurately and efficiently than humans.

(Morley et al., 2019, p.144)

Again, there is an important message about the need to re-emphasise the imprecise, less algorithmic and more human side of social work. Bar-on (2002) encourages creativity and discretion in social work practice by suggesting that social workers recognise that policies and procedures ‘are not inscribed in stone but are socially constructed, and so constantly subject to interpretation and discretion.’ He proposes that it is legitimate for social workers to ‘challenge, negotiate and, at times, bend or circumvent rules, regulations and procedures that inadequately serve their client’ (p.1011). This is apparent, too, in notions of professional integrity itself which, according to Pawar et al. (2017), can be seen to lie somewhere between dogmatism and inconstancy, such that there is openness to new information and ideas while retaining the distinct value base of social work.
In the wider resilience literature, there are calls to question and resist cultural norms and practices, particularly those experienced as oppressive (Bottrell, 2009). Bottrell (ibid.) emphasises that the resilience of individuals may not always conform to widely accepted ideals, and draws on her study of a group of young people excluded from school as an example. These young people were viewed as deviant within the local community, however, they saw school as entailing an oppressive culture that did not meet their needs. For them, resilience was not about conforming to the cultural norms of their community in order to reintegrate but about seeking meaning in connection with similarly excluded people. Foucault’s idea of ‘critique’ suggests that, while there will realistically be some constraints on behaviour as a result of the power held by social institutions, the power relations that arise may be questioned and navigated differently to avoid subjugation (Taylor, 2014). In this sense, if not transcending power imbalance altogether, constraints can at least be minimised. Interestingly, Foucault also links his idea of critique to reflection on moral values (ibid.), which resonates with the participants’ concern for professional integrity and ethical practice. So, while it may be difficult for social workers to subvert organisational and professional practices, certain challenges to cultural norms might be one way to support their resilience and professional integrity when rigid conformity to the prevailing professional ideology does not.

Such a stand against cultural norms may, however, have consequences that do not support resilience. For example, Zara’s choice to prioritise contact with service users over office-based tasks, cited earlier, had not been met with approval from her manager. Some of the managers interviewed were aware of the impact of rigid organisational practices.

*ISABEL (Manager): I think it’s probably about the size of the organisation. It’s got rules, general rules and general things and they don’t fit individual people. I think there’s room for discretion and I have no problem about using that at all but it gets a narrower and narrower margin because my boss plays it by the book, absolutely everything by the book, so that narrows my margins because she expects me to play it by the book.*

Isabel’s comment conveys her sense of the impersonal nature of large organisations, which, as well as impacting on the scope for creativity in practice, also recalls the plea made by the participants of my study to be treated in a more human and personalised way. In terms of organisational norms, it was certainly the case that some social workers in my study were less willing to contravene the rules and, while this protected them from recrimination by managers that might have impacted negatively on resilience, they appeared to experience difficult feelings about the lack of creativity and individualised practice that this allowed. Ian described having to adapt his preference for spending time with a service user as he came to understand that this was not within the remit of his role.
IAN: He’s got complex needs, mental health and cognitive issues but we have that relationship, and part of me regrets that I can’t spend a bit more time with him and try to work with that, so it’s having that resilience, I don’t know whether that’s resilience or, but it’s realising that you can’t work, in my current role I’m not able to work, to spend that much time.

The sense of regret that seems to arise from the conflict between Ian’s professional priorities and those of the organisation entailed both emotion management and resilience on his part.

Accounts of the tensions between bureaucratic procedure and frontline practice are reflected in the literature. Lipsky (1980) coined the term ‘street level bureaucracy’ to denote how frontline workers, due to their position in direct interface with the public, have discretion in how public policies are enacted in practice. Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2003) narrative accounts of frontline workers in the police force, teaching and counselling in the United States are replete with tales of rule-bending to respond to the situations and needs of individuals, or to align with the worker’s own values. Higher levels of management are seen as the ‘system’ and essentially out of touch with what happens on the ground. The authors point out that, although policy and rules do not always conflict with frontline practice, such conflicts tend to come to the fore in the narratives of workers. A very similar picture was found in the data from my study in which social workers did not talk about how policy, procedure and bureaucracy supported good social work practice but rather how they impeded it.

One key difference between ideas of street level bureaucracy in the literature and in my own research was in the level of power considered to be held by frontline workers in the discretionary enactment of policy. For example, while Johannessen (2019) presents frontline workers, in a range of professions, as holding a degree of power and autonomy in this respect, the social workers in my study who chose to circumvent organisational rules did not suggest that they felt empowered to do so. In contrast, this often came at a cost. While their sense of professional integrity may have been maintained and their resilience enhanced as a result, such discrentional practice could be criticised by managers, which seemed to somewhat offset the resilience gained. As suggested in my research findings, some managers may be more sympathetic to discretion than others. Again, resilience may be supported by instilling a greater degree of ‘procedural justice’ within social work organisations, in creating procedures that are perceived as fair by the social workers responsible for enacting them (Kim et al., 2012). Since resilience appears to be so closely bound up in professional integrity, flexibility and creativity in organisational procedures are likely to be of benefit by enabling fair and ethical practice.
The difficulty with advocating for creativity and discretion as a resilience-enhancing measure is that accountability and blame can be a feature of social work culture.

Enabling discretion has advantages for managers and organizations as it allows ‘innovation’ to be claimed for the organization when things work well while directing blame at front line practitioners when things go wrong, that is, ‘failed to follow procedures.’

(Gilbert and Powell, 2010, p.14)

Although the bureaucratically driven approaches of managerialism can be experienced as overly rigid and stifling to creativity, they are favoured by some social workers in providing clear rules and boundaries (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Ruch, 2012). This is an important consideration since it reflects a concern about blame and lack of shared accountability that was prevalent among the participants of my study.

LILY: How the council treats staff is pretty shit, and you kind of know that you could work your entire life for the council and then if something happened, would they have your back? No, they wouldn’t.

ZOE: The other manager was very confrontational, always trying to cover herself, saying you did or didn’t do things when you had emails to prove you’d done them. It was that kind of, you know, I felt like I was really really close to being pitched under a bus, so I didn’t feel safe or secure in any way.

Katie recognised that this was an issue in the organisational culture of the local authority for which she worked.

KATIE (Manager): The accountability, I began to feel that the senior managers wanted to be distanced from risk and they wanted to push the risk down to frontline workers and frontline managers. They’re more expendable.

In addition, a small number of the participants were acutely aware of the public profile of social work, particularly when service users are harmed.

MELANIE: Right now, you know like this woman I was telling you about who’s gone missing, if she ends up dead tomorrow, guess whose name is going to be on the front page of the newspaper?

Melanie was honest in reflecting that her concern was due to a sense of her own ‘self-protection’ as well as the safety of the service user who was missing. Concern about negative media portrayals was not a prominent theme in my findings but elsewhere is noted as having a negative impact on the
resilience of social workers (Greer, 2016) suggesting that wider social attitudes and public views of social work can be influential.

There were many accounts in the interviews and diary data about resilience being supported when accountability was shared with senior staff. It follows that the participants found it highly stressful when they experienced, not only a lack of shared accountability, but direct blame from managers. In a diary entry, Emily relayed a situation in which a senior manager had blamed her for something outside of her control. The strength of the impact comes across clearly in describing her feelings as ‘furious, rage out of proportion to the issue, upset, anxious, murderous.’ She stated that what would support her resilience would be ‘not working in an established blame culture.’ Where such a culture exists, the focus can shift to ‘making sure that the t’s are crossed and the i’s are dotted’ (Melanie) in order to ensure accurate records in case of blame, which is likely to feed into a bureaucratically driven rather than flexible and creative approach to practice. Hardy (2021) reflects that social work practice has largely moved from supporting the wellbeing of service users to prevention of harm. In his view, this has led to a blame culture and ‘unrealistic expectations of infallibility’ exacerbated by the principles of neoliberalist and managerialist social work culture (p.163). It has also been argued that the Codes of Practice for social workers in Scotland (SSSC, 2016) do less to support the values adhered to by social workers and more to instil fear and anxiety, given that non-adherence to these codes can lead to deregistration (Simpson et al., 2020). To address this blame culture and avoid increasing social workers’ anxiety and stress, there arguably needs to be a commitment to addressing the root causes of practice ‘mistakes’ rather than placing blame on individuals (Grant et al., 2014b) as well as creating organisational cultures that provide a ‘secure base’ and promote ‘psychological safety’ (Grant et al., 2021, p.29).

In essence, the resilience of social workers is more likely to be supported by a culture in which some discretion is expected in the use of organisational policy and procedure, and endorsed at all levels of management. This would allow social workers a degree of flexibility regarding the ways in which they engage with, respond to and work in partnership with service users. Such an approach may more effectively support resilience by showing trust in the practice of social workers and enabling them to fulfil their role in ways that they find ethically sound and effective. Alongside this, a culture of shared accountability with clear support from managers may be one of the key ways to equip social workers with the confidence to be creative and innovative. However, if organisations hold power in terms of apportioning blame and shifting accountability, social workers may be disempowered in the extent to which they can act in ways that enhance their resilience.
7.4 Emotion and Professionalism

According to Hochschild (1998), the relationship between culture and emotion can be significant. Definitions of feelings, she suggests, come from a ‘collectively shared emotional dictionary’ (p.6) and ‘culture impinges at many points: at the point of recognizing a feeling, at labelling a feeling, at appraising a feeling, at managing a feeling and expressing a feeling’ (p.11). Organisations, while sometimes portrayed as ‘bland portraits’ devoid of emotion can, in contrast, be seen as ‘emotional arenas where feelings shape events, and events shape feelings’ (Fineman, 2003, p.1). Organisations may exert influence over what is seen as an acceptable and unacceptable emotion, thereby reducing the agency that individual workers have over their own emotional experiences and expression. Such expectations may become absorbed and lead to a state of ‘internalised’ oppression and self-blame (McCusker, 2022). The capacity of social workers to be ‘reflexive’, in the sense of gaining an awareness of ‘how various psycho-social positions and power-saturated social spheres have shaped individual meaning and narrative’ (Houston and Marshall, 2020, p.3), may be useful in highlighting the power of organisations and even wider society to dictate expectations about the emotional experience of the social work role.

The ways in which the emotional impact of social work was seen to influence resilience was explored in Chapters Five and Six in relation to the personal and relational domains. Yet, despite the apparently emotional nature of social work, its managerialist culture appears to be ‘driving practice to be objective, neutral, value-free and evidence-based, and valorising practitioners who are emotionally self-regulating and distant’ (Morley et al., 2019, p.143). This denotes the kind of ‘bland portrait’ referenced previously, however, ‘bureaucratic organisations do not eliminate emotion’ (Rogers, 2001, p185). Within managerialist cultures, emotional expression and ideas of ‘professionalism’ can be held in tension such that social workers may find it difficult to be open about their emotions for fear of being considered incompetent (Grant and Kinman, 2013; Ingram, 2015a; Rajan-Rankin, 2014; Ruch, 2007). This was the experience of several of the social workers in my study.

MARY: There is a bit of wariness talking to managers because you don’t, like I said, in the past I felt that’s been kind of taken as though you’re struggling, not just that’s normal to feel like that. So, there’s a bit of wariness about what you tell managers because you don’t want them to misinterpret it.

JO: There’s a bit about you have to be seen to be managing, you’ve got to be doing, you can’t just be like, oh that’s it, I need a half day off, I’m just going to go home. And I think there are definitely support systems in place and I think that people do use them but there’s a limit to that.
While there may be support in place, as Jo suggests, this is less helpful if the culture of the organisation feels prohibitive in terms of making use of these supports. The socially constructed nature of what is perceived as ‘coping’ can be seen, within the above comments, to restrict the measures available to support the resilience of workers. In Mary’s comment in particular, this is partly about the power that she believes managers hold in interpreting and giving meaning to her emotional expression. The perceived need to repress feelings, particularly of stress, entails emotion management with its associated risk of burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, 2015). The metaphor of the swan gracefully floating on the water comes to mind. If what is visible above the surface accords with the professional persona expected within the culture of social work, what is beneath may tell a different story.

Despite a tendency for some of the participants to repress emotion and engage in surface acting, opportunities for emotional processing, as discussed in Chapter Five, appear to be significant in maintaining resilience. A workplace culture that nurtures the resilience of social workers is therefore likely to be one that enables emotional expression and does not equate it with an inability to cope. In fact, being honest about one’s emotions may be seen as ‘a mark of professionalism, rather than personal failure’ (van Heugten, 2011, p.11). All of the managers in my study recognised the importance of emotional expression but, as their choice to take part in research into emotional resilience may have reflected their interest in supporting social workers, this may or may not be representative of managers more generally.

Alongside the creation of a culture in which all levels of the organisational hierarchy understand the importance of emotional expression in the workplace, it might be worth recognising, as highlighted in Chapter Five, that peer relationships can have a particularly significant role to play in this. A culture which encourages relationships to grow between peers may, therefore, be a key component of resilience. One local authority, in which a few of the participants worked, held regular peer group meetings at which everyone had the opportunity to say how they felt at the beginning of each session.

_EILIDH:_ It’s an amazing thing just to do that, it’s so powerful because it makes everyone feel, I’m important, people do want to hear how I’m doing, I’m not just a machine.

Forums such as these may complement the one to one informal support provided among social workers which, according to the findings presented in Chapter Six, is highly beneficial but only within reciprocal and mutually supportive relationships. In reference to Eilidh’s comment about not being ‘just a machine’, such a culture of emotional recognition may also engender more ‘human’ and compassionate qualities.
One of the male participants reflected on the potential influence of gender norms on emotional expression and wondered whether male social workers may be less comfortable being open about their feelings than female workers.

MIKE: I don’t know if it’s a male/female thing, I don’t know if it’s a gender thing. I’ve probably been bad at not speaking enough, like trying to forget it, and I think that’s something I’ve learnt actually that’s, that isn’t any good at all really.

Some studies have suggested that in Western cultures women tend to express emotion more readily than men, who are often more emotionally inhibited (Jansz, 2000; Simon and Nath, 2004). This is not to say that men do not feel emotion in a similar way but that culture and context play a part in modifying its expression (Fiorentini, 2013). Ahmed (2014) highlights the political context of emotion in her feminist critique, suggesting that emotions are associated with women and subordinated as a way of subordinating women more generally. However, later research suggests that more emotional forms of masculinity are emerging (de Boise and Hearn, 2017). In my study, gender difference in emotional expression was not particularly apparent. Of the twenty-eight social workers who participated, twenty-two identified as female and six as male. Reviewing the interview and diary data, the men were equally as likely as the women to refer to the emotional demands of the role and the need to process emotion.

STEPHEN: I think emotional resilience is about having the insight to be able to go away and speak to somebody else, whether that be a loved one or whether that be with your manager or your colleagues at work.

Richard commented that resilience was important in the context of ’supporting people who have sometimes been through quite horrific things but managing the emotions that those will bring out.’ Neither participant elaborated on the extent to which the culture of the workplace supported their emotional expression but were certainly able to speak about their emotions with myself as the researcher.

Social work has traditionally been seen as female-orientated by virtue of its focus on care, and the gendered nature of caring roles (Pease, 2011). The social work workforce in Scotland reflects this, being comprised of around eighty percent women (Unison Scotland, 2019). Studies of other professions have highlighted different expectations regarding emotional expression by men and women. Although not a recent example, Fineman’s observations of the police force (2000) remain relevant. He cites the paradox of female police officers being expected to underplay their emotional responses to volatile situations but then being criticised as unfeminine. In social work, this paradox may play out in relation to male workers being required to connect with their emotional experience.
but, as a result, be challenged for not fulfilling a culturally prescribed masculine role. On the other hand, the ‘rational-technical’ skills which tend to be favoured in managerialist cultures can be seen to accord more with masculine cultural norms (Orme, 2009). Thus, it is perhaps the more stereotypically female characteristics of emotional openness which may be counter to cultural norms in managerialist social work. These points were not present in the findings of my study, and the small sample size means that generalisations about the impact of gender on the emotional expression of social workers cannot be made. However, in the light of this mixed picture within wider theory and research, it would be interesting to further consider how the social construct of gender and emotion may influence and be influenced by the culture of social work.

When the participants did feel comfortable to openly express their emotions, many found their resilience to be supported by validation. In other words, they sought confirmation that their emotional response was ‘normal’ in the sense that anyone in a similar situation would be likely to feel the same.

**EMILY:** I think just to be able to talk it through with somebody who actually knows, who’s had similar experiences. I think there’s also that kind of mutual misery thing. We’re all miserable so we share that, and that’s kind of helpful. Shared pain.

The normalisation and acceptability of crying was also felt by some of the participants to be helpful.

**JULIE:** If I’ve not cried once a week, I’m like something’s wrong, why am I not panicking about this, what’s going on here? It’s OK to cry and it’s absolutely fine to have a little cry because you’re stressed or you’re angry or you’re pissed off or you’re tired, you’re exhausted. Have a little cry, it’s fine.

Difficult emotion was perceived to be easier to manage if this was coupled with self-acceptance and external validation about one’s response, rather than being layered with feelings of guilt and incompetence. Nonetheless, although it may be reassuring to know that one’s own emotional response is similar to that of colleagues and not due to some personal ‘weakness’, it is potentially harmful to equate culturally ‘normal’ with ‘innocuous.’ In some cases, as reflected in Emily and Julie’s comments, there appeared to be a risk of over-normalising the emotional content of the role.

Returning to the physical metaphor of ‘bouncing back’ to illustrate the impact of normalisation, a resilient object is restored to its original form or baseline when pressure is released. Emotions do not have the same tangible qualities as physical objects, therefore, when this metaphor is applied to emotional resilience it is important to identify what the original baseline is considered to be. Chapter Four highlighted that ‘stress’ was commonly referred to within the participants’ teams but not resilience. With stress apparently so embedded into the culture of social work, there is a danger that
the baseline is one characterised by high stress levels, which then become ‘normalised’ rather than being seen as an issue to be addressed. Mary was one of the few participants who noted the potential pitfall of normalisation.

*MARY: Sometimes you can come home feeling quite sad for people, or what they’ve been through and it’s just kind of recognising the effect that is having on you. I think sometimes we just get so used to it. We think it’s just normal to hear what we hear.*

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, it seems important for the resilience of social workers that high levels of stress and other difficult emotions are seen within the organisational culture as both acceptable and unacceptable; acceptable in the sense that these emotions are a ‘normal’ human response to adversity, and unacceptable in that social workers should not be expected to manage such emotions as an inherent aspect of their working lives.

