



PSDP—Resources and Tools: The system of concern

Introduction

Legislation and policy guidance in England requires professionals to work together to safeguard and protect the welfare of children (HM Government 2004; 2018). However, research into serious case reviews has shown that this can be difficult to achieve and there have been shortcomings in effective multi-agency working when things have gone wrong (Brandon et al, 2009; Ofsted, 2010; Sidebottom et al, 2016).

Sometimes complex family dynamics can also play out in the communication between agencies, or between agencies and the family. For example, a breakdown in family relationships can be mirrored in a similar breakdown in the working relationships between professionals. Where systemic difficulties in jointly managing risk and interprofessional working are evident, it can be harder to keep a focus on the needs of the child.

For many families, the quality of the service received is dependent upon how effectively different professionals work together (Barrett et al, 2005). Therefore, supporting practitioners to explore and navigate the multi-agency landscape is an essential component of effective supervision.

The 'system of concern' is an idea introduced by Lang and McAdam (1996a; 1996b), which brings the 'helping' system that gets created around a family that is presenting with a 'problem', clearly into focus. The idea of a 'system' helps us to focus on the patterns of behaviour and communication that develop between and within a group of professionals and the child / family they are working with. It also

allows practitioners to explore different perspectives and intervene in this system of concern to reflect on whether or not it is helpful to the progress of ongoing work with the family.

One of the implications of moving to an evolving systems approach is that the supervisor and social worker, and other involved professionals, all have a stake in the system of concern. However, as a practice supervisor you hold a position of power in relation to the rights and duties you hold in relation to the work that is carried out. Exploring the system of concern and intervening in the stories lived and told with respect to the identified 'problem' can help to move the work forward in a positive way. Becoming curious about all the different ideas that are part of the system of concern can help practitioners to become reflexive about the impact of working with other professionals, and to reflect on ways in which they may have been drawn into unhelpful communication patterns themselves. Consequently, the system of concern is helpful to prompt reflection in supervision about ways in which effective multi-agency working can be achieved.

This learning tool provides a brief explanation about the concept of a system of concern and how it relates to supervision, with some guided questions for practice supervisors.

What is a ‘system of concern’?

An approach that is used mostly in current systemic thinking is an *evolving systems approach*. This recognises that, as social workers and supervisors, you are part of the ‘system of concern’, and that this system is evolving and changing all the time. In this way of thinking, there is a shift away from the idea that systems create problems to the idea that problems create systems around them. In the same way that everyone in the Grimm’s fairy tale who touches the golden goose becomes stuck, this can also happen in families and within the systems that surround them, which aim to help and support them.

The concept of the ‘system of concern’ holds the idea that everyone who has a concern about the ‘problem’ is therefore part of the system that surrounds it, and has ideas about what is happening in the family or what could make the situation safer. This may include, for example, the person who sought help, statutory workers, police, nurses, teachers, friends, neighbours and even anxious pets. Along with the ‘helping system’, ie the social worker and their supervisor and wider team, this system forms what Bateson (1972) termed as an ‘ecology of ideas’, all of which forms the system of concern.

So we’re moving away from the idea that families create problems and towards thinking instead about the way a system gets created around a presenting problem, and it is into *this* that we intervene. In systemic practice, thinking in this way is referred to as taking a second order position in which the observer is both part of the system and capable of influencing a process of change within it so that the system can re-organise and function in a different way.

How the system of concern may relate to supervision

Tony Morrison's seminal 4x4x4 model for supervision sets out the importance of considering multi-disciplinary partners and families as *stakeholders* for supervision, along with social workers themselves and social work organisations. Morrison (2005) suggests that a well supervised social worker:

is clear about their role	understands partners' roles	communicates better with partners	has accurate expectations of partners
is more confident in multi-disciplinary discussions	is more able to negotiate with partners	is more able to resolve conflicts with partners	is supported in acting as a key worker.

This indicates that conversations about the multi-agency context are an essential part of supervision. The practice supervisor and the dialogue generated in supervision can in themselves, therefore, be considered part of the system of concern and intervention. So the beliefs and stories of the supervisor enter the ecology of ideas of the family and contribute to the ecology of ideas created by the wider professional system. Therefore, it is important for supervisors to consider how they are positioned within the system of concern, and how their position contributes to the system that has evolved around the presenting problem.