A further aspect of the openness of emotional expression, which arose in the findings of my study, was the potential for ‘emotional contagion’ within teams. Emotional contagion refers to the transferring of an emotion or mood between people (Siebert et al., 2007). Although it has links to vicarious and secondary trauma, emotional contagion is distinct in referring to the sharing of a mood state rather than traumatic response. It is also distinct from empathy which does not necessarily entail actively feeling the emotions of another person but rather being able to understand them (ibid.). Mike was the only participant to use the word ‘contagion’ to describe the transference of emotion between team members, and commented that ‘grumbling’ and ‘moaning’ were not helpful to his resilience as they imbued the team atmosphere with negativity. Other participants, although not framing this as contagion, had similar views on the detrimental impact of shared negativity. Anne spoke about negativity among the social workers in her team.

*ANNE (Manager): They’re the moaniest of moaners and I don’t think as a profession for social work we do ourselves any favours. I think we spend way too long bemoaning being a social worker, how dreadful it is, particularly in the statutory sector, but forgetting how amazing it is, how positive the profession is, and I think we need to have a better sense of ourselves as a profession and stop whingeing about it.*

A study of 751 social workers who completed an anonymous survey (Siebert et al., 2007) found that susceptibility to emotional contagion was correlated with burnout. The study was carried out in the context of social worker/service user relationships but could equally apply to relationships between professionals and, as such, may be an important consideration in enhancing resilience. On the other hand, social workers may have very good reasons for ‘moaning’, and caution should be taken in expecting social workers to adjust their mood rather than address the sources of their negativity.
In contrast to concerns about emotional contagion, the sharing of difficult feelings was seen as resilience-enhancing by some participants.

**EMILY:** We’re just going to go out for a beer and a moan, because we all have a lot to moan about and we all find that we’ve spent half an hour moaning on the council’s time so we should take that to the pub instead. I think, I suppose there’s an element of, well we’re all feeling unhappy. We’ll go and share that so there is a kind of reaching out to support each other to some extent.

For Jane, ‘communal venting’ was seen as helpful whereas negativity was not.

**JANE:** That’s the main thing is just to have a group of good people that you can vent to, and then just go on with it. I think it can be really negative if you’ve got a team that are just negative all the time.

**INT:** What impact does that have? Have you experienced that?

**JANE:** Yeah, just sort of brings you down doesn’t it, you know? I don’t like being in a team where everybody’s miserable and hating social work.

It is quite difficult to separate ‘venting’ from ‘negativity’ within Jane’s comment, although there appeared to be a clear distinction for her. The nuances of this can perhaps be explained by reference to the metaphor of containment discussed in Chapter Six. When negative emotions are vented, team members are at risk of ‘absorbing’ these emotions with a potentially detrimental impact on their own resilience. However, if workers can ‘vent’ and then ‘just go on with it’, the negative emotion is more likely to be discharged neutrally whereas emotional contagion is, by definition, infectious and potentially more toxic to resilience.

Beyond an acceptability of emotional expression in the workplace, is a recognition that emotions may not be as distinct from rationality as is sometimes presumed. Within organisations, emotion can be considered an interference to the higher power of rationality (Fineman, 2000), however, from a neuroscientific perspective, rationality and emotion are often considered inseparable with emotion seen as forming an integral part of decision-making (de Boise and Hearn, 2017). This is pertinent to social work particularly in light of the findings from a review of child protection social work in England, which suggests that the ‘rational-technical’ approach of managerialism places too much focus on cognition and logical reasoning in assessment and decision-making, and leads to a ‘skewed management framework that undervalues intuitive reasoning and emotions and thus fails to give appropriate support to those aspects’ (Munro, 2011, p.35). Trevithick (2014) calls for a similar understanding and recognition of the ‘extent to which emotions shape and steer professional decision-making and action’ (p.288). An organisational and professional culture that acknowledges
these perspectives may be able to break down the supposed dichotomy and potential hierarchy of rationality and emotion, and support the resilience of social workers by recognising, valuing and giving credence to their emotional responses.

A final point to note is that, just as individuals can be said to be emotionally intelligent, so too can organisations (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). An organisational culture that supports the resilience of social workers is likely to be one that has sufficient emotional intelligence to recognise the place of emotion in all aspects of social work practice from engaging with service users to carrying out assessments and making decisions. In addition, such a culture would maintain an awareness of the emotional impact of the social work role, encourage open expression and validate the emotions expressed, just as social workers strive to remain open to the emotional experience of service users, and seek to respond with empathy, compassion and respect.

7.5 Professional Identity

As has been highlighted throughout the thesis, a prominent theme in the data was the connection between resilience and a sense of professional integrity achieved by carrying out the social work role ethically and effectively. For the participants, this sense of integrity appeared to be closely related to having a distinct and positive professional identity. Briefly, professional identity is characterised by a sense of uniqueness and of belonging to a profession with a set of norms and common values (Best and Williams, 2018). In Webb’s view (2016), it is defined by the roles, tasks and values of a profession, although is dynamic and involves an ‘ongoing process of interpretation and customisation which is shaped by contextual workplace factors’ (p.356). Adherence to core values was a particularly prevalent aspect of professional identity found in a study of social workers in Ireland (BASW NI et al., 2020), most significantly a commitment to anti-oppressive practice, respect for diversity, and working collaboratively with service users in an empowering way. Given its apparently fluid and contextual nature, for the purposes of this thesis, professional identity is deemed more relevant to the cultural rather than the structural domain of resilience, and can be seen to manifest in the culture of teams and organisations as well as in the social work profession as a whole. In my study, its importance to resilience arose primarily in an appreciation of the uniqueness of the social work role, the maintenance of a distinct identity and value base within integrated health and social care settings, and the need to feel valued within the social work organisation.
Many social workers in my study spoke about the uniqueness of the social work role, referring to ‘the insane’ (Karen) or ‘strange’ (Catherine) situations that they encountered. Julie commented that ‘there are cases I never thought I’d have to see’ and Mike echoed this in stating that ‘you hear all sorts and things that you never thought that you’d ever come across.’ Melanie commented that ‘you’re hearing things that are outside the realm of most people’s life experience.’ She talked about watching a television programme with her husband, which explored issues of mental health and sexual assault. When her husband announced that he no longer wanted to watch the programme due to the difficult content, she responded by saying ‘you say you don’t want to see this because it’s going to ruin your night but what the hell do you think I do twenty-four hours a week?’ Due to the unique role of social work, there was a need to share, in Stephen’s words, the ‘you’ll never guess what happened to me?’ stories with other social workers who were more likely to understand than people outside the profession. As well as contributing towards the mutual support among peers that was discussed in Chapter Six, this sharing of experience seemed to reflect feelings of pride and achievement in doing a job perceived by others to be demanding. This, in turn, was expressed as strengthening a unique sense of professional identity collectively alongside other social workers, which fed positively into resilience.

This distinct identity was somewhat threatened, however, within the culture of integrated health and social care settings. In theory, it is hard to argue against the policy of health and social care integration, framed as it is within a commitment to higher quality services and better outcomes for those who use them (Audit Scotland, 2018). Certainly, the overall purpose of integration was seen positively by many of the participants and, as discussed in Chapter Six and important to restate, there were some examples of very positive working relationships between social workers and health professionals. Nonetheless, integration was overwhelmingly experienced by the participants, both social workers and managers, as giving rise to some distinct challenges that had a negative impact on resilience. These were related primarily to the perceived low status of social work within integrated services, and an erosion or misunderstanding of the social work role. This was explored to some extent in Chapter Six in the context of inter-professional relationships but also seemed to relate to issues that could be construed as aspects of professional culture. In terms of the low status of social work, many of the participants expressed a view that, within integration, health had positioned itself as the dominant partner. Metaphors were common in expressing this.

TOM: It’s a bit like health is the massive big oil tanker and we’re just like the ferry boat and in some way we’ve, we’re not equal in size but we’ve got to go parallel with each other. It almost feels like now they’re dragging us along with them to go in their direction, and we don’t have the strength to pull them in our direction.
Using a different metaphor to express a similar view, Mike reflected that social work was seen as ‘a kind of bolt on’ to health services and a ‘secondary service.’ Pia stated that, in her view, there had been ‘a health takeover’ and Lizzie questioned the fundamental premise of integration itself.

Lizzie: There is no partnership by the way, it is all just health. I know it’s called ‘health and social care’ but you can just snip off the ‘and social care’, because it is just health.

Eilidh felt that social work as a profession was treated as a ‘second-class citizen’ within integrated services, and Linda described it as the ‘poorer sibling.’ These findings are reflected in a study conducted by Tazzyman et al. (2021), which gathered data from interviews with twenty-four practitioners in integrated teams. Social workers used very similar terminology, commenting that health was the ‘big brother’ and social work the ‘poor relation’ (ibid., p.164). Findings from Pearson and Watson’s study on the integration of health and social care in Scotland (2018) provides a further example of the health profession being perceived by social workers as exerting its dominance, despite the rhetoric of a health and social care ‘partnership.’

Contributing to the apparently low status of social work was a perceived misunderstanding of the social work role. As well as occurring on an individual level within the relationships between health professionals and social workers, there was a sense that the wider culture of integrated services reflected and exacerbated the differences. Lizzie commented that health ‘do things very differently’ and went on to illustrate this with an example about the misconceptions of health professionals that her job was to persuade an older person to move to a care home.

Lizzie: The problem is they see social work as not doing their job properly because this is what they think a social worker should do and we are crap at it because we are not doing what they think we should do.

It is apparent from Lizzie’s comment that professional identity and integrity are very much interwoven. The implication of ‘doing things differently’ was fundamentally about carrying out the social work role with a different set of underlying ethics. In her view, social workers were seen by some health professionals as ineffective due to not arranging a hospital discharge at speed, whereas ethically this would mean having to forego some key social work values and principles, namely carrying out a thorough assessment in a person-centred way and consulting meaningfully with the service user and family about their wishes.

In the view of many of the participants, the challenges arising in the culture of integrated services were exacerbated by the skill set of social work being neither understood nor valued by health professionals. Tom expressed a view that, within integrated working, social work was ‘a square peg
being made to fit into a round hole’, reflecting the metaphor of resilience as a tool box. The unique ‘tools’ of social work may not fit the framework of the health profession, and it was perceived by the majority of the participants that the expectation was on social work to mould itself to fit the ‘round hole’ of health. The distinct identity and culture of the ‘square peg’ of social work was felt to be in danger of being lost in the process. Similarly, Mike described feeling, on occasions, that he needed to ‘compromise’ his professional skills and values, and submit to those of his health colleagues. My study reflects the views of social workers only but, interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that both social workers and health professionals feel misunderstood within integrated teams, and engage in ‘competitive boundary work’ to reinforce their distinct role and remit (Tazzyman et al., 2021, p.166).

A potential challenge to the formation of a clear professional identity in social work is that its theoretical foundation is derived from a variety of sources, in contrast to the more specific remit usually held by health disciplines. As a result, social work can be perceived to have an indistinct knowledge base, which may lead other professionals to believe that social workers are less able to have any specific influence (Bar-on, 2002). At the opposite end of the scale, such a broad remit may create a perception that ‘every task is a social work task’ (Linda) and that social workers can be ‘all things to all people’ (Katie, Manager), thus increasing demands and taking a greater toll on the resilience required to cope. To a large extent this manifested in individual relationships with health professionals and has already been discussed in Chapter Six, however, it also appeared to relate to the overall culture in health and social care. Recounting a difficult situation in which she had felt sidelined by health professionals, Erica suggested that what was required to support her resilience was a ‘shift in ideology of medics.’

Very similar findings are reported in other studies. For example, research conducted by Audit Scotland (2016) drew attention to the challenges experienced by social workers due to the perceived erosion of their distinct professional identity within integrated health and social care settings. In a study carried out in Wales (Best and Williams, 2018), using data from eight focus groups with forty-four health and social care workers employed in integrated teams, the need to retain a sense of uniqueness was found to important, with the blurring of professional boundaries potentially creating conflict. On the other hand, for effective collaboration to occur, the authors suggest that it is important to avoid reinforcing a ‘stereotypical uni-professional identity silo’ (ibid., p.733). This points to the need for professional identity to be distinct yet retain some fluidity and be accommodating of other perspectives, evidently not an easy position to adopt in integrated health and social care settings, according to the findings of my study. Overall, although there is much research into both professional identity and inter-professional working, there is little which examines the intersection between them.
(ibid.). A greater examination of this issue, and its impact on resilience, may enhance wellbeing for professionals across disciplines and lead to more harmonious and respectful working cultures.

For some, the lack of understanding of the social work role on the part of other professionals was exacerbated by an equivalent lack of clarity within the social work profession itself.

*KATIE (Manager): I don’t think really sometimes there is a clarity of the social work role now, and I think some of this is the blending of health and social work and not you know, who does what. I mean, it seems to be increasingly flowing from health to social work and not from social work to health. I don’t necessarily think the role is, there’s enough clarity of role from our senior managers as to what social work do, and actually defending the social work role.*

In the context of integrated working, it must indeed be challenging to assert clarity about one’s role and identity to other professionals when it is poorly defined to begin with. While the breadth and adaptability of social work can be seen as one of its core strengths, it has been noted that the profession is weak in confidently articulating its identity (BASW NI et al., 2020). Similarly, Webb (2016) refers to the professional identity of social work as ‘muddy terrain’ (p.255) and emphasises the importance of gaining greater clarity in this regard. A further concern is that the formal regulation of social work, through bodies such as the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) in Scotland, has been argued to destabilise the professional identity of social work as it aligns more with managerialist values than those advocated by social workers (Simpson et al., 2020). Interesting, one of the major findings from Ravalier and Boichat’s study (2018) into the working conditions of social workers was the negative impact on wellbeing of a lack of role clarity, perhaps feeding into the more general murkiness of professional identity as a whole.

As well as seeking clarity in their identity, the participants spoke about the importance of this identity being positive. Feeling valued in their role was a significant contributory factor to a positive professional identity, and seemed to feed significantly into their resilience. As has been referred to throughout the thesis, the participants were generally very committed to their work, and this was bound up in forming relationships with service users and supporting them towards positive change. Feeling valued by service users was appreciated but certainly not expected. However, the need to feel valued by their employer was a theme that arose frequently in the research data. In the literature, the sense of just reward for one’s efforts and commitment in the workplace is referred to as ‘distributive justice’ and falls under the umbrella of organisational justice (Kim et al., 2012). Distributive justice occurs when ‘individual benefits are perceived as fair if they are consistent with an organizational member’s perceived inputs (ibid., p.32). Such a sense of organisational justice appeared to be lacking
in the experiences of the majority of the participants in my study. According to Wang et al. (2021), as part of organisational justice, managers have a key role in enhancing the professional identity of social workers and contributing to a sense that the work they carry out is of value.

A small number of the participants commented on some positive strategies within their teams and organisations that contributed to them feeling valued. Kirsten appreciated emails from senior managers with positive recognition of the work carried out by the social work team. Similarly, Maggie felt that her organisation had tried to make social workers feel more valued by explicitly acknowledging their contributions, and including questions on feeling valued within staff surveys. Richard expressed appreciation of the ‘give and take’ culture that he felt existed in his team in terms of the contribution of workers being valued, and efforts taken not to overwhelm them with heavy workloads. Several participants from one particular local authority felt valued through their connection with managers, including a sense that their views and professional experience were recognised and respected.

Unfortunately, feelings of being undervalued by the organisation were expressed far more commonly. This became apparent in the metaphor of currency explored in Chapters Four and Five. Some of the participants spoke about the ‘personal cost’ of their role and a desire for something in return. This was not generally voiced in relation to immediate line managers, the input from whom was often found to be supportive, but more about the culture of the organisation and senior management as a ‘concept’ rather than particular individuals at this level. In a sense, these senior managers were faceless to the social workers just as the social workers felt they were to managers. Lily was unambiguous in her view of the organisation for which she worked:

*LILY: The council say they want to ‘sweat the assets.’ That’s a quote.*

*INT: What does that mean?*

*LILY: Squeeze every ounce of work out of us until we drop dead because we are the assets.*

This led to her reluctance to ‘go the extra mile because the extra mile comes at a personal expense.’ Comments from other participants conveyed similar messages about feeling unvalued.

*MARY: Working in a place where they just don’t seem to care that staff are going off sick, it’s just as long as the work’s getting done. I think that’s the wrong attitude to have.*
LINDA: You think, well nobody’s really interested in me. I’ve given thirty-two years to health and social care and if I went tomorrow, you know and I accept that, I’m just, you know, a cog in the machine.

Again, the need for an organisational culture that reflects a sense of humanity, rather than being robotic in its operation, came across strongly and would likely support a sense of feeling valued as an individual as well as an employee.

The participant managers showed a keen acknowledgement of the need for social workers to feel valued in order to be resilient but were as negative about their organisations’ ability to put this into practice as were the social workers. Isabel (Manager) thought that, due to the size of the local authority for which she worked, social workers felt ‘really alienated, they don’t feel part of something’, and Hazel (Manager) reflected that she couldn’t identify anything that the organisation did to value workers. Anne (Manager) expressed a view that social work organisations had a responsibility to consider ways to value employees and express appreciation for their contribution but felt that there needed to be a culture to support this, which she perceived as lacking in the local authority for which she worked. She commented that small gestures can make a big difference such as occasionally letting staff go home early, managers giving Christmas presents to their teams, and social events being organised to encourage team cohesion. However, there was much criticism from the participants, including Anne herself, about tokenistic efforts by organisations to value employees.

ANNE (Manager): I’m getting the delightful piece of glass after twenty-five years this year and you want to go, well, is that the value of my twenty-five years, a piece of crystal? Well, actually that doesn’t really value me.

On a similar note, a children’s social care agency in England explored whether free coffee for social workers, alongside a notice thanking them for their compassion, integrity and dedication, would have a positive effect on their motivation and sense of being valued (Turner, 2019). Accusations of tokenism soon followed on social media with strong feelings about the fact that more fundamental threats to the wellbeing of social workers, such as heavy workloads, remained unaddressed (ibid.). Similarly, Lily mentioned the tokenism of management concern about employee wellbeing when, in her opinion, this was motivated more by concerns for staff productivity. Daniel and Alice both spoke about attempts by their organisations to monitor staff wellbeing and workload demands in the form of online questionnaires. They were both of the impression that such questionnaires were not completed by staff due, ironically, to busy workloads but also a lack of conviction that they would lead to any meaningful change.
The metaphor of currency is used by Webster and Rivers (2019) in the context of resilience among staff and students in higher education. They strongly criticise neoliberal notions of resilience that focus on individual responsibility without considering the demands and pressures placed on them from external sources.

The primary focus remains the individual as the unit of currency; the subject that they seek to amend, enhance or protect is the neoliberal self.

(Webster and Rivers, 2019, p.527)

The neoliberal self in this quote is the individual who is considered to be able to develop the necessary traits to become more resilient and have the agency to control their socio-political circumstances. Translated into the world of social work, the neoliberal self of the social worker would be seen as responsible for their own resilience thereby absolving the organisation of any need to compensate beyond paying a salary. Instead, Webster and Rivers (ibid.) propose that the development of resilience should be seen as an ‘investment’ in wellbeing. The currency metaphor offers a reminder to look beyond the individual to consider the wider contextual factors and address issues of fairness and injustice, ensuring that organisations take due responsibility for a fair exchange with their employees. It is not that these small tokens of appreciation are inherently detrimental to resilience, or that they should be removed, rather that they may be considered tokenistic unless the fundamental sources of adversity and stress for social workers are recognised and addressed. Without organisations attending to such factors, it was apparent that the participants of my study would not feel sufficiently supported and valued merely by utterances of thanks and seemingly empty gestures emanating from the senior levels of management.

7.6 Conclusion

Pinpointing the culture of an organisation can be difficult, elusive as cultural factors are. The participants of my study rarely referred explicitly to the culture of social work, however, references to some of its features have been extracted from the research data and their relationship to resilience examined. Much of this relates to the managerialism of current social work practice within adult services in Scotland. For the participants, the overall impact of such a culture was primarily its capacity to dehumanise both social workers and service users and, in doing so, transgress some fundamental values that they held about the importance of relationships and human engagement. Creativity and innovation in practice were felt by some participants to increase job satisfaction and resilience, but
this often contravened the bureaucratic norms of organisational culture. Such contraventions risked challenges to the practice of social workers by higher levels of management and, in turn, could erode resilience. The double bind created for social workers in this respect appeared difficult to resolve.

The technical-rational approach of managerialism in social work culture is presented both in the literature and in the findings of my own study as existing in conflict with the emotional aspects of the role. As noted in previous chapters, social workers can gain a great deal of job satisfaction from their direct contact with service users, however, the emotional demands are well recognised. Although social workers experience a variety of emotional responses, however, open expression was not always felt to be respected within organisational culture. When emotional processing is so important for resilience, as has been argued in previous chapters, a working environment that does not offer a safe space for this to happen is unlikely to contribute towards a resilient culture. While open expression to peers was more common, and in many ways beneficial for resilience enhancement, the damaging nature of emotional contagion was highlighted in its capacity to ‘spread’ negativity and contribute to more toxic working cultures. A further complexity arose in the ‘normalising’ of difficult emotions. It appeared immensely supportive to social workers to feel that their emotional responses were equivalent to what their colleagues may experience in similar situations. On the other hand, this normalisation could lead to such emotions being seen as inherent to the social work role rather than as an unacceptable impact of work-related demands thus contributing toward a neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility for what may, in fact, be organisational or wider structural issues.

The interface of social work culture with that of health professionals, and its relationship to resilience, was a key finding of my study. Within integrated working cultures there were strong feelings expressed about the relatively low status that social work was perceived to hold. A lack of understanding of the distinct social work role led, somewhat contrarily, to an idea that social workers could mop up every unallocated task, while being excluded from some key tasks, particularly decision-making, that they saw as falling under their essential remit. The literature and findings from my own study suggest, however, that these issues of indistinct identity and status are perpetuated by wider social work culture itself. Within the profession, there is not always a collective identity that is conveyed clearly to those outside it. The broad theoretical base of social work could be to its credit in terms of the adaptability of workers to the different circumstances of service users, and the multitude of skills and knowledge that the profession entails. A less positive consequence of this adaptability is the potential for the distinct shape of social work to be lost for social workers and other professionals alike.
8. THE STRUCTURAL DOMAIN: Emotionally Resilient Organisations

8.1 Introduction

The personal experience of being a social worker, the relationships in which workers are engaged and the culture of social work all operate within a wider ‘structure.’ In Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model, the structural level relates to institutions, social divisions and forces, socio-political factors and ‘the fabric of society’ (2006, p.28). This may refer to the broad socially defined categories of gender, race and class as well as, in the context of my study, encompassing structure in terms of organisational policies and procedures, social policy and legislation. In practice, it was often difficult to separate structural factors from the personal, relational and cultural domains. For example, many of the participants felt that they had to personally grapple with the weight of organisational demands and adjust their self-expectation in order to be resilient. Interpersonal relationships with health professionals were sometimes fraught partly due to misunderstandings about what social workers could achieve in a climate of budget restrictions and scarce resources. Attempts by organisations to create a culture in which the participants felt valued were often met with disapproval and accusations of tokenism as long as working conditions remained unaddressed. Therefore, while focusing on the structural aspects
of social work in this chapter, there is a recognition that all of the domains within the resilience framework presented in this thesis can be seen to interact and are not intended to be construed as distinct.

It has already been noted that when resilience is seen as an individual issue, adversity arising from wider social inequality is expected to be tolerated rather than addressed (Garrett, 2015; Hart et al., 2016; Webster and Rivers, 2019). A similar criticism has been levelled at social work organisations with concerns that social workers are blamed for not coping with what could be regarded as unmanageable working conditions (Collins, 2007; Collins, 2017; McFadden et al., 2019). The absolution that this affords social work organisations from addressing sources of adversity was noted by some of the participants.

EMILY: I think, you know, within the organisation there's a structural problem that needs to be addressed. The emphasis is very much on, it's up to you to manage your own stress and it's up to you to manage your own time, so there's almost a victim blaming thing. Well, if you're not managing, you're doing it wrong.

JO: Feeling like there's all these barriers against you personally when it's not, it's just the system but if you take that too personally then I think that that would also put you under pressure.

According to many of the participants, it was not only that their organisations did not support them to maintain and develop their resilience, but that organisational demands were a more significant source of adversity than the emotional impact of working with service users. Other research also suggests that the emotional demands of working with service users is not always what leads to distress. Rather, it is the limitations experienced, due largely to organisational factors, in responding to the needs of service users (Kinman and Grant, 2020; Tanner, 2020). This is particularly concerning in light of reports that the Scottish Social Services Council, Scotland’s regulatory body for the social services workforce, has a tendency to treat organisational issues as individual ‘fitness to practice’ cases. The consequence for social workers is that they may be held directly to account for factors that are not within their control (Simpson et al., 2020). In such a climate, attention to the structural domain of resilience appears paramount.

In this chapter, I consider how some key policies, procedures and resource issues may affect the emotional resilience of social workers before highlighting the multiple ways in which workload has an impact. Consequences for the resilience of social workers regarding the structure and restructure of teams and organisations are examined, including the practicalities of the integration of health and
social care. Finally, I examine to what extent specific measures of support introduced by social work organisations may enhance the resilience and wellbeing of employees.

8.2 Policy, Procedure and Resources

Aspects of the culture of managerialism discussed in Chapter Seven were perceived by many of the participants to have given rise to complex and time-consuming organisational procedures that impacted negatively on their resilience by creating additional challenges. Daniel commented that, for every hour of direct contact with service users there seemed to be about ten hours of associated procedural and administrative tasks. To a large extent, this sentiment was echoed by the other participants. The main tasks were identified as recording case notes, writing up assessments of service users, drawing up support plans, preparing funding requests and writing reports. To a certain degree, the participants accepted this aspect of their role, however, some of the tasks were considered cumbersome or even pointless. For example, Alice experienced a ‘duplication’ of administrative tasks, and Linda spoke about being requested by the organisation to update paperwork despite the fact there was no new information to provide. When requesting funding for services, Erica described feeling ‘frustrated with the number of hoops you have to jump through.’ Additional frustrations were voiced concerning the complexity of procedures, illustrated by Gemma who said that finding the correct procedure ‘can be a needle in a haystack.’ The effect of undertaking these administrative and procedural tasks was not only an increased workload, stressful in itself, but a sense of being deskilled.

ERICAl People who are supposed to be able to guide you don’t know how to do it either, and all of that time you’ve got admin saying you need to update this or, you know, the world’s going to end, your bosses saying you’ve got to update this but I don’t know how to help you do it, and then the person’s not getting their budget because you can’t do it and it’s coming from the social work budget that we’re not supposed to use, it’s just procedurally silly.

Erica’s comment highlights how the consequence of being deskilled within complex procedural requirements may fall partly on the service user, and is likely to contribute towards the depletion of resilience for social workers in undermining their sense of professional integrity and efficacy.

For many of the participants of my study, the cumbersome nature of bureaucratic procedure was thought to have been magnified by the introduction of ‘self-directed support’, implemented in Scotland under the Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013. This legislation is based on the principle of service users having more autonomy over how social work services are delivered to
them ‘thus ensuring that people are active participants in shaping, creating and delivering their care, in conjunction with their paid and unpaid carers, so that it meets their distinctive needs and their hopes for themselves’ (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.34). Those participants who spoke about self-directed support expressed a view that the overall ethos was commendable in its focus on service user choice and autonomy. However, the way that their organisations were implementing self-directed support was generally seen less favourably. According to several of the participants, assessments of service users completed under this framework give much more emphasis to local authority budget management than the person’s needs.

ERICA: It’s so budget orientated. You have to get your boss to approve it, and then the next boss up has to decide whether she’s taking it to the big boss to say, well you know we’re ten percent short, are you willing to overrule that? And that just slows everything down.

A particularly stark example was provided by Zara in relation to management scrutiny of a service user’s risk assessment.

ZARA: There’s a budget attached, and our boss has got to agree or disagree with that so he’ll come back with his own views and say, I don’t really think that’s critical because, for example, you’re saying she can’t make a meal and she can’t get herself a drink, but she’s not quadriplegic and sitting there. If she was desperate, she could crawl to the cupboard and grab a biscuit. So, that’s the kind of extremes we’re talking about.

It is easy to see how such a situation would compromise the professional integrity of a social worker seeking to improve the quality of life of service users. In a study examining professional integrity in social work, Banks (2004) suggests that ‘there are certain features of the current organisational climate within which social work is practised that make professional integrity difficult to achieve’ (p.20). Although this perspective is based on social work nearly two decades ago, it resonates with the picture portrayed by the participants of my study in terms of the impact of the structural, and associated cultural, influences that Banks refers to, notably managerialism, economy, accountability and a focus on targets and procedures. Certainly, the participants in my study strove to maintain a strong sense of professional integrity and experienced threats to their resilience when this was thwarted by the procedural aspects of practice.

For some of the participants, self-directed support procedure with its budgetary focus was thought to require skills more akin to those of accountancy than social work. This presented a demand that some felt ill-equipped to meet, again leading to a sense of being deskillled and ineffective, and thus negatively affecting their resilience. They generally did feel skilled in assessing the needs of service
users, yet under self-directed support procedures, assessments were heavily scrutinised by managers as they were linked to budget authorisation.

ZARA: You’re dizzy with all of this. You’re dizzy with the meetings, the reports going back and forwards with changes. I’m looking at the computer and the figures and the words are all jumbled up, and then you really doubt yourself, and then you’ve had to go in and just say, crying sometimes, I’m a really good social worker, I used to write court reports that thick and the sheriffs would say, that’s a great report, I really enjoyed reading that, and now I can’t write a report to get home helps.

Other participants, in addition to Zara, found it unsettling and insulting to have their assessments scrutinised and challenged in such a way, and felt that their existing skills were being undermined. For resilience to be supported, the findings of my study suggest that the ability of social workers to perform the core tasks of the role, such as assessing the needs of service users, should be trusted and respected within the organisation. In addition, social workers may benefit from support and training to gain any new skills required as the role adapts and evolves in the light of new policy and legislation.

Ferguson’s analysis (2007) of the concept of personalisation and the implementation of self-directed support, which began to influence the social work profession prior to the introduction of the 2013 Act, conveys a similar doubt about its overall merits. He argues that personalisation retains a superficial attachment to core values of service user empowerment and autonomy but, in reality, reflects neoliberal political agendas of individualisation of social issues and reduced state intervention. As noted in Chapter One, ‘eligibility criteria’ for local authority social work services were introduced to manage reduced public spending in a time of austerity (Scottish Government, 2014) alongside the introduction of self-directed support. Reflecting Ferguson’s views, some of the participants thought that self-directed support had not been true to its underlying ethos of service user empowerment and had, instead, been a disguise for budget and service cuts. This view is supported by the findings from a study which drew on telephone interviews with eleven practitioners across health and social work sectors as well as data regarding the uptake of self-directed support by service users (Pearson et al., 2018). The study concluded that little had changed in service delivery since the implementation of self-directed support legislation and, partly due to austerity measures, more limited choice was being offered to service users in contrast to the greater choice proposed in the legislation.

The impact of austerity was felt to have had a further impact on working conditions for some of the participants in my study. In relation to the eligibility criteria referred to previously, some of the local authorities for which the participants worked had made a decision to fund services only for those meeting the criteria of ‘critical’ or ‘substantial’ need (Scottish Government, 2014), definitions of which
were given in Chapter One. This was felt to have greatly increased the amount of crisis work undertaken, which was experienced as particularly demanding. The metaphor of ‘firefighting’ was used by several participants to reflect the emphasis on crisis responses.

*PETER (Manager):* If you put the fire out when it’s dropped on the carpet rather than put the fire out when the whole house is ablaze, then it’s a damn sight easier.

*RACHEL:* All we’re doing is firefighting now. It’s all the crisis work and you’re like, is that social work? I always thought social work was a balance. You always had the crisis work, but you also had the preventative kind of stuff. It’s relentless and there’s never, you solve one crisis and, you know, there’s another one just waiting around the corner, so there’s never a break from it.

Similar metaphors of ambush, assault and being ‘blindsided’ were used by several participants to describe the destabilising unpredictability of crisis work. These call to mind the ‘siege’ metaphors referred to in Chapter Four, which Beckett (2003) suggests is indicative of feeling unable to meet demands. Expressions of being taken by surprise in an attack also evoke a sense of feeling powerless or out of control. In such an environment, it seems that social workers are required to harness both proactive and reactive resilience; proactive resilience to cope with unpredictable demands as and when they arise, and reactive resilience to cope with the aftermath of the ‘attack.’ Considering metaphors of resilience as a finite resource, ongoing crisis-orientated work requiring such proactive and reactive resilience is likely to deplete reserves. Masten, a well-known scholar of resilience, uses the term ‘surge capacity’ to describe the availability of energy for short-term responses to crisis situations. She suggests that the sustained stress of ongoing crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, presents a challenge beyond what our ‘surge capacity’ is likely to be able to cope with.

The pandemic has demonstrated both what we can do with surge capacity and the limits of surge capacity. When it’s depleted, it has to be renewed. But what happens when you struggle to renew it because the emergency phase has now become chronic?

(Masten, 2020 cited in Haelle, 2020, para.6)

The crisis intervention carried out by social workers may follow a similar pattern. There is potentially enough ‘surge capacity’ to respond to infrequent crises but being required to do this on a daily basis risks taking it beyond its limits.

Another impact of crisis work was that it reduced the scope for preventive work, as quoted by Rachel in the previous paragraph. Intervention that prevented crises from occurring in the first place was felt by many of the participants to contribute towards a greater quality of life for service users.
ERICA: They probably need more support than they did when the referral was made in the first place, but then I’ve quite often heard managers say, well if they’ve waited that long they can’t be that desperate and you just think, that’s not what our job’s about. Like, I didn’t sign up to social work to firefight and minimise risk per se. Of course that’s what you do but, you know, I went into social work to improve people’s lives and benefit their quality of life, not just stop them from dying.

Again, the firefighting metaphor was used to express the nature of crisis work, and to make a comparison with preventative intervention that was the more desired aspect of the social work role. A lack of such preventative work diminished the level of job satisfaction for many of the participants, and led them to question the value of their role. This was described as a significant challenge and a threat to their resilience, not least because their fundamental value base about what social work could achieve was compromised.

Despite the concerns of the participants discussed, an understanding was generally conveyed of the need for local authorities to manage a finite supply of resources and direct these to people most in need. Nonetheless, the direct interface of this with service users challenged the value base of some of the participants with a resulting impact on their resilience. In terms of managing scarce resources, Karen talked about the conflict this created alongside being an advocate for service users.

KAREN: It does feel like you’re having to fight against management to say, that’s not right, you’re not doing this, you’re not taking into consideration social work values to start with. They seem to be totally scuppered.

INT: Which social work values?

KAREN: Well just, you know, looking after one another, respect, people’s rights, being an advocate for your service user.

The lack of resources further impacted on a sense of professional integrity due to the pressure of, in Jane’s words, ‘people demanding things that you can’t deliver.’ Erica talked about the challenges of having to tell service users that they were not eligible for services because they were ‘not risky enough.’ Additionally, as discussed in Chapters Five and Six, resource issues were seen to be implicated in the expectations placed on social workers that played out in their relationships with other professionals, and within the overall culture of integrated health and social care settings. Unfortunately, limited resources appear to be a deep-rooted issue in social work. Following on from the global financial crisis of 2008 and ongoing austerity measures, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the chronic underfunding of adult social care and has led to additional funds being made available by the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2020). It remains to be seen whether a sustained
increase in funding will come to fruition and, if so, what impact this will have on social work services for adults, as well as the working lives of social workers. However, it is clear that austerity and under-resourced social services not only negatively impact service users but may also contribute towards adversity and resilience depletion for social workers.

The factors discussed in this section, embedded within organisations and wider social policy, may exert constraint over the practice of individual social workers, and limit their personal agency to maintain their resilience partly by creating increased demand but also by instigating practice that is not always perceived to be ethical. Houston and Marshall (2020), in their model of reflexive practice, helpfully incorporate an ‘organisational domain’, inviting social workers to question the extent to which processes and procedures strengthen their practice, how they balance administrative tasks with direct contact with service users, and how much discretion they are able to exercise. This may generate a focus on resilience as an engagement with issues of power and justice (van Breda, 2018) and, in particular, organisational justice (Kim et al., 2012) with a corresponding duty on organisations to respond. Explicitly within Hart et al’s definition of resilience (2016) is the transformation of injustice and inequality on a structural level and not only through individual activism and resistance. Thus, social workers should have the opportunity to raise issues of concern and have confidence that their organisations will respond.