The ecology of ideas can also set up a dynamic where professionals talk *about* the family rather than be transparent with them. Therefore, it is helpful for the practice supervisor to utilise supervision

conversations with the social worker to recognise the patterns of relationships between professionals, identifying where these are likely to compromise the welfare of families and the safety of children and taking immediate and corrective action where necessary.

In other words, supervision can be used to help the social worker map out the system of concern and examine interprofessional dynamics and ways of challenging their own position, or that of other professionals, within the system of concern. This approach locates supervision as a means of intervening in relationships, families, multi-agency contexts and organisations, and can also help social workers to think about what kind of system of concern they could create.

Thinking about the concept of the system of concern, here are some questions to consider in your role as practice supervisor:

What resonates with you about the idea of the system of concern?	In thinking about a particular family, what is the impact of the complexity of this system around the child?	How does it help?
What do you think of the idea that it's important for you to consider how you're positioned within the system of concern, and that your beliefs and stories about the family play a significant role in shaping it?	What are the challenges associated with navigating this idea?	How do you support social workers to navigate this in supervision?

Using the system of concern in supervision

The system of concern and the practice supervisor position:

Recognising that the practice supervisor, and their beliefs and stories, will form part of the ecology of ideas about a family and the presenting problem is an important starting point when applying the system of concern concept to supervision. Working through the questions below can help you to think about your position within the system and how you might consciously position yourself to influence the system of concern.

Questions for the practice supervisor:

How might factors such as your gender, age, race, religion, culture, class, sexuality, sexual orientation and other social characteristics influence the stories and beliefs you bring to the system of concern?

What value do you place on the voice of different partners within the system of concern and whose voice do you tend to privilege, and why?

Imagine you are confident that you've overcome blind spots to the way you see presenting problems with families. What needed to happen to get to this position?

What do you notice in yourself and your team members when there is confidence and congruence in the system of concern? What can you learn from this for situations that are more challenging?

Thinking about the different stakeholders of supervision, ie children and families, multi-agency partners, your supervisees or your organisation, what would they say about how you position yourself within the system of concern? What advice might they give you about making your contribution more influential or supportive to them?

The system of concern in supervision:

There are ways in which the practice supervisor can use the ideas about a system of concern to analyse practice in supervision, and to help the practitioner prepare to have discussions with other professionals about it.

Mapping the whole system of concern including family, neighbours, friends and professionals, creates a map of concerned people who all need to be considered in constructing a way forward. Creating a visual map together in supervision that shows all professionals working with the family is a valuable tool in supervision. It allows you and the supervisee to focus on the ways in which different members of the system influence the developing ecology of ideas about the family.

The questions below are a guide to help you consider how you might have conversations with practitioners in supervision, to enable them to think about their position within the system of concern and how they might influence or challenge the positions of others.

Questions for supervision:

Thinking about the practitioner, how might factors such as their gender, age, race, religion, culture, class, sexuality, sexual orientation and other social characteristics, influence the stories and beliefs they bring to the system of concern? How might you explore this with them?

How might we bring the multi-agency group into supervision more? How can we achieve this?

What value does the supervisee place on the voice of different partners within the system of concern? Whose voice do they tend to privilege, and why? How might you explore this with them?

When thinking about a family where there is a lot of 'professional anxiety', how might you explore this with the practitioner and use the system of concern concept to make sense of it? What support might they need from you to address particular issues?

How might you help a supervisee to acknowledge if the system of concern is not helpful? What support might they need from you to consider the ways in which feedback about their experience can be shared with other professionals in order to invite dialogue about how they might work more effectively with each other and the family?

How could you support the supervisee to consider how ideas about difference and diversity may shape the beliefs and stories about the family?

Other ways you can use this tool

You could present the ideas from this tool, along with the narrated presentation, to your team and pose some of the questions above for them to explore.

You could bring the idea to a group supervision when examining the work with one family, invite different team members to take up the positions of the different stakeholders within the system of concern, and speak about the family from that perspective.

You could bring this tool to supervision and use the questions to guide a conversation with a practitioner about individual children and families.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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