8.3 Organisational Change and Consultation

Other than the themes identified highlighted, the participants did not tend to talk about their resilience in terms of the impact of specific legislation and policy. However, the challenges associated with their role amid frequent changes in the legislative and policy framework of social work, and the changes to organisational procedures and structure that usually followed, were referred to as having a negative impact on resilience. Such changes seemed to add to the experience of feeling deskillled and, as a consequence, less effective. Several of the participant social workers commented that they were expected to adapt quickly to new ways of working, often without sufficient training.

*KIRSTEN: All these changes are introduced, the systems, the IT, but we’re expected just to churn out the same amount of work even though you have no idea what you’re going to be doing in regards to the systems, so that’s frustrating. They’re not sustainable because they all come at once, we’re all expected to be up to speed.*

Emily, a social worker with seventeen years’ experience, described her emotional response to a major organisational restructure in which her role had changed significantly.
EMILY: Now I’m constantly terrified I’m going to make a mistake, because at least fifty percent of what I’m doing I’ve no idea what I’m doing. It’s quite possible that I would make a mistake. I don’t have a senior to consult and most of my colleagues can’t tell me.

She was clear in her view that her sense of being deskilled was an organisational responsibility, and went on to say that a lack of clarity in the social work role was ‘about poor operational planning, it’s about poor management, it’s about bad decisions taken with restructuring, nobody’s thinking about these things when they’re planning it.’

The lack of guidance and direction referred to by Emily was echoed in comments by other participants. Erica stated that guidance on procedures was not always useful ‘because goalposts shift so often you just think actually, I’m not sure if that’s true anymore.’ The complex bureaucratic and administrative tasks, identified as a significant part of the role by all of the participants, took time for them to master in order to feel competent. The sense of competence was felt to be short-lived for some, however, as another organisational restructure or policy change was looming and bringing with it new ways of working. The more experienced social workers in my study tended to emphasise this, perhaps because they had encountered more cycles of change in policy, procedure and organisational structure.

JANE: I think that’s what I found frustrating, being part of a council for, you know, almost twelve years. You see the changes and, you know, it’s almost like reinventing the wheel. You put in one thing, it doesn’t work, you go back to what it was like before and you think, oh for goodness sake.

According to Webb (2016), such structural change can have a negative impact on professional identity. He suggests that ‘we need to consider the constant re-localisation, re-embodiment and re-distribution of social worker as practitioner to get a grasp on the dynamics of professional identity’ (p.56). As a result of frequent organisational change and restructure, in addition to the cultural factors discussed in Chapter Seven, there may be threats to a stable sense of professional identity for social workers, and an associated decrease in resilience.

Some of the participant managers recognised the impact of organisational change but generally saw this as a factor that social workers needed to manage.

ANNE (Manager): I think staff need to be resilient for change. I mean change is there, it’s always there. It’s around life, people kind of get a bit surprised with it but they need to understand that everything is about change, and it’s often seen as terribly negative. It’s good to see the positive bits of change because what we’re trying to do with service users is often support change, but somehow when it’s down to us we seem to forget how to manage change.
Hazel (Manager) also recognised the resilience required to manage organisational change and distinguished between aspects of change over which social workers felt they had control and those they didn’t. In her view, it was helpful for communication by senior managers concerning organisational change and restructure to be provided in advance, as this gave social workers the opportunity to prepare. Her impression, however, was that change tended to be ‘thrust’ on workers, and was experienced as destabilising as a result.

There were some positive views expressed by the participants about consultation and information-sharing regarding changes in the structure, policies and procedures of the organisation. Eilidh appreciated her managers ‘always filtering down stuff.’ Sometimes, this related to new approaches and developments, which were perceived by the team to be exciting and energising thus feeding into the resilience that can arise through creativity, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Eilidh described feeling listened to and ‘strengthened’ by the process of consultation, with a positive influence on her motivation and resilience. Likewise, Julie appreciated having been consulted about the impact of the integration of health and social care. She felt that she had received important information that gave her the knowledge to handle service user enquiries more effectively, and this helped her to be resilient to the associated changes in policy and procedure. Anne (Manager) was encouraged by a new approach adopted within her local authority that gathered the views of team members to feed into both an individual and team development plan, thereby reflecting different priorities on both micro and macro levels of the organisation.

In the team that Hazel (Manager) supervised, various forums had been set up to allow social workers to discuss newly implemented policies, however, she commented that there was a ‘Catch 22’ in that staff had requested this consultation but did not always have the time to engage in it. Hazel thought that, at the very least, social workers should be informed about changes to policy and organisational structure, the rationale behind them and a recognition of the impact, as this was more likely to make them feel valued and ‘important enough’ to be told, particularly as ‘the direct implication to them is the greatest.’ As well as the ‘filtering down’ of information, there were also comments about the importance of consultation in filtering ideas up from social workers to managers.

_ISABEL (Manager): We’re on the ground saying, we don’t do it this way, stop imposing what you think is a good idea. Let’s take the ideas from here and put them up._

Simon also commented on his role as a manager in feeding ideas and issues to more senior levels of the organisational hierarchy, and advocating on behalf of social workers. This filtering ‘up’ and ‘down’ reflect French and Raven’s notions of informational power (Elias, 2008) in terms of social workers
being disempowered by both information overload or its withholding, and empowered by the sharing of information that is relevant and enables them to fulfil their role. There need not be agreement among organisational members on the content of the information shared, as suggested by Tew in his ideas of ‘power together’ (2006) and, instead, ‘questions of difference need no longer be feared as a potential basis for subordination or exclusion, but may be valued as a resource that can open up new forms of creativity and opportunity’ (ibid., p.38). Recalling the importance to resilience of creative and innovative practice discussed in Chapter Seven, this form of power and meaningful consultation within organisations seems fruitful to develop.

Not all of the participants in my study had a positive experience of being informed and consulted. There were several comments that major changes in organisational restructure and policy implementation were not communicated well by senior management. This seemed to increase the sense of disconnect between frontline social workers and senior managers, referred to in Chapter Six, and contribute to social workers feeling unsupported within their organisations. Anne (Manager) acknowledged this and reflected that ‘I don't quite know why we're so bad at it but we are.’ Hannah (Manager) thought that the restructuring of the local authority in which she worked had not been managed well, and that workers had been given very little notice of relocation into different teams and offices. In a diary entry, Catherine wrote about a team meeting in which changes to the team structure had been discussed. She felt that this had been handled in a disrespectful way by senior managers without due recognition of the impact on social workers. Pia was generally very positive about the local authority for which she worked but she, too, noted that information about organisational restructure had not been well communicated. Karen talked about the practice of bringing in external consultants to manage organisational change instead of engaging in discussion with social workers directly.

*KAREN: I think there is a complete disconnect from upper management to what's actually happening on the frontline. They rely too much on people that do not do the job to give them answers, you know people that are far removed from doing social work, to say this is how we could organise social work to provide a better service, instead of actually asking people on the frontline how to do that, and ask it in a genuine way.*

Naomi (Manager), who worked for a different team within the same local authority as Karen, also referred to the use of external consultants and stressed the importance of a direct face to face dialogue between social workers and senior managers.
When consultation with senior management did happen, it was often viewed as tokenistic by the participants, and was seen as a way of ‘ticking the right boxes’ rather than genuinely listening to the voices of social workers.

RACHEL: *We can have that chat, but if it’s not actually changing anything then I don’t know why we’re having that chat, because it’s just really a moaning session.*

Stephen spoke about an increase in team meetings within his organisation as a result of complaints by social workers that ‘we’re not getting a chance to collectively voice some of our concerns about the work, about the management of social workers, about the provision of services.’ However, he recognised that there was a certain amount of scepticism among team members, most of whom thought that the meetings were nothing more than a ‘management tool.’ In the local authority for which Julie worked, the senior managers had decided to have regular consultation meetings with staff. She was not planning on attending these as she felt that ‘sitting for a cup of tea isn’t going to fix anything.’ Earlier in her social work career, Jane had found this kind of tokenistic consultation frustrating, as it seemed evident that decisions had already been made by senior management, and the views of social workers were not being heard and acted upon. Rather than the situation improving, she had maintained her resilience by changing her attitude.

JANE: *I’ve found that consultation never really mattered anyway so I think, as I’ve got older it’s like, why shout about it, let’s just do what I can in my job and let somebody else have the arguments up there.*

Jane described how she had deliberately chosen to be a locum social worker in order to avoid getting involved in the ‘politics’ of the organisation, saying that ‘I think that’s when people start becoming more upset because you’re getting the bigger picture, so I’m closing myself off slightly from that bigger picture.’ She characterised her locum work as ‘passing through’ and this transience afforded her some protection against becoming too involved in organisational policies and strategies that she may disagree with. Although to some extent this contributed towards her resilience, there is a hint of resigned defeat in her comments, and a sense of increased disconnect with the decision makers ‘up there.’

Naomi (Manager) reflected that when social workers were consulted, ‘it’s often not the right kind of consultation.’ The question of what constitutes the right kind of consultation is an important one to consider. It seemed that some kind of balance between consultation and ‘filtering’ was beneficial to social workers. For example, Maggie was quite happy to be ‘protected’ from discussions about policy, procedure and restructure as long as she was kept up to date with what she needed to know in order
to carry out her role effectively. Lizzie appreciated managers ‘diverting stress away from the team’ and ‘shielding’ them, to use another battle metaphor, from discussions that did not directly affect them. Likewise, Catherine felt that her resilience was supported by having information ‘filtered’ by senior managers to avoid overload. However, she acknowledged that there was a balance to be struck, and that this filtering could result in social workers feeling that they were outside the loop of communication. Overall, it seemed to sustain the resilience of the participants to be consulted on what mattered to them, and given time in their workload for this to happen. Most importantly, they needed to feel confident that this would be a meaningful experience in which their voices would be genuinely heard, respected and acted upon.

8.4 Workload

Some of the consequences of local authority budget cuts for the resilience of social workers have already been noted in this chapter. Arguably, one of the most significant is in relation to workload. A report published by Unison Scotland (2019) points out that funding cuts had led to decreased staffing levels at a time when referrals to social services were increasing, with a corresponding impact on the workload of individual social workers. In the report, eighty-two percent of respondents stated that their workload had become heavier in the last few years, and eighty-nine percent were regularly working late and not taking regular breaks. Further examples of recent research point to workload as a major factor in increased levels of stress for social workers (McFadden et al, 2015; Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Unison Scotland, 2017). Creating a healthy work/life balance is promoted by some as a way to maintain resilience (Greer, 2016; Kinman et al., 2014), however, workload demands imposed by the organisation may make this difficult to put into practice. This has been exacerbated by the increased use of technology for communication within social work organisations, meaning that workers are more easily accessible and may be considered available outside of standard working hours, thus blurring the boundaries between work and home (Harris and Stout, 2021). This was particularly the case during the earlier stages of the Covid-19 pandemic when home working for social workers became the norm (Mishna et al., 2021) raising concerns regarding the emotional toll that this may take (Ferguson, 2020).

Reflecting such pressures, one of the main findings from Ravalier and Boichat’s study into UK social workers (2018) was the need to introduce protected caseloads. It was apparent that the impact of workload had a significant and wide ranging effect on stress and resilience for the social workers in my study too, and was one of the most prominent themes in the data overall. Jane described her team
as being ‘on its knees’ under the weight of the workload, and Mary mentioned the ‘ridiculous amount of work’ she had been expected to do in her previous post. Most of the participants with several years’ experience or more had noted an increase in workload, which Linda described as ‘the stupid admin and all the guff that’s come along in the last few years.’ Generally, across the data, the increase in workload was considered to arise primarily from administrative tasks. Not only had the number of such tasks increased but administrative staff had been cut in many of the local authorities for which the participants worked. Some of the tasks that had previously fallen under the remit of administrative support workers had then become part of the social work role. The volume of administrative tasks was also found to be a significant source of stress in a large mixed methods study of 3421 social workers in all disciplines across the UK (Ravalier et al., 2021). Overall, the impact of an increase in workload was noted by some of the managers in my study with a recognition that ‘we're being asked to do more and more with less and less’, which ‘adds another layer of stress’ (Naomi, Manager).

Significantly, none of the participants talked about the impact of their workload arising from direct contact with service users. Indeed, a constant thread running throughout my study was the notion that social workers felt a great deal better prepared to manage the demands of working with service users in comparison to the ‘overwhelming admin stuff’ (Tom). As mentioned in the context of organisational culture in Chapter Seven, they were often disheartened by the fact that only around twenty to thirty percent of their time was spent with service users. Given the extent of the bureaucratic and administrative demands that arise from the structural factors of policy and procedure, as outlined earlier in the current chapter, it is perhaps unsurprising, although regretted by many in my study, that a less people-orientated culture appears to have emerged in social work. This sentiment was reflected in a great deal of comments from the participants of my study, and summed up by Ian.

**IAN:** I think quite often workers want to be able to provide a lot more in terms of themselves to clients, but because caseload demands and pressures of constant allocation, and the next person, and unlimited time mean that they can’t do that.

An all-Ireland study of professional identity (BASW NI et al., 2020), involving 1,691 social workers who completed an online questionnaire, reported similar findings. Bureaucracy, workload pressure and insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users were considered the most significant threats to positive professional identity. While a certain amount of bureaucracy is inevitable, the report of the all-Ireland study (ibid.) called for it to be streamlined so that more of social workers’ time could be spent working with service users in an empowering and collaborative
way. As argued in Chapter Seven, a professional identity that is clearly defined and accords with the value base of social workers is associated with greater levels of resilience.

Deadlines imposed by organisations added to the pressure of workload for some of the participants. Daniel talked about having seventy-two hours to organise a hospital discharge however, in his view, good social work practice meant engaging in complex negotiation and planning with service users and families, which usually extended way beyond the allocated time. His idea of ethical practice was threatened as, within integrated settings, ‘here we are talking about managing the resources; somebody has to be out of the hospital.’ Mike also felt that the timescales involved in hospital discharge, particularly when adult protection concerns were raised, were ‘almost impossible.’ Jane echoed this in stating that, in relation to pressure from health professionals to get services in place for a person’s discharge from hospital, ‘you’re asking for something that’s totally impossible.’ She resorted to not answering phone calls from ward staff for updates when she had only been allocated the work the previous day. Jane’s comment illustrates how structural factors can have an effect on the relationships between individual professionals, each with their own priorities. Being asked to do what is ‘impossible’ within the structure and resources of the organisation is unlikely to enable social workers to engender positive relationships with multidisciplinary colleagues, or to feel a sense of achievement and pride in their role.

The mix of heavy workloads, crisis work and deadlines within the structure of local authority adult services combined to create an environment in which social workers often experienced competing demands. A comment from Zara provides a useful illustration of the somewhat frenetic nature of trying to manage this.

ZARA: I’ve really got to just try and get some kind of perspective, which is difficult when you’ve got clients that are phoning you and you’ve maybe got ten of these reports going on, well maybe four at the same time, it feels like ten but maybe four clients but you’ve also got your other stuff, like you’ve got duty, the reviews and other wee things going on and you’ve got families waiting.

These competing demands were ethically compromising for many of the participants, as there was a perception that it would be service users who suffered as a result. Peter, one of the managers, commented that the workload had increased to such an extent that, for social workers, there was a need to ‘prioritise your priorities.’ If everything is a priority, the conflict in deciding which tasks to complete first is likely to be antithetical to a sense of carrying out the social work role ethically and effectively, which may have a negative impact on resilience. Alice talked about a sense of ‘guilt’ at not completing tasks in good time, and equally for Kirsten, the challenge of competing demands was in
‘not doing it right’ for service users. Lily talked about feeling ‘stuck’ at times and being so overwhelmed with the volume of tasks that ‘you just get bunny in the headlights and you don’t do any of them.’ In relation to the metaphor of resilience as a ‘journey’, this feeling of being stuck is likely to impinge on a sense of efficacy by preventing ongoing momentum and the capacity to move forwards with work-related tasks.

Within the metaphor of resilience as a journey is a suggestion of the need for regular breaks that provide an opportunity to ‘refuel’. The balance between work life and time off was a common theme in the data, and was explored in the context of the personal and professional self in Chapter Five. Many of the participants commented on their organisation’s flexible working policy as a significant benefit to their resilience in enabling a more favourable balance between their work and personal lives. However, for some, the pressure of a heavy workload and competing demands meant that, in practice, they could not benefit from flexible working as they were generally exceeding their contracted hours to complete tasks that were considered to directly impact on service users’ wellbeing. The difficulty for social workers is that prioritising their own personal time and working within contracted hours may be an important aspect of resilience, however, if it is seen to have a negative impact on service users, professional integrity can be compromised.

**HAZEL (Manager):** I think there’s a default position often that, well yes, we know everybody is very busy but if they could just do, and I think what that relies on is people’s resilience, people’s staying power, people’s core values. I think there’s a real overreliance on that. I don’t think there’s nearly enough of an emphasis on understanding their workforce.

Weinberg and Banks (2019) echo this in noting that organisations can take advantage of social workers’ commitment to demonstrating compassion and altruism towards service users even when they feel exploited by the organisation in doing so. For resilience to be supported, it appears imperative for social workers to be able to fulfil their role ethically and compassionately without such exploitation by their employers. Again, protected caseloads implemented by organisations are likely to be an effective way of avoiding this, not to mention developing a culture in which employers demonstrate similar compassion to that which social workers seek to emanate in their engagement with service users.

In addition to flexible working, every social worker is entitled to a set amount of annual leave, which may serve to replenish and refuel. Nonetheless, the workload of a social worker tends to be autonomous and, as both Ian and Daniel commented, a return from a holiday can be met with an even heavier workload in relation to tasks that have accumulated in one’s absence; the replenished fuel
can be quickly depleted. Significantly, for many of the social workers in my study, even taking a period of annual leave was not felt to be sufficient to continue on the social work path. In a diary entry, Emily commented that a major source of her resilience arose from knowing that she was leaving to begin a new job, and Melanie spoke about people in her team taking career breaks or leaving the profession entirely due to high levels of stress. Eilidh and Jane both chose to do short-term locum or agency work specifically to retain a sense of their role as time limited. Julie, who was in her twenties and two years into her social work career, expressed concerns about the future, doubting that she could remain a social worker until retirement. Tom commented that the further social workers are in their career the less resilience is needed as ‘you’ve not got much further to go.’ Indeed, for Maggie and Rachel, a significant part of their resilience and ability to continue to do their job day to day came from knowing that they could retire within the next few years. Katie (Manager) recognised threats to the longevity of a social work career suggesting that social work had become more stressful in recent years, and that it was no longer possible to sustain frontline work for the entirety of a career. She thought that social workers would instead move ‘sideways’ from direct practice into other professional areas such as strategy or regulation. While the stressors that cause these career decisions may be varied, the lack of breaks in the journey due to heavy workloads may mean that the reserves of resilience required to deal with demands are limited, and the journey on the social work path is curtailed.

The findings of my study suggest that heavy workloads had a further negative impact in limiting opportunities for various other resilience-enhancing measures. Professional development and training have been identified as sustaining to resilience by contributing towards a sense of skill and effectiveness, however, several of the participants reported that there was little time to devote to this, as well as fewer opportunities due to funding restrictions. In relation to a lack of training in her team, Julie made the following comment.

\[ JULIE: If I don’t know the things I need to know then how the hell am I meant to do my job well? And then I’m going to feel crap and then I’m not going to want to be here. It all has a knock-on effect. \]

While professional development activities may boost resilience in the more abstract sense of increasing effectiveness, in reality it can mean a day or two out of the office during which time the tasks awaiting a social worker on their return are likely to be building up. It would no doubt be challenging to a social worker’s sense of ethical practice and professional integrity to prioritise their training needs over facilitating a hospital discharge or arranging support for a service user in crisis. The lack of training and professional development due to time constraints and budget cuts is highlighted in a recent study (SSSC, 2019b), and found to be exacerbated in integrated health and social care
settings by joint budgets for training but different training priorities. If health is indeed the dominant partner in integrated settings, the professional development needs of social workers may be neglected. The report (ibid.) makes an interesting observation that post-qualifying training in social work is not as directly linked to career development as it is in many other professions. A more resilient workforce may be one which has professional development activities incorporated into the workload, and time protected by the organisation to undertake these.

Several of the social workers in my study talked about their organisation’s work allocation policy. Some were allocated work in discussion with their managers, which provided them with an opportunity to comment on how they were managing their existing workload and their capacity to take on additional tasks. They were generally very positive about this strategy and saw it as supportive to their resilience. In the teams of several other participants, a set number of referrals were allocated to each social worker every week or month regardless of existing workload. This rigid allocation policy seemed to be a hugely significant factor in undermining their resilience, as it demonstrated little regard for the demands already placed on them. I recall the burden, as a social worker, of receiving two referrals every Friday afternoon; perfect timing to increase anxiety over the weekend. As has been noted in Chapter Seven, some social workers may be reluctant to admit that they are struggling if this is seen as a personal lack of resilience rather than an issue to be addressed at an organisational level.

MARY: It felt like when you were given a ridiculous amount of work you were, and if you struggled it was that you weren’t emotionally resilient enough, and it felt like a bit of a cop out rather than them addressing the fact that we were overworked, and it felt more personal. Like, you were being told you need to go and deal with that rather than them kind of saying, well we’ve given you too many cases there, or how can we help you?

This is a clear example of individual social workers shouldering the burden of systemic resource issues, also noted by Tom.

TOM: They’re passing the responsibility down for that massive waiting list, which is all to do with lack of resources. That’s being passed on to us, and it feels like a burden.

Some social workers were more comfortable in discussing their workload with managers than others. In a diary entry, Stephen did not pinpoint a particular task that was affecting his stress and resilience but stated that ‘I felt that I had too much work on.’ His resilience was boosted by sharing his concerns with a manager who agreed not to allocate any further work for a period of time.
The complexity of the work as well as the number of ‘cases’ allocated is an important consideration when determining workload. To return again to the metaphors of resilience presented in Chapter Four, the need to be solid and stable was mentioned by several of the participants, highlighting that resilience has a breaking point when the pressure applied is greater than one’s capacity to withstand it. It was suggested that adversity can be in the form of one-off significant events or the cumulative effect of smaller daily pressures (Grant et al., 2014b). An acknowledgement of both types of pressure has implications for workload allocation, and requires an awareness of the complexity of work with each service user alongside the number of service users allocated. If this type of workload management is absent, social workers may find that they are expected to manage both types of stressor; the significant events as well as the smaller cumulative daily demands. In view of the fact that crisis work was seen as increasingly prevalent by many of the participants, it may be that responding to crises is no longer a one-off event but in essence becomes the daily demand. The resulting pressure of managing daily high stress situations is likely to take a significant toll on the resilience of the social workers involved.

The managers in my study were all very aware of the pressures of heavy workloads and spoke about the impact of funding and staffing cuts in much the same way as the social workers. Recognising that challenges in the personal lives of social workers could impact on their professional lives, some of the managers commented that they saw supervision as a forum in which to gain an understanding of what personal issues may be affecting a social worker’s capacity to function in their professional role. They appeared sympathetic to adjusting workloads accordingly, however, a couple of them had observed negativity among team members directed at those who did not appear to be taking equal responsibility for the overall workload of the team.

KATIE (Manager): When people are under stress, what you actually have to manage is the resentment of other workers against this one person who is struggling or seen as underperforming. So, if one person is seen as underperforming and getting somewhat lighter duties, there’s often resentment and gossip and unpleasantness from other members of the team, and that is something that has to be dealt with. You cannot let that fester because that can be really really, it's basically a form of bullying.

This was an unexpected finding given that the overall message from the social workers in my study was one of the value of peer support and understanding, and a commitment to sharing responsibility within the team, sometimes to the point where they would jeopardise their own resilience and wellbeing.
KAREN: You then go, right there's an emergency, I'll just take that one, and I'll take that one as well because there's nobody else to give it to, because you're trying to work as a team as well. You'd never see someone else struggling, you take something on, but then you end up starting to struggle yourself because you're trying to take on more to help people out.

Reducing the workload of individual social workers who are struggling appears to be a valuable way to support their resilience and maintain their ability to continue in the role. The onus may be on managers to address any issues that arise between team members as a result. Issues of confidentiality mean that the circumstances of particular workers cannot be shared among the team, but general reminders from managers about the acceptability of workload adjustments may be useful in order to reduce the potentially negative impact on peer relationships. The level of resentment within teams, observed by some managers, about a perceived lack of parity in work allocation is perhaps an indication of how raw the issue of workload is for social workers.

8.5 Supervision and Guidance

Supervision with a line manager, both formal pre-planned sessions and more ad hoc guidance, was a prominent theme in the data. It appeared to contribute significantly towards the resilience of the participant social workers when experienced positively, and detract from resilience when absent or unsatisfactory. All of the managers expressed a great deal of commitment to supervision, both in scheduling regular formal sessions and being available more generally for consultation and support.

NAOMI (Manager): There was a discussion amongst the seniors, because we were at breaking point, what could we reduce in order to give us more time to do the other things we've been asked to do and somebody did say, supervision. They said maybe we could go five or six weeks and I'm like, I wouldn't feel happy with that, that's too long. And one of the other top sort of managers said, yeah, but you're giving supervision anyway because they're seeing you on a daily basis and they're able to ask questions and I'm like, but it's not the same as sitting down with somebody.

Naomi’s comment again highlights a sense of disconnect between more senior managers and the needs and priorities of frontline staff. It is also a useful reminder that managers, too, have a ‘breaking’ point and a finite level of resilience. Nonetheless, they appear to have a key role in supporting the resilience of the social workers whom they supervise.
The main elements considered to be important in formal supervision, in the view of many of the participant social workers, were reflection, emotional support and case discussion. This largely reflects some of the classic models of supervision such as that devised by Kadushin (1976 cited in Beverley and Worsley, 2007), which identifies the three components of education, support and administration. This generally aligned with the participant managers’ view of the purposes of supervision.

SIMON (Manager): It’s the same elements that you would expect from social work interactions. You need time, you need safe space, you need to be able to listen actively during supervision as a manager. You need to be able to facilitate reflection from the worker on the difficulties that they are experiencing with the work that they are doing, and to help them to talk through in a meaningful way.

The opportunity to process emotion was discussed in Chapter Six in the context of the relationships between social workers and their line managers. It was suggested that the extent to which emotional support featured in ad hoc and planned supervision was largely dependent on the level of trust within this relationship. When emotional support was not sought, this did not appear to be because it was not valued but due to the fact that supervision was not experienced as a safe place. In addition, the opportunity for reflective practice was seen as sustaining to resilience by some of the participants.

IAN: We’ve had more of a discussion about what my thoughts are and where we’re going, and more reflection. He’s helped me pick up sort of threads, my approach with different families, and kind of challenged me about my approach which is good.

Reflection was a component of supervision much endorsed by most of the managers although, in Katie’s view, it ‘seems to have just disappeared.’ This is potentially a significant omission since reflective supervision has been shown to be strongly associated with higher levels of resilience (Kinman and Grant, 2017). Lack of time and a tendency towards task-based supervision was often seen as the reason for this disappearance.

DANIEL: I think supervision, not to be just about discussing cases but also to be reflective as well, discuss cases and reflect on them. What could have happened? What could have been done differently? If supervision was more reflective rather than just pretty much just going through a list of names, what’s happening with this person, have they been discharged? Then you go to the next one. But there’s no time for that.

This style of supervision is likely to be characteristic of a managerialist culture in social work, as referred to in Chapter Seven, which focuses more on tasks and outcomes than the process by which these are achieved.
Despite criticisms by some of the participants that supervision tended to be overly task-focused, it was often case discussion that was most emphasised by the social workers as the key component of supportive supervision. This seemed to relate to the need for support in terms of their accountability in social work practice, and the opportunity to ‘check how to progress matters’ (Stephen), ‘check out my thinking’ (Emily) and ‘provide some guidance and advice’ (Maggie). Lizzie felt supported by the fact that the decisions she made were ‘in agreement with line management so they are not my personal decisions’, and that managers would ‘endorse my recommendations.’ The managers in my study largely reflected the views of the social workers in their recognition of the need to support decision-making and share accountability but were also very clear on the need for social workers to recognise their own accountability. Naomi, Anne and Simon all related this to the formal registration requirements for social workers and the need for them to uphold standards of professionalism.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise the strain on social workers of being accountable in situations that may entail high levels of risk and crisis in the lives of service users. Indeed, the need to process and ‘let go’, discussed in Chapter Five, was not always about the emotional impact of the role but about relieving the burden of accountability in decision-making.

*RICHARD*: No matter how distressing a situation is, no matter how difficult a time somebody that I’m working with is having, if I’m able to say, well I’ve done everything that I can for this person in that situation, that actually means I’m not taking it with me when I go back home so it’s, but if I have any doubts about that then over a certain, it’s like at four in the morning it’s still in the back of my head. So, having my senior go through that with me was quite important.

Within cultures of accountability, and in some cases blame, the need for shared decision-making appears vital to resilience. However, it is important to recognise that this need may arise as a result of structures of hierarchy that have the power to shift responsibility to frontline workers. If responsibility were felt to be more equally shared, the focus of supervision could include other components, particularly emotional support, which have an important part to play in sustaining resilience. Some researchers argue for the separation of caseload discussion and emotional support in supervision due to the apparent incompatibility between the ‘surveillance’ ethos of accountability-focused social work practice and attention to the worker’s wellbeing (Beddoe, 2010, p.1286). However, the two might be more intertwined than is immediately apparent. Recalling the points made in Chapter Seven regarding the involvement of emotions in decision-making (de Boise and Hearn, 2017), it may be that the case discussion and emotional support elements of supervision are inseparable and that attempting to disentangle them will distort the fact that, as Ingram (2015b) suggests, emotion is prevalent in all aspects of social work practice.
Some of the participants expressed a general view that newly qualified social workers were likely to require more supervision and guidance than experienced workers. Commitment at a national level to supporting newly qualified social workers, by means of more frequent supervision and training, is reflected in plans for the implementation of a mandatory supported and assessed first year of practice (Scottish Government, 2019a). This seems valuable in supporting students to make the transition to qualified practice, particularly in view of evidence that they may be more vulnerable to stress and burnout (Considine et al., 2015), as long as the ethos of the mandatory year emphasises support equally to assessment. However, it was not only the newly qualified social workers in my study who sought guidance. Those who had been in the post for a number of years appeared to continue to benefit from this kind of support. For example, Maggie, a social worker with thirty-eight years’ experience commented that ‘if I’ve got an issue, I need it now, you know.’

Whatever the worker’s level of experience, it seemed that there was a balance to be struck for many of the participant social workers between management support and professional autonomy. ‘Micromanagement’ was generally viewed unfavourably, especially when it thwarted the freedom of social workers to manage their time and workload. Erica commented that she had experienced this kind of management style in the past, but that her current managers ‘allow me the respect and autonomy to know that I’m not, you know, going to the cinema instead of going out on visits.’ Zara made a similar comment about a former manager.

ZARA: I’ve got a great boss just now and he’s not long out of being a social worker, so he’s not a micromanager. So, we can kind of do what we want as long as at the end of the day the reports are coming in and things. So we can do that and he’s not that interested. The one before him, she’s a complete micro manager, and that was very stressful. She looked at your diary every day, and wanted to know where you were and how long it took.

The domains of resilience certainly appear to overlap in these examples, since trust in the relationship between social workers and managers is also implicated.

Reflecting the antipathy to micromanagement, greater autonomy in direct engagement with service users was mentioned by some of the participant social workers as impacting positively on their resilience and relates, in part, to the creativity in practice discussed in Chapter Seven. For example, Eilidh reflected in a diary entry that her resilience would have been enhanced by ‘greater autonomy to be able to advise families of outcomes when I can’t due to management approval process.’ A study of social workers in Wales also found that increased involvement in decision-making and professional judgement, and less invasive management boosted their wellbeing and job satisfaction (Pithouse et
Empowerment of workers is said to be a key aspect of resilience within organisations (Huq, 2020) and good leadership ‘occurs though inspiring and enabling others’ (Greer, 2016, p.128). In terms of resilience more generally, there is research to suggest that it is associated with a sense of control and mastery (Seery et al., 2010), and this is a key aspect of ‘flow states’ in which people are intrinsically motivated to perform tasks that they feel skilled to undertake and over which they have control (Carr, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Furthermore, Park and Folkman (1997) suggest that the extent to which a person feels able to exert control in stressful situations is a key factor in whether they perceive the situation ‘as a challenge to be mastered rather than a threat to be endured’ (p.122). This is an important distinction for the social workers in my study. Some situations they strove to master, especially those involving creative and innovative approaches to practice, without excessive intervention by managers. On the other hand, some situations engendered anxiety and were felt to require management guidance and back up. This is likely to be subjective, with variation among social workers regarding what is felt to be a ‘challenge’ as opposed to a ‘threat.’ A style of supervision that explores the experiences of each individual social worker is more likely to be responsive to this subjectivity, and thus to support resilience.

Overall, it seemed that some degree of balance between autonomy and guidance was sought by the participant social workers in relation to their resilience. A comment from Emily illustrates what this balance was for her.

*EMILY:* I knew that my boss had my back. So, I knew that if I ever needed to refer to him, I could do and he would step in. I think he was always prepared to defend us, but he was also very keen that we defend ourselves, that we were autonomous professionals. He kind of encouraged us to be independent but he had our backs so we felt protected.

She described being involved in setting up a new team in a previous post and ‘being able to make it up as we went along, literally’, which enhanced her job satisfaction and sense of resilience. Without the support, she stated that she would not have felt confident to be as innovative. This was certainly reflected in the context of the social work post she held at the time of the interview, in which she was experiencing what she described as bullying behaviour by managers and the fear that ‘if you make a mistake, somebody will punish you for that.’ This balance between autonomy and guidance is reflected in the Scottish Government’s ‘Shared Vision and Strategy 2015-2020’ for social services (2015) which recognises that, in the risk averse climate of social work, an environment should be created ‘which allows people to be innovative whilst also taking responsibility and being accountable should things go wrong’ (p.24). The strategy says little, however, about the ways in which
accountability within organisations may be managed and protection afforded to individual social workers within blame cultures. In view of the findings of my study, it appears that resilience can be derived from a sense of what might be termed ‘supported autonomy.’ Building on the recognition of the participant managers that a sense of shared accountability is important in boosting the resilience of social workers, Anne added that this might ‘move up and down the continuum’ depending on the worker and the situation; a view which reflects this more nuanced understanding of accountability and its relationship to autonomy. Thus, the notion of ‘supported autonomy’ recognises the importance of guidance from managers, and frames it in such a way that does not foster dependency, but rather provides a secure base from which social workers can feel confident to be creative and innovative in their practice and, in doing so, develop effectiveness in their role and enhance their resilience.

8.6 Wellbeing Strategies

The organisation’s role in the emotional resilience of social workers has been prominent in the discussion throughout this chapter. So far, the picture has primarily been one of organisational pressures increasing stress by means of a variety of workload demands and associated challenges. In order to avoid inadvertently leading the participants down a more negative line of thought in the interviews, I asked what measures their organisations took to support their resilience. Karen replied ‘we do it all ourselves’, and this was a sentiment expressed by many of the participants across local authority areas. Anne (Manager) recognised that, while a variety of policies were in place regarding stress management and risk assessments for workers, ‘something is just kind of not quite there.’ She noted that organisational support was often scored very low by social workers completing wellbeing surveys, whereas support within teams and from immediate line managers was generally rated more highly. Concerningly, the overall message was that the organisation’s role in resilience was largely perceived as depleting rather than enhancing it.

Some of the participants’ organisations appeared to have made attempts to support staff wellbeing. For example, events had been arranged such as ‘roadshows’ of yoga, mindfulness and Reiki sessions, or organised walks and other forms of physical exercise. The benefits of mindfulness in particular have been referred to throughout this thesis, and some of the participants made use of the sessions provided by their organisations and felt that this enhanced their resilience. However, workload demands were cited by some as preventative in engaging with any of these activities. Zara appreciated being sent communication about mindfulness techniques but stated that ‘sometimes I don’t read
them at all if I’m all panicky or busy, I should be reading them but I don’t.’ This comment sums up the irony of being too stressed to engage in wellbeing activities, and viewing them as another item on the to-do list. For others, such attempts to promote health and wellbeing were felt to be blatantly tokenistic. Richard commented that ‘it’s all well and good talking about mindfulness and whatnot but we should really be looking at how to, how the initial problem itself can be dealt with.’ This echoes Desmond Tutu’s quote cited in Chapter Four, which highlights the need, metaphorically, not just to rescue people from the river but to consider why they are falling in. Some of the participants evidently perceived these kinds of wellbeing events and activities to be a rescue attempt but not one that would prevent them from falling back in the river. Without a corresponding commitment to tackling the root causes of the adversities of the social work role, such activities were merely a ‘band aid on larger, sort of institutional problems’ (Richard).

PIA: Maybe it’s a wee bit tokenistic what the council has been doing. I appreciate that they’re doing it but maybe, rather than sending someone to do a massage once a month, they could maybe talk about the tensions that are existing which they haven’t really done so much. I’m not saying it’s not a good thing but maybe there’s things that are, there are white elephants out there that are not being addressed.

ZOE: It was almost like, if you’re having difficulty it’s your own fault, you’re not being mindful enough, you’re not finding the right strategies, you need to take care of all of this and it’s like, well, that’s like saying to a person who’s somehow survived a horrible war and is living in a refugee camp and everyone they loved is dead and saying, if you were more mindful, you’d be a happier person. You know, I find it really insulting almost.

It seems that the tokenism of wellbeing strategies not only fail to support social workers but, for some, actively exacerbate the feeling of being devalued and misunderstood. Stuart (2021) notes that when social workers are encouraged by their organisations to engage in such wellbeing and ‘self-care’ activities in response to high levels of stress, this may be well-meaning on the part of the organisations but positions the individual as responsible for finding their own solutions to endemic stress and distress. Moreover, self-care is depicted as a choice and, by extension, a lack of self-care is seen as a personal failure.

In the final days of writing up this thesis, I was both heartened and disheartened to learn that, in January 2022, the Scottish Government set up a £1 million fund (Inspiring Scotland, no date) to improve the wellbeing of workers in adult social work and social care. This seems laudable in giving much needed recognition, as well as funds, to the wellbeing of social workers in adult services who have played a large role in supporting vulnerable people throughout the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.
However, the images on the website are primarily ones of yoga and meditation which, while no doubt very beneficial practices for many people, may again feed into retorts by social workers of surface level and tokenistic attempts to address deeply embedded systemic issues. On a more positive note, it invites applications from workers with ideas about how to support their wellbeing, and therefore will be more self-determined than some of the organisationally-driven wellbeing initiatives described by the participants of my study. Nonetheless, it will be interesting to see how many applications are completed by busy social workers managing multiple demands while emerging from a global health crisis at which they have been at the forefront.

There are wider examples of the negative impact of tokenism, which are useful to note. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I was interested to read an article entitled ‘I’m an NHS doctor – and I’ve had enough of people clapping for me’ (The Guardian, 2020) written by an anonymous doctor who had been working in a UK hospital throughout the early stages of the pandemic. Referring to an initiative called ‘Clap for Carers’ that had begun, in the UK and beyond, of people standing on their doorsteps on Thursday evenings clapping to show their appreciation for NHS workers, the doctor stated ‘I don’t care if people clap until their hands bleed.’ The doctor acknowledged that some health colleagues welcomed this display of appreciation but was of the view, instead, that this was a ‘sentimental distraction from the issues facing us’ and created a ‘creeping clapping fascism.’ Later in the pandemic, a survey completed by 2,541 health and social care workers found that only a minority were in support of ‘Clap for Carers’ with most believing it detracted from the seriousness of the situation and the inadequacy of resources (Manthorpe et al., 2021). Bottrell (2009) asks ‘how much adversity should resilient individuals endure before social arrangements rather than individuals are targeted for intervention?’ (p.335) and suggests that if resilience is about coping with adversity against the odds, one response is ‘shifting the odds’ (p.337). This is essentially what the large majority of the participants in my study were calling for. For social workers, who are trained in matters of human welfare and whose role is not only to work with individual service users but to advocate for them in circumstances of wider oppression and disadvantage, it is perhaps no wonder that organisational advice on health and wellbeing strategies may seem obvious and patronising.

8.7 Conclusion

The vast majority of the participants were clear in their view that adversity in their role arose primarily from organisational demands and not from working with service users. Various policies and procedure were experienced as cumbersome and, at times, unnecessary thus increasing the pressures of
workload and feeding into a procedurally driven approach to practice rather than one which was more person-centred. Issues of professional integrity were as ever present in the structural domain as in the other domains, and emerged in the value conflict between procedural aspects of the role and what the participants believed to be ethical practice. Furthermore, with the advent of new procedures, many participants described feeling deskilled as they had to grapple with different ways of working. The fast pace of change in policy, procedure and structure noted in many of the local authorities for which the participants worked, brought about the threat of information overload. Some of the participant social workers appreciated a ‘filtering’ of information from senior managers, however, this was complicated by the fact that many felt aggrieved at not being consulted about organisational change and restructure. It seemed that a balance between ‘filtering down’ and ‘filtering up’ supported resilience in the sense that social workers were only informed about organisational matters of importance to them, but had access to forums where they felt heard and respected by the higher levels of organisational management.

Workload was a very dominant theme for all of the participants. Allocation policies within organisations were noted to have a significant effect on resilience particularly when such policies disregarded the worker’s current capacity to take on additional tasks. Most favoured a method by which they had work allocated to them following discussion with their line manager. As well as increasing stress by creating greater demands on social workers, heavy workloads were found to have a further impact by reducing the time available for resilience-enhancing measures such as opportunities for reflection and emotional processing, sufficient time away from work to recharge, and engaging in training and professional development activities.

Supervision was generally thought to have a significant role to play in maintaining and enhancing resilience, if it were of good quality. Good supervision was generally characterised as involving a trusting relationship between the social worker and supervising manager, and comprising of emotional support, reflection and case discussion. Both formal and ad hoc supervision were significant in sharing accountability, which helped many of the social workers to feel resilient and supported in their role and tasks. There were some nuances around the level of guidance social workers were seeking, however, and often a degree of autonomy was sought alongside direction and guidance. This was termed ‘supported autonomy’ to reflect the importance of social workers being supported in their responsibility and accountability, but without this detracting from the opportunity to feel empowered and innovative in their practice.
It was particularly notable that, when asked about what the organisation could do to promote the emotional resilience of social workers, many of the participants struggled to articulate what they were seeking. While criticising what they saw as tokenistic attempts by organisations to support resilience in the form of wellbeing strategies, they still tended to revert to more individualised ways of talking about and attending to their own resilience. More focus on organisational factors is likely to be crucial in developing a greater understanding of what can be done at a structural level to promote the resilience of social workers. Since the organisation appeared to contribute so significantly to the adversity experienced by the participants of my study, it would be pertinent to begin by addressing the root causes. Indeed, it is only when resilience is no longer understood merely as a means to survive, that social workers may have the opportunity to thrive and flourish in their role.
9. BRINGING RESILIENCE INTO THE LIGHT: Implications and Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

The emotional resilience of social workers is a topic that has attracted increasing attention over the last decade or so, most often focusing on social workers generically. In Scotland, social workers in the three areas of Adult Services, Children and Families, and Justice Services have distinct roles, which present different challenges. Thus, it is important to examine the emotional resilience of social workers within each area of practice, as well as generically. As there are no studies on the emotional resilience of social workers in adult services specifically, my research makes an important contribution to the field in exploring what is similar or different regarding emotional resilience for this group of social workers.

Overall, this study sought to understand how social workers in adult services conceptualise and experience resilience in relation to their professional lives, and how resilience may be maintained and enhanced. In light of criticism in the wider literature that the concept of resilience can be used to place responsibility on individuals to cope with externally-imposed demands, organisational factors were explicitly included in the aims and objectives of the research. Using a qualitative approach, my study gained a deeper understanding of the main sources of adversity for the participants and what, in their view, supported or might have supported their emotional resilience. The interviews and diary entries provided a rich source of data which, through the use of metaphor and narratives as well as more general discussion, highlighted many perspectives on adversity and resilience in relation to the social work role. Emotional resilience emerged as a multi-faceted concept, reflecting the diverse definitions of resilience in the wider literature.

Various sources of adversity and approaches to enhancing emotional resilience for social workers in adult services have been presented in the chapters of this thesis. In some cases, as referenced throughout, these approaches reflect and corroborate findings from previous research into the resilience of social workers generically, indicating that they are not specific to those working in adult services but might be applicable more widely. In this final chapter, the key findings and implications are presented, which add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the resilience of social workers as well as reflecting the specific context of working with adults in local authority settings. The first half
of the chapter returns to definitions of emotional resilience and draws attention to the effectiveness of the ‘fuel tank’ metaphor in offering a conceptualisation of resilience as an interplay between internal and external factors. It then moves on to reflect on the holistic framework presented in the thesis and how it may be interpreted in practice. The second half of the chapter moves towards more concrete suggestions regarding strategies that may promote emotional resilience for social workers before discussing key implications for policy, practice and research. These implications are encapsulated under two broad and related areas that have an overarching and significant connection to resilience; firstly, the need for a relational and compassion-based culture for social work and secondly, the importance of incorporating issues of professional integrity into resilience policy and practice in recognition of the finding that resilience and integrity are so tightly interwoven as to often appear inseparable.

While emotional resilience is a topic of much theoretical speculation, it has important practical applications. Shaw and Holland (2014) point out the potentially fraught relationship between researchers and practitioners, with the former supposedly providing knowledge for the latter to put into practice. They suggest that ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’, research and practice, are not two wholly distinct areas that need mechanisms to connect them, but are to a significant degree part and parcel of one another’ (p.16). Given the high rates of stress and burnout in social work, one of my overall priorities in conducting this research was to translate conceptual perspectives into meaningful resilience-enhancing measures for social workers in adult services. A comment about the attention given to resilience within organisations, made by a social worker in the final interview, starkly drew this to my attention.

RICHARD: It’s never actually the focus. It’s made in passing reference to another issue. So, it’s always there but it’s never actually brought out into the light.

My aim, then, is to move from ‘knowing’ to ‘doing’ and to bring resilience ‘into the light.’

9.2 Key Contributions

Conceptualising resilience through metaphor

In order to move from conceptualisation to practical application, it is useful to begin by bridging the gap between theory and practice in presenting an accessible way to understand the term ‘emotional resilience’ as a real-life concept. The use of metaphor by the participants of my study was especially
enlightening in this regard. While all the metaphors they used had something important to say about the nature and experience of resilience, it was resilience as a ‘fuel tank’ that most effectively encapsulated the findings of my study overall. One of the clear messages that was integral to most of the metaphors was the finite nature of resilience. Whether an analogy was made with drowning, breaking or snapping, the implication was that everyone reaches a point beyond which they are unable to cope with pressure. Some of these metaphors present only a crude distinction between being intact and broken. In contrast, the idea of resilience as a fuel tank reflects the subtle interplay between different factors integral to resilience depletion and enhancement, and emphasises that it is both about decreasing adversity and increasing coping. The dynamic nature of resilience suggested in this metaphor points to an ongoing flux as adverse experiences deplete the tank and resilience-enhancing measures top it up. Thus, greater adversity may be more tolerable if resilience is high, whereas a combination of high adversity and low resilience is likely to have a negative impact. This serves as a reminder that the aim is not to remove adversity altogether, even if this were possible. Indeed, moderate adversity has been shown to be beneficial to resilience (Seery et al., 2010) as long as coping capacity is sufficient. Since workplaces incorporate both demands and resources (Ravalier et al., 2021), it is important to maintain a balance, and either reduce demand or increase support if social workers are negatively impacted.

Much of the resilience literature, both in social work and more generally, refers to vulnerability factors and protective factors, and the interplay between them (e.g. Masten, 1998; Rutter, 1999; Yates et al., 2015). Using the fuel tank metaphor, it could be said that vulnerability factors deplete the tank and protective factors top it up. However, what constitutes vulnerability and protection are not prescriptive and can, instead, be seen as subjectively experienced. While there may be statistical evidence that certain types of experience are more likely to cause distress (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000, p.858), there may also be variability; what is a protective factor in one context or for one person, may become a vulnerability factor in a different context for another person (Adamson et al., 2014; Ungar, 2008; Yates et al., 2015). To use an example relevant to social work, professional training activities may be a protective factor in increasing a sense of self-efficacy and competence but become a vulnerability factor for social workers with busy workloads and multiple demands.

In the light of this more nuanced understanding of resilience, and through closer analysis of the data, it became apparent there were a number of areas in which resilience was about finding a balance or equilibrium between two extremes. It appears that vulnerability and protective factors do not only vary from person to person and between contexts, but occur in a delicate balance with each other. In some instances, it is helpful to see resilience as lying at an optimal point on a ‘spectrum’ between two
extremes, resonant of Ungar’s concept of a ‘tipping point’ between too much and too little stress (2018, p.28). These spectrums have been discussed throughout the thesis and were related to all of the different domains of resilience. For example, on a personal level, it was argued that resilience lay between perspectives of pessimism and optimism in order to find a ‘hopeful realism.’ In terms of the relational domain, resilience could be found between empathising to the point of personal distress at one extreme, and becoming overly emotionally detached at the other. Within the culture of teams, there was a sense that a balance needed to be struck between recognising that the uniqueness of the role elicited strong emotional responses, and normalising these emotions to the point where their cause remained unaddressed. Within the structural domain was a point of ‘supported autonomy’ on a spectrum with complete autonomy void of support and guidance at one end and, at the other, a level of micromanagement that stifled professional innovation and discretion. Thus, the main message conveyed by the fuel tank metaphor is one of the dynamic and non-prescriptive nature of adversity and resilience, such that there may be ‘many pathways’ to it (Padesky and Mooney, 2000, p.285). Therefore, while resilience can be construed as ‘individual’ in the sense that each person’s experience may be different, this should not be conflated with the idea of resilience as ‘internal.’ In fact, the ‘fuel tank’ metaphor of resilience is explicit in encompassing both internal and external influences on resilience.

Using the holistic framework of resilience

To further bridge the gap between theory and practice, a conceptual model was presented for understanding emotional resilience in a holistic way across the four domains of personal, relational, cultural and structural factors. Although these domains were addressed in separate chapters, it is important to recognise their mutually influential nature. The ‘cascading effect’ from macro levels down to the individual, proposed in Yates et al.’s systems-oriented approach to resilience (2015), needs to be taken into account given that social workers operate in the context of relationships with other people, within wider teams and organisations, and under the overarching umbrella of legislation and policy. For example, a social worker’s individual efforts to enhance their resilience by engaging in reflective practice in supervision is likely to require a trusting relationship with their manager, a culture that promotes a reflective rather than procedural style of supervision, and a workload allowing sufficient time. What can sometimes be neglected in resilience research, however, is the recognition of an upward ‘cascading effect’ in the sense that the individual social worker has a degree of personal agency in attending to their own resilience. To use the same example, if all the conditions are in place for reflective supervision, it will not happen without the personal agency of the individual social worker to engage in the process. Failing to recognise this risks disempowering the worker and
neglecting to give due credit to their strengths and internal resources. Fundamental to the framework of resilience I have presented in this thesis, therefore, is that attention should be given to each of the four domains concurrently and interactively. By including ‘internal’ and external’ factors of adversity and resilience, this framework seeks to ‘reclaim’ the concept of resilience as a useful one against very legitimate concerns about its use as part of a neoliberal agenda to pass the responsibility for structural inequality and disadvantage onto individuals.

Overall, the adaptation of Thompson’s ‘PCS’ model of oppression (2006) worked effectively to reflect the different domains of resilience and highlight their mutually influential nature. The addition of a ‘relational’ domain to Thompson’s original model was important in order to reflect the significant emphasis that the participants placed on the many different relationships they engaged in as part of their professional role, and how these influenced their resilience. In fact, much of what they spoke about was embedded in their experience of relationships with service users, their immediate peers, managers and other professionals. Relational elements of experience could have been incorporated into the existing three aspects of Thompson’s original ‘PCS’ model, particularly within the personal and cultural levels, given that relationships play out between individual people, and that cultural practices and norms can be mediated through relationships. However, the prevalence of data in my study that pointed to the distinct influence of relational factors on resilience meant that the significance of such factors may have been overlooked if subsumed under another category.

The importance of reflecting the participants’ commitment to ethical and effective social work practice, which was highly prevalent in the findings, entailed a further adaptation to Thompson’s model by including the notion of ‘professional integrity.’ Banks (2016) suggests that the word ‘integrity’ refers to a sense of wholeness and spans different domains. It is about ‘parts fitting together, and the whole being complete, undamaged or uncorrupted’ (ibid., p.49). In this sense of ‘wholeness’, it seems applicable that professional integrity should be the backdrop against which the four domains of the model are set, and which binds and unites them all. Definitions of professional integrity were provided in Chapter Four and it was suggested that, for the participants of my study, integrity equated closely to an overall sense of efficacy in their role. Indeed, the essence of effective social work practice seemed to entail an ethical approach to engaging with service users and acting in their best interests. For many of the participants, this approach accorded with core social work values around working with service users in a person-centred way, emphasising relationship-based rather than procedural practice, and conveying compassion and empathy. When prevented from working in an ethical way, and in accordance with these values, resilience appeared to be significantly diminished.
One of the key findings that arose from identifying the four domains of resilience was the significant impact that organisational factors had on the resilience of social workers overall. Within the personal and relational domains, some areas of adversity were identified by the participants but alongside this was a wealth of sources of resilience. The participants seemed well versed in finding ways to enhance their personal resilience perhaps reflecting their position as skilled professionals, confident in supporting human wellbeing including their own. Likewise, much resilience arose from the satisfaction gained through engaging with service users as well as within mutually supportive relationships with peers. In contrast, as attention moved to the cultural and structural domains in Chapters Seven and Eight, it was notable that the balance started to tip towards sources of adversity being identified significantly more than factors associated with resilience. Many of these factors were seen to emanate from organisational demands, practices and working conditions, and thus, participants often found individual wellbeing strategies promoted by their organisations to be tokenistic and patronising when the organisation itself was seen as responsible for creating a large proportion of the adversity experienced. Based on these findings, there are significant issues to address within the culture and structure of social work in adult services in order to sustain and enhance the resilience of social workers, with some important implications for professional policy and practice, and areas for further research.

9.3 Implications for Social Work Policy, Practice and Research

*Topping up the tank*

To begin to draw this thesis to a close, some key strategies for enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers will be presented. These have been identified from a synthesis of all four domains within the holistic framework, underpinned by professional integrity and ethical practice. While there is likely to be much diversity in what supports resilience, depending on the person, the context and a range of external factors, these suggestions may serve as a set of ideas for individual workers, teams and organisations to consider in their own unique context. While the findings arise from research undertaken with social workers from local authority adult services, some of the strategies may be helpful to social workers in other fields as well as related professions especially those involving welfare-orientated practice within large organisations. Reflecting the structure of the preceding chapters, these suggestions move from more personal and relational strategies to those that could be implemented within organisations and broader social policy.
Since emotional intelligence has a strong association with resilience, further ways to support social workers to develop its components of self-awareness, emotion management, empathy and reflective ability are likely to be beneficial. Opportunities may arise within supervision with line managers or peer supervision sessions, as long as the focus is not merely task-based. A space for ‘checking in’ that enables identification of emotions can increase self-awareness, and help to establish appropriate empathetic and emotional boundaries. It is possible that the emotional support offered in line manager supervision will always be impacted to some degree by the power imbalance in the supervisor/supervisee relationship. In this case an ‘external’ supervisor can be beneficial in order to separate the dual aspects of accountability and support that are usually a feature of line manager supervision. Peer support is invaluable in removing or lessening the impact of organisational hierarchy. While emotional support between colleagues often happens on an informal basis, a designated forum for reflection and emotional processing reduces the likelihood of individual workers feeling depleted by having to take on a supportive role with peers who do not reciprocate.

As well as the scope to enhance resilience through regular opportunities for processing the emotional impact of the day to day role, there is the possibility that more acute distress will be experienced by social workers in adult services. It is important to dispel ungrounded assumptions that adult social work is inherently less stressful than social work with other service user groups, and to recognise that burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious or secondary trauma are a risk in this area of practice too. Training should be provided on these themes to enable social workers to recognise symptoms in themselves and others, and more focused emotional support made accessible through counselling funded by the organisation.

The findings presented in this thesis suggest that certain perspectives are associated with resilience, namely a sense of hopeful realism, manageable self-expectation and self-compassion. Together, these perspectives may engender a positive sense of what can be achieved in the social work role alongside satisfaction about one’s efforts and commitments, regardless of the outcome. Having realistic self-expectation and recognition of the boundaries of the social work role alongside a sense of self-compassion are important in developing an understanding of what is within and outwith one’s control, addressing self-criticism and reducing negative thinking. Although perspective is a somewhat elusive concept and highly individual, these ideas could be introduced to social workers through workshops, training and reflective group discussion, and perhaps through their own faith and contemplative practices such as mindfulness. Indeed, there is evidence, cited earlier in the thesis, that mind/body practices such as yoga and mindfulness contribute towards resilience partly by building self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-compassion.
The development of skills and knowledge through engaging in professional development activities appears to be a key facet of resilience. Opportunities should be made available to social workers and, on the basis of training undertaken, they may be identified as experts in certain areas, and viewed as a valuable source of knowledge and skill. This would not only be a useful resource for the organisation but may instil a sense of mastery and competence, strongly associated with resilience, in the individual worker. A learning culture within organisations is required to help make this a priority by dedicating time to professional development activities and to meaningful discussion with workers about their professional aspirations. As well as training on the themes of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious/secondary trauma being offered to all social workers, as noted earlier, developing counselling skills also appears to be of particular benefit to resilience by virtue of its role in developing emotional intelligence, self-awareness and the interpersonal skills required for effective social work practice.

Peer relationships have already been discussed in reference to the emotional support and reflection that can come from peer group supervision especially as it provides a forum free of the apparent scrutiny of those in supervisory and management positions. In addition, one to one peer mentoring schemes can be a fruitful way of social workers receiving practice guidance as well as emotional support from someone who is directly involved in the social work role and has an in-depth understanding of it. This is in contrast to some managers, notably those in more senior positions, who can be seen as distant and unconnected to the realities of work on the frontline. Peer mentoring need not only be for newly qualified workers. Indeed, the rate of change in organisational policy and practice means that experienced workers may feel the need for guidance too. In addition to peer mentoring benefitting the mentee, the mentor might also enhance their resilience through a sense of satisfaction arising from feeling skilled, knowledgeable, and valuable in their support of others.

As peer relationships appear to be so important in sustaining resilience in a variety of capacities, opportunities to nurture these connections may be offered through less formal social and team building activities in addition to more structured peer supervision and mentoring. Furthermore, it is evident that peer relationships grow quite naturally and often become friendships. Consideration of the practicalities of office and desk arrangements, as well as a recognition of the rupture of these relationships as a result of organisational restructure, is fundamental in providing fertile ground for these relationships to grow.

In the current climate of health and social care integration, social workers in local authority adult services are often based in teams with health professionals, therefore attention to the practicalities
of working arrangements within offices may also engender closer professional relationships among multidisciplinary colleagues. The challenges of multidisciplinary work were evident in the findings of my study, yet there were also accounts of its great potential to improve practice and provide a better standard of support to service users. The existence of integrated health and social care teams is relatively new therefore little is known about the impact they will have on the resilience of workers in the longer-term. Further research, particularly into professional identity in multidisciplinary settings would be useful. In the meantime, measures such as joint training sessions and shadowing colleagues from different disciplines may help to address any misinterpretations regarding professional roles and foster a clearer understanding of how different priorities and values come to the fore in practice. Developing forums to share skills and knowledge could be invaluable in nurturing the potential for innovative and creative practice to arise through multidisciplinary approaches.

In terms of a worker’s relationship with their line manager, while seeking emotional support can feel precarious due to the inherent power imbalance, this relationship is often fundamental to receiving feedback and guidance, and sharing accountability. It is also helpful for managers to be available for ad-hoc guidance, especially in the crisis-driven ‘firefighting’ approach that social work with adults appears to have increasingly had to adopt. In this thesis, the idea of ‘supported autonomy’ was presented as a way to find a balance between micromanagement and complete autonomy, neither of which appeared to support resilience. Micromanagement risks undermining the sense of mastery and control that is associated with resilience while complete autonomy places social workers in a vulnerable position regarding accountability and blame. Between these two points lies the scope for self-direction and professional judgement with the availability of support, guidance and shared decision-making when needed. Each social worker may benefit from reflecting on where they find themselves on the spectrum at any particular time, and managers can fulfil their role in this by responding accordingly to the level of guidance or autonomy sought or required.

The visible and tangible presence of senior managers may help to foster more personalised relationships among employees at different levels of the hierarchy and to make social workers feel more valued as individuals. The sense that senior managers understand ‘issues on the ground’ can contribute towards a sense of trust that decisions made by them will reflect the interests of social workers and service users. Meaningful, rather than tokenistic, consultation enables both a ‘filtering up’ and ‘filtering down’ of information and ideas between social workers and senior managers. The ‘filtering down’ of information, for example in relation to organisational change and restructure, ensures that social workers are fully briefed and are less likely to feel deskilled. ‘Filtering up’ adds to the sense that social workers’ knowledge, skill and expertise are fully recognised, respected and acted
upon. How exactly this is done may be a valuable point of discussion within each organisation or team. Feelings of tokenism abounded among the social workers in my study in relation to consultation and some of the approaches that their organisations had used were met with cynicism.

More broadly, resilience may be enhanced by organisations providing a ‘secure base.’ As well as promoting the sharing of accountability and decision-making, a secure base would seek to eradicate blame cultures, which can be immensely destructive to social workers’ confidence, wellbeing and resilience, and create high levels of anxiety and distress. A sense of the organisation as a secure base could enable social workers to exercise an appropriate level of discretion and flexibility in the enactment of policy. This would allow more creative and innovative practice to flourish thus moving away from defensive practice and rigid adherence to procedures that are not always perceived to meet the needs of service users. This is likely to feed into the resilience of social workers by supporting their efforts to engage in ethically sound practice, which they deem to be effective in responding flexibly to the needs, wishes and circumstances of service users. Physical matters of risk and safety are important features of a secure base and help social workers to feel valued as individuals. This may include protective measures for workers attending home visits, for example, by working in pairs or using personal safety systems that can issue alarms or alerts when in danger or feeling threatened. Debriefing and counselling should be offered following any significant incidents.

On an organisational level, one of the most significant factors in enhancing resilience, and one of the key ways to make social workers feel valued as individuals, is to introduce protected workloads. Not least, this demonstrates an understanding that each social worker has a finite capacity to manage pressure, and that the point at which they are no longer able to do so is generally an indication, not of their incompetence, but of their humanity. Opportunities for recovery are limited when demands remain at a consistently high level; breaks in the journey provide an opportunity to refuel and resume whereas following a seemingly endless path will likely lead to energy depletion and burnout. In addition, commitment to carrying out the social work role ethically and effectively can be threatened by having to sacrifice a person-centred approach to supporting service users who are often in crisis, distress or trauma and, instead, reducing intervention to an impersonal ‘churn’ of relentless tasks. As an extension of this point, addressing workload should also involve the streamlining of bureaucracy. If administrative tasks were simplified and duplication avoided, it follows that workload pressure on social workers would decrease.

Heavy workloads not only directly increase stress and demand for social workers but also detract from the opportunity to engage in a host of other resilience strategies already mentioned such as training.
and professional development, peer group support, supervision, finding a healthy work/life balance, mindfulness and yoga among others. In fact, some of these resilience-enhancing measures simply will not work or, worse still, will engender resentment as a result of their tokenism if heavy workloads are not acknowledged and addressed. To draw on an earlier example, while promoting the development of specialist knowledge and skills though further training is a key supporter of resilience, equally, it may detract from resilience if there is little time to put it into practice or it adds to the demands of an already demanding workload.

Work allocation policies are an important way of ensuring fair practices. Generally, allocation seems to support resilience when it occurs as a discussion between a social worker and their manager regarding workload capacity. Allocating a set number of ‘cases’ each week or month seems to be a certain way to increase stress and demand, and demonstrates little recognition of the social worker as an individual with finite capacity. Neither does it portray an understanding of the reality of service users’ lives, which may involve ever-changing levels of need to which the social worker is required to respond. In this sense, the social workers’ workload can be in constant fluctuation and requires regular review. Given that variety and creativity are also associated with resilience, those with responsibility for workload allocation could also be mindful of offering social workers a varied range of tasks and responsibilities, which can boost resilience through improving job satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

Flexible working policies can be an effective way of enabling a better home and work life balance by allowing social workers to plan their working hours more autonomously but, again, these policies have limited impact if heavy workloads preclude the opportunity to take advantage of them. Working from home can ease pressure on social workers by reducing commuting time and making caring commitments more manageable, however, on a cautionary note brought to the fore as a result of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic, flexible working requires some superimposed structure to ensure that there remains a clear demarcation between home and work. The increased use of technology, while helpful in aiding communication, has further blurred the work/home boundary such that social workers can be seen as accessible at any time. Organisational policy and practice should make expectations clear and reasonable in this regard.

On a wider social and structural level, the resilience of social workers may be strengthened by addressing the public image of social work as a profession and promoting a more positive professional identity. This does not mean sugar coating the significant structural issues of funding, resources and staffing, but rather promoting the distinct values and ethos of social work. Professional associations
such as the British Association of Social Work (BASW) have a key role to play in this by representing the views of social workers, and stimulating a sense of pride and achievement. ‘Communities of practice’ currently run by BASW can help to develop a sense of professional pride and identity by providing a forum for social workers to meet to discuss topics of interest, share knowledge and practice wisdom, and reflect on ethical dilemmas. Forums within the workplace such as team meetings and reflective practice sessions, could celebrate successes rather than focus only on problem-solving. Again, however, there is the risk of tokenism if the celebration of success is seen as a mask for more deep rooted and fundamental issues that remain unaddressed.

A final point and one that can only be addressed on a national level is the need for social work services to be adequately funded. Sufficiently resourced social services would enable more social workers to be employed, leading to more manageable workloads for each individual worker. The ‘firefighting’ response that has apparently become characteristic of social work with adults may then give way to more preventative practice that has the potential to enhance the quality of service users’ lives rather than intervening only at the point of crisis. Additional funding would also provide the scope to increase the number of business support staff, enabling social workers to focus on the relational and interpersonal aspects of their role, often considered to be the essence of effective practice and a key source of resilience.

Nurturing a compassionate culture

One of the overarching findings from my study was the extent to which a more compassionate culture was sought by the participants, both social workers and managers, and how intrinsically this connected to their resilience. The addition of a ‘relational’ domain of emotional resilience was particularly important in this regard, as it drew attention to the significance of relationships for social workers in supporting their resilience through a sense of compassionate connection with service users and colleagues, and the value of ‘soft skills’ in developing interpersonal relationships. Also clear was the extent to which organisational culture and practices, as well as the wider climate of social work with adults, was often experienced as hindering this sense of compassionate connection by focusing on measurable outcomes and organisational targets. As a result, many of the participant social workers felt ‘robotic’ rather than ‘human’ in their role with service users, and many experienced a strong sense of conflict when organisational expectations prevented them from carrying out their role in a compassionate way.

Additionally, many felt that they were considered to be little more than a ‘cog in the wheel’ or an ‘asset to sweat’ by their employers. This left them feeling unvalued and dehumanised. Such language
used by the participants conveyed a picture of organisational culture characterised by a paucity of humanity and a sense of the social worker as an automaton to serve the needs of the organisation rather than an emotional being. This perhaps goes some way to explaining why the participants found it so difficult to identify what would make them feel valued within their organisations; it appeared to exist not so much in distinct and tangible practices but in a fundamental need to be treated humanely with their welfare considered a key aspect of, rather than antithetical to, the organisation’s aims and productivity. While these characteristics of compassion and humanity might be assumed to be integral to a welfare profession such as social work, this was not the case in the view of the majority of the participants of my study. In terms of future research, the difficulty social workers may have in articulating specific ways in which they would feel valued could be addressed by conducting a case study approach involving organisations whose staff do feel valued and resilient; identifying the presence of a phenomenon is perhaps easier than hypothesising about its potential characteristics.

As a further illustration, towards the end of my research, I delivered a workshop to a group of around fifty social workers in Ireland on the topic of resilient cultures in social work, focusing on these aspects of compassion and humanity. The post-workshop feedback from participants contained several comments about the ‘affirmation’ they had felt in learning of a research-informed basis for the emphasis that they also chose to place on compassion within their working lives. Much like the participants of my study, this was reported to be, at times, in direct contrast to what was being asked of them by their organisations. This suggests that there may be something fundamental about the current culture and ethos of adult social work, and perhaps social work more widely, that does not always accord with the priorities that social workers hold within their role. It has been noted throughout the thesis that a managerialist culture and neoliberal ethos has come to dominate social work, particularly in adult services. Turbett’s comment (2014) referred to in Chapter Six that, historically, social work has been based on the ‘universal and uncontested assumption about the importance of relationships’ (p.130) suggests that the culture of social work has become disconnected from its roots while individual social workers remain immensely invested in the relational aspects of practice. Such a relational and compassionate approach seems to now be in the realms of ‘traditional’ or ‘radical’ social work yet for many practitioners it is, simply, ‘social work.’

In interviewing managers as well as social workers, it was possible to gain a sense of the extent to which their views were aligned. There was very little divergence of opinion between the two groups regarding the importance of compassion in social work. Many of the managers also criticised organisational cultures that depersonalised social work practice. It was, perhaps, significant that they were all at levels of the hierarchy still relatively connected to frontline practice, and it would be
interesting to gain the views of more senior staff who were thought by the majority of participants to be disconnected from the realities of day-to-day social work. Research into the emotional resilience of social workers involving managers at the top of the organisational hierarchy could shed light on the ways in which organisations might contribute to adversity for social workers and inhibit resilience, as well as identify more supportive practices. Using Farragher and Bloom’s idea of ‘parallel’ processes (2010) discussed in Chapter Seven, such research may usefully direct attention to the potential for compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and emotional overwhelm to be experienced by the ‘living complex systems’ of organisations (ibid., p.131). Just as detachment may occur in individual social workers as protection against the emotional nature of engagement with service users so, too, might the organisation employ defence mechanisms to avoid taking on board the collective experience of stress and trauma among its employees. Farragher and Bloom’s ‘Sanctuary Model’ (2010) could then be adapted to identify practices that would provide an organisational ‘sanctuary’ in which resilience may be enhanced.

Attempts to influence the culture of a professional discipline may be unsuccessful when it is deeply embedded and has remained unchanged for some time. However, in Scotland, adult social work is presented with a unique and timely opportunity to address some of the fundamental issues highlighted in this thesis, with discussion underway regarding the establishment of a ‘National Care Service’ (Scottish Government, 2021). This initiative arose from a recommendation following a major independent review of adult social care (Feeley, 2021) undertaken, in part, due to the Scottish Government’s recognition of the crisis in social care not only during the Covid-19 pandemic but preceding it. A consultation has now been carried out by the Scottish Government (2022) and, significantly, there is a recognition of the importance of ‘nurturing and strengthening’ (p.15) the social care workforce as an integral part of effective service delivery.

If a National Care Service were to be introduced in Scotland, it would be likely to entail significant restructuring, which the Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW, no date) warns may create turbulence for the profession particularly following the relatively recent changes in structure and governance brought about by the integration of health and social care. Certainly, according to the findings from my study, organisational restructure can have a detrimental impact on social workers’ resilience primarily through feeling deskilled, being inadequately consulted and having mutually supportive peer networks disrupted. Nonetheless, such fundamental restructure may also provide an opportunity to re-think the culture of adult social work in a way that would reflect the human and compassionate qualities that appear to be integral to resilience in the social work role as well as to effective service delivery. Returning again to Farragher and Bloom’s parallel processes (2010), a
commitment to nurturing organisational cultures and practices that support the resilience of social workers may usefully be guided by the key characteristics of respect, trust, empathy and compassion which social workers value highly and seek to convey in their relationships with service users.

**Promoting professional integrity**

Nurturing compassion in social work, according to the findings of my study, appears to be synonymous with ethical practice, and deeply embedded in a sense of professional integrity. Without such compassion, the participants often felt that they were not carrying out their role effectively, and threats to resilience soon emerged. Far from encouraging in the research findings is the extent to which attempts to maintain professional integrity, and associated resilience, conflicted with the practices and expectations of the organisation in both the cultural and structural domains of resilience. Certain characteristics of the managerialist culture were felt to prioritise cost effectiveness and organisational performance indicators over the welfare of service users and social workers. If social work has moved too far away from an ethos of compassion and human engagement towards a bureaucratically driven approach, as my study suggests, social workers may be in the position of having to act against organisational rules and procedures in order to practise in a way that they believe is ethical. This gives rise to further ethical challenges in terms of contravening organisational protocol, as well as fear of recrimination by managers. In contrast to the ‘win-win’ outcome in terms of increasing resilience through challenging situations (Padesky and Mooney, 2012), this appears to be more of a ‘lose-lose’ situation in the sense that whatever a social worker chooses to do, a toll is taken on their resilience. While much has been written about managerialist culture and its erosion of relationship-based approaches in social work, the links with resilience have not tended to be explored in depth. Further research to examine this connection would be helpful.

More subtly, attempts made by the organisation to support the emotional resilience of the participants of my study were sometimes ineffective as they conflicted with aspects of professional integrity. For example, an organisation may encourage the use of flexible working to enable employees to take sufficient breaks from work but allocate workloads that make this near impossible. A social worker who has a strong sense of professional integrity is not likely to derive resilience from taking a holiday when a service user is awaiting the worker’s intervention in order to be discharged from hospital. The prevalence of poor working conditions, such as heavy caseloads, is an issue that has been highlighted in recent research (Ravalier and Boichat, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2021) and appears to require urgent attention in order to sustain the workforce. However, if working conditions are not considered within a framework of professional integrity and ethical practice, some of the measures to
tackle these conditions may be unsuccessful. It is arguably imperative for policy makers and employers, when considering approaches to the resilience of social workers, to take into consideration the tensions that can arise for workers in managing their sense of responsibility to service users in conjunction with their own wellbeing.

The concept of organisational justice is highly relevant given that it concerns workers’ perception of equity and fairness in the practices of their employing agency, and is correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction and lower levels of burnout. There appears to be a great deal of good will on the part of committed social workers who strive to do their best for service users. However, this is at risk of being exploited by organisations. When social work practice is bound up in relationships and interpersonal engagement, this can be experienced as an exploitation of the self and a sense of one’s dispensability. Interactional justice, characterised by fair treatment on the part of managers and leaders, may contribute towards more ethical and compassionate leadership. Since the sense of being valued within the organisation seemed important yet elusive to the participants of my study, the connection between resilience and organisational justice may provide an enlightening framework for further research.

It is worth reiterating that social work practice is formally guided by the SSSC Codes of Practice (2016), which is service-user centred in its principles, promoting such traits as truthfulness, openness and honesty on the part of the social worker. However, the rhetoric arises more from a procedural perspective than a compassionate one. For example, Code 2.3 states that social workers must ‘respect confidential information and clearly explain my employer’s policies about confidentiality to people who use services and carers.’ While it would be unethical to argue against this principle, it is couched in terms of organisation policy rather than regard for the service user’s private life. Indeed, throughout the Codes of Practice, there is a great deal of reference to following organisational procedure, which may not be a useful guide to social workers who find that such procedures can be a source of ethical conflict in themselves. Furthermore, there are concerns that the Codes function primarily to hold social workers to account rather than to guide ethical practice (Simpson et al., 2020). Qualitative research into the extent to which the SSSC Codes of Practice are experienced by social workers as supporting and informing ethical practice would be a valuable and related area of research. BASW’s Code of Ethics (2014), though not binding as the SSSC Codes of Practice are, provides more detail on the nature of ethical practice and defines professional integrity in some detail (p.8). Both this and the proposals for a National Care Service in Scotland advocate for a human rights-based approach to social work practice which, while of the utmost importance and ethically sound in itself, does not explicitly incorporate the essence of compassion that seems to represent ethical and effective practice for social
workers. Again, the consultation on the National Care Service proposals offers a unique opportunity to reconfirm some of the core values of social work and establish these as integral to the profession.

Overall, in the light of the apparent connection between emotional resilience and professional integrity, it may be pertinent to promote the development and practice of ‘ethical intelligence’ (Carey and Mazerolle, 2016, p.5), which denotes the capacity to respond reflectively and critically to complex situations in order to support service users towards positive outcomes. In view of the ‘systems’ approach to supporting the emotional resilience of social workers that has been taken throughout this thesis, this concept may usefully be considered in relation to organisations as well as to individuals, just as emotional intelligence may be applied to both (Goleman, 1998; Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Research into the concept of ethical intelligence in relation to individuals and organisations, and its impact on resilience may therefore be a fruitful area of further enquiry. At the very least, an ethically intelligent organisation could be seen as one which recognises, promotes and accommodates the place of ethical practice in social work and, in doing so, contributes towards a sense of professional integrity, greater wellbeing and the enhanced emotional resilience of social workers.

9.4 Final Conclusions

In this study, I attempted to unearth the main factors that support and enhance the emotional resilience of social workers in adult services. Despite explicitly designing the phrasing of the interview and diary questions to invite comments both on sources of adversity and resilience, the participants spoke a great deal more about adversity. This was perceived as emanating primarily from organisational factors in the culture and structure of social work organisations as well as aspects of the wider profession, in particular the managerialist approach to social work practice in adult services. In such a climate, notions of resilience as thriving and flourishing are unlikely to be meaningful. Certainly, the metaphors of siege and battle used by some of the participants suggest that thriving may not be within reach when survival is the main concern.

This thesis has presented a holistic framework of emotional resilience based on a ‘systems’ approach, which recognises that resilience may be nurtured in different domains that intersect and impact on one another. Therefore, while social workers may exercise personal agency and autonomy in maintaining their own resilience, it is unlikely to be sustained without due attention to the other domains. The framework recognises that there are diverse ways to support emotional resilience. These are likely to be somewhat individual in the sense that each social worker is uniquely positioned
within their own ‘system’, entailing a range of internal and external factors that impact on their experience of adversity and resilience. What underpins these diverse approaches and forms a foundation for resilience, is the importance of carrying out the social work role in a compassionate way and with a sense of professional integrity. Indeed, these can be seen as inseparable; compassionate social work is at the heart of ethical practice. By embedding these core qualities of social work into daily practice and the culture of the profession, resilience may be brought more fully into the light.
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Appendix 1: Literature Search Results

Appendix 1 is a table of results from the literature search. An explanation of the search terms, parameters, eligibility and inclusion/exclusion criteria is provided in Chapter Two.

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</table>

N= Number of sources

*ASSIA (Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts)  
**DiscoverEd (University of Edinburgh library database)  
***IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences)
Appendix 2: Key Themes from the Literature and Research Findings

Appendix 2 is a conceptual map of the themes associated with resilience that were identified from the literature (discussed in Chapter Two) and the findings of my study (discussed in Chapters Four to Nine).
Appendix 3: Interview Topic Guide (Social Workers)

Research Project Title

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

- Employment;
  - Job title
  - Length of time in current post
  - Length of time as a social worker overall
  - Number of hours a week worked in current post
  - Role and main tasks

- Understanding of the term ‘emotional resilience’ in relation to the role of a social worker in adult services.

- Do you think it’s important to be emotionally resilient in this role?

- Aspects of the role that require emotional resilience.

- Aspects of the role that provide job satisfaction.

- Personal experience of developing and sustaining emotional resilience (personal strategies and strategies at work)

- The role of the team and organisation in supporting social workers to develop and sustain emotional resilience.
Appendix 4: Emotional Resilience Diary

Emotional Resilience Diary

Thank you very much for agreeing to complete this diary, following your participation in the interview.

I am requesting five diary entries from each participant over a two-week period. However, if this is too time-consuming, any number of entries would be very much appreciated. The reason for this number and time scale is to provide a picture of how emotional resilience is experienced in the day-to-day working lives of social workers.

A format for the diary is provided on the following pages, which you can complete on paper or electronically. Please write as much or as little as you wish in response to the questions. Instructions on how to submit your diaries is provided at the end of this document.

This study aims to explore social workers’ own understanding of emotional resilience rather than beginning with a definition. Before you complete the diaries, it may help you to write down what emotional resilience means to you.

Emotional resilience is:

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CONFIDENTIALITY

Please anonymise your diary entries so that you, your colleagues and service users are not identifiable. Share only as much information as you can in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all concerned.
DIARY ENTRY

What happened at work today?

How did it make you feel?

To what extent did you feel resilient?

What personally helped you to be resilient?

What aspects of the team and organisation helped you to be resilient?

If you did not feel resilient, what do you think would have helped?

Please send your diary entries to me at the following email address: xxxxx
Or you can post them to me at the following address: xxxxx

Many thanks for your assistance with this research. Your time and participation are very much appreciated.
Appendix 5: Interview Topic Guide (Managers)

Research Project Title

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

- Employment;
  - Job title
  - Professional background
  - Length of time in current post
  - Length of time as a social work manager overall

- Understanding of the term ‘emotional resilience’ in relation to the role of a social worker in local authority adult services.

- Aspects of the role of a social worker that require emotional resilience.

- The role of the team and organisation in supporting the emotional resilience of social workers.

- What more could be done to support emotional resilience, if anything?

- Discussion of themes identified by social workers as having an effect on resilience. These will be written on cards and you will be asked to identify whether you think they are a personal or organisational responsibility, or both.
Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet (Social Workers)

Research Project Title:

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

My name is xxxxx and I am conducting this research for my PhD in Social Work at the University of Edinburgh. I am delighted that you are giving consideration to taking part in this research project and would like to give you some more information about what would be involved.

What is the project about?

The resilience of social workers is important for their own wellbeing and to enable them to provide effective services to those who need them. The purpose of the project is to explore how social workers understand emotional resilience in relation to their role, how they develop and sustain emotional resilience and how the teams and organisations in which they are based may support the development of resilience.

Why have I been approached?

You have been approached because the project is focusing on social workers currently working in practice teams within local authority adult services.

Do I have to take part?

Your organisation has given me permission to contact you but it is now entirely up to you whether you take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a Participant Consent Form (see attached) before the interview to confirm that you wish to participate.

You may choose to withdraw from the project up to four weeks following the interview and you will not be required to give a reason for this. After this, the data gathered from your participation are likely to have been processed and will be difficult to extract from the project.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

Participation in this project has two stages. Firstly, I will interview you on the topic of the research. The interview will take place at a time and venue convenient to you and will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. It will be audio recorded. A broad outline of the questions is attached however the format of the interview is flexible to allow for open discussion, and you may choose not to answer any of the questions asked. No prior preparation is expected.

Secondly, if you feel you can commit the time, I will request that you complete a series of five diary entries over a two-week period to record your personal experiences of resilience in your role as a social worker. There is no prescribed length and you may write as much or as little as you wish. A format for the diary entries will be provided at the interview and further guidance given.
What will happen to the information I provide?

Your personal data (name and contact details) will be kept confidential and will be stored separately from your interview responses and diary entries so that you cannot be identified personally.

Only myself as the researcher conducting this project will have access to the audio recordings of interviews and these will be destroyed once the study has been examined. Diary entries and written transcripts of the interviews will be retained but anonymised by removing any identifying information including your name.

The information provided by you will be used for my PhD study. The findings of the research will be summarised and reported in my thesis and this may include direct quotes from interviews and diary entries, with all identifying information removed. Potentially, the findings may also be used for other purposes in the future such as academic publications and training.

The themes arising from interviews with social workers will be discussed with social work managers from various local authorities in a later phase of this study. The themes discussed will be general and no information will be shared that would make you identifiable in any way.

Please only share as much information as you feel comfortable and able to, in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of yourself, colleagues and service users. There are some limits to confidentiality: if what is said in the interview indicates that you, or someone else, is at significant risk of harm, I will have to break confidentiality and consult with my research supervisor about the appropriate action to take. If possible, I will tell you if I need to do this.

Are there any risks?

There are no risks anticipated as a result of participation in this project. However, if you experience any distress during the interview you may choose to cease your involvement at any time. If you feel distressed following the interview or completing the diary entries, you are encouraged to discuss any issues with your own supervisor if appropriate and/or contact your organisation’s counselling service.

Who has reviewed the ethics of the project?

This project has received formal ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh.

Where can I obtain further information about the project if I need it?

If you have any questions about the project, please contact me on the phone number or email address below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and giving consideration to taking part in this project.
Appendix 7: Participant Information Sheet (Managers)

Research Project Title:

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

My name is xxxxx and I am conducting this research for my PhD in Social Work at the University of Edinburgh. I am delighted that you are giving consideration to taking part in this research project and would like to give you some more information about what would be involved.

What is the project about?

The resilience of social workers is important for their own wellbeing and to enable them to provide effective services to those who need them. The purpose of the project is to explore how social workers understand emotional resilience in relation to their role, how they develop and sustain emotional resilience, and how the teams and organisations in which they are based may support the development of resilience.

Why have I been approached?

You have been approached because the project is focusing on social workers currently working in practice teams within local authority adult services. As well as interviewing social workers about their emotional resilience and requesting that they complete five diary entries on their day-to-day experiences, I also plan to interview social work managers. The main purpose of this will be to present the themes raised by social workers and gain the perspective of managers on how organisations and teams may support resilience in relation to these particular themes.

Do I have to take part?

Your organisation has given me permission to contact you but it is now entirely up to you whether you take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a Participant Consent Form (see attached) before the interview to confirm that you wish to participate.

You may choose to withdraw from the project up to four weeks following the interview and you will not be required to give a reason for this. After this, the data gathered from your participation are likely to have been processed and will be difficult to extract from the project.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

I will interview you on the topic of the research. The interview will take place at a time and venue convenient to you and will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. It will be audio recorded. I will ask you some general questions about resilience as well as seeking your perspectives on the main themes arising from the interviews and diaries completed by social workers. A broad outline of the questions is attached (see Interview Topic Guide) however the format of the interview is flexible to allow for open discussion, and you may choose not to answer any of the questions asked. No prior preparation is expected.
What will happen to the information I provide?

Your personal data (name and contact details) will be kept confidential and will be stored separately from your interview responses so that you cannot be identified personally.

Only myself as the researcher conducting this project will have access to the audio recordings of interviews and these will be destroyed once the study has been examined. Written transcripts of the interviews will be retained but anonymised by removing any identifying information including your name.

The information provided by you will be used for my PhD study. The findings of the research will be summarised and reported in my thesis and this may include direct quotes from interviews with all identifying information removed. Potentially, the findings may also be used for other purposes in the future such as academic publications and training.

Please only share as much information as you feel comfortable and able to, in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of yourself, colleagues and service users. There are some limits to confidentiality: if what is said in the interview indicates that you, or someone else, is at significant risk of harm, I will have to break confidentiality and consult with my research supervisor about the appropriate action to take. If possible, I will tell you if I need to do this.

Are there any risks?

There are no risks anticipated as a result of participation in this project. However, if you experience any distress during the interview you may choose to cease your involvement at any time. If you feel distressed following the interview, you are encouraged to discuss any issues with your own supervisor if appropriate and/or contact your organisation’s counselling service.

Who has reviewed the ethics of the project?

This project has received formal ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh.

Where can I obtain further information about the project if I need it?

If you have any questions about the project, please contact me on the phone number or email address below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and giving consideration to taking part in this project.
Appendix 8: Consent Form (Social Workers)

Research Project Title:

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

Before you consent to participating in this research project, please read the Participant Information Sheet dated 15/3/19.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be provided with a paper copy of this form at the interview and asked to sign it if you agree with the statements below.

If you have any queries about the consent form or your participation in the project, please contact the researcher, xxxxx, whose contact details can be found on the information sheet.

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet dated 15/3/19.

2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my involvement in it, and I fully understand what is expected of me.

3. I understand that no personal details such as my name and contact information will be revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

4. I understand that my interview will be audio recorded and made into an anonymised written transcript.

5. I understand that audio recordings will be kept until the research project has been examined.

6. I understand that information and quotations from my interview may be used in the PhD thesis and that these will be completely anonymised.

7. I will share only as much information as I am comfortable with and able to, bearing in mind the confidentiality of service users and colleagues.

8. I understand that any information I provide will remain strictly confidential unless it is thought that there is a risk of harm to myself or others, in which case the researcher may need to share this information with the research supervisor.

9. I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw up to four weeks following the interview without giving a reason.

10. I understand that by signing this form I am indicating my agreement with the above statements and to taking part in this research project.

11. I am willing to be contacted again regarding this research.

YES / NO (delete as appropriate)
12. I would like to be provided with a summary of the findings of this research (please note that this is likely to be a year after the interview).
YES / NO (delete as appropriate)

13. If Yes, please provide your preferred contact details

..............................................................................................................................................................

Signatures

Participant:
Name:
Signature:
Date:

Researcher:
Name:
Signature:
Date:
Appendix 9: Consent Form (Managers)

Research Project Title:

Creating thriving teams; enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services.

Before you consent to participating in this research project, please read the Participant Information Sheet dated 14/10/19.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be provided with a paper copy of this form at the interview and asked to sign it if you agree with the statements below.

If you have any queries about the consent form or your participation in the project, please contact the researcher, xxxxx, whose contact details can be found on the information sheet.

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet dated 14/10/19.

2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my involvement in it, and I fully understand what is expected of me.

3. I understand that no personal details such as my name and contact information will be revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

4. I understand that my interview will be audio recorded and made into an anonymised written transcript.

5. I understand that audio recordings will be kept until the research project has been examined.

6. I understand that information and quotations from my interview may be used in the PhD thesis and that these will be completely anonymised.

7. I will share only as much information as I am comfortable with and able to, bearing in mind the confidentiality of service users and colleagues.

8. I understand that any information I provide will remain strictly confidential unless it is thought that there is a risk of harm to myself or others, in which case the researcher may need to share this information with the research supervisor.

9. I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw up to four weeks following the interview without giving a reason.

10. I understand that by signing this form I am indicating my agreement with the above statements and to taking part in this research project.

11. I am willing to be contacted again regarding this research.
   YES / NO (delete as appropriate)
12. I would like to be provided with a summary of the findings of this research (please note that this is likely to be a year after the interview). 
YES / NO (delete as appropriate)

13. If Yes, please provide your preferred contact details

........................................................................................................................................................................

Signatures

Participant:

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher:

Name:

Signature:

Date: