

**‘Treading water and trying to keep your head  
afloat’: How can we improve the experience of  
participants on Year 2 of the Frontline  
Programme?**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional  
Doctorate**

**In**

**Advanced Social Work and Social Research**

**Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust**

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**Date of submission for examination: September 2023**

## Abstract

In their first year of qualified social work practice and in their second year on the programme, Frontline participants carry out first-person action research. They draw on at least one of the Frontline practice models (systemic approaches, motivational interviewing and parenting support) to explore and develop their practice in line with their values. This thesis describes my own action research project, carried out in my role as the curriculum lead for the Frontline Year 2 programme. It asks the question 'How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?' This question emerged from a professional dilemma; my belief in the value of carrying out action research, alongside awareness that the second year of the programme was emotionally and academically challenging.

As a small-scale qualitative research project, this study focuses on emotional experience. A blend of methods, including free association narrative interviews, co-research, voice-centred relational and thematic analysis were used when interviewing nine ex-participants (fellows) of the programme and analysing the data. The data is viewed through a critical realist (Houston, 2010) and psycho-social lens, considering myself and research participants as defended subjects (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Research interviews took place between December 2021 and May 2022.

As an action research project, the research had both investigatory and emancipatory aims. The latter were enacted through the co-creation, with research participants, of one-page stories describing their experience of the programme. This archival knowledge (Epston, 1999) was shared with current participants of the programme. In addition, themes emerging from the data were used to shape and develop the design

and delivery of the Year 2 programme. Future plans to improve participants' experience include the teaching of foundational psychoanalytic concepts to build awareness of the impact of unconscious processes on emotional experience.

The study demonstrates the value of drawing on student narratives of emotional experience when planning and delivering social work programmes. It also makes the case for curricula and organisational cultures that acknowledge the emotional nature of the social work task. This, in turn, can support students to make sense of and manage their emotional responses to practice and practice-based research.

In addition to the aim of local improvement, the study's findings hold relevance beyond the Frontline programme, relating to the emotional experience of early career social workers and the capacity to complete practice-based research. Emerging themes highlight the influence of wider societal discourses on the capacity to show vulnerability and seek support, as well as the importance of containing spaces and roles, not only for emotional well-being, but for 'research-mindedness'.

## Glossary

Frontline programme	A fast-track training programme for child and family social workers in England. Participants gain their social work qualification in one year, whilst working in a local authority.
Year 2 of the Frontline programme	The second year of the programme, when participants are working as qualified child and family social workers. They have the option of undertaking a master's programme.
Frontline participant	The name given to students of Year 1 and Year 2 of the programme
Frontline fellow	The name given to students who have completed the Frontline programme
Summer Institute	The first five weeks of the Frontline programme consisting of 25 day of academic teaching which is completed before participants start in their local authority placement.
Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)	A nationwide, local authority delivered programme, to support social workers in their first year of practice.
ASYE coordinator	A social worker employed by a local authority to coordinate the delivery of the ASYE programme and support ASYE social workers
Frontline curriculum lead for Year 2	The role for designing and coordinating the delivery of the Year 2 programme
Intercalation policy	The policy which enables Frontline participants to defer a year of the programme in exceptional circumstances.
Frontline unit	A group of four to five participants placed in a local authority, under the guidance of a consultant social worker in Year 1 of the programme.
Consultant social worker	A social worker employed by the local authority who is line manager and practice educator for a group of Frontline participants in Year 1 of the programme. They are the official case holder for all work allocated to Frontline participants.
Practice Educator	Qualified social worker who oversees the training of student social workers in

	their practice placement and recommends whether the student has passed or failed the placement.
Frontline practice tutor	A social worker, employed by Frontline, who provides academic support to three to four units. They attend group supervision at unit meetings and deliver teaching to the unit and at twenty-one recall days held through Year 1. They provide dissertation supervision in Year 2 of the programme.
Reflexive groups	A self-organising group for Year 2 participants where they continue to meet with their unit colleagues from Year 1 of the programme, to reflect on the process of completing research and for the purposes of peer support
Reflecting team	A reflecting team is an intervention, developed by Tom Andersen, which is used in systemic family therapy. Clinicians observe a family therapy session, often from behind a one-way screen. They then discuss their observations as a way of providing feedback to the family. The family then provide the clinicians with feedback on their observations. This model of working has been adapted for use by reflexive groups at Frontline. One participant presents an aspect of their research, perhaps a dilemma, or an extract of data. After asking clarifying questions, the group then devise open questions to ask the presenter, to help them explore the issue or data they presented. The team then discuss what they have heard, as a way of providing feedback to the presenter, who then provides their feedback to the group.
Programme Management Team	Staff team at Frontline tasked with the management of the academic programme, for example, timetabling, marking allocation, processing applications for academic deadline extensions, collating results for exam boards.
Partnership and placement team	Team at Frontline responsible for allocating participants to placements, as well as developing and maintaining

	relationships with local authority partners.
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### Acronyms used in the text

ASYE	Assessed and supported year in employment
CSW	Consultant social worker
NQSW	Newly qualified social worker
PMT	Programme management team
PPM	Partnership and placement manager
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
LA	Local Authority
VCRM	Voice-centred relational method
FANI	Free association narrative interview
LGBTQ+	Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Trans Queer plus

## Acknowledgements

I am fortunate to have had the support of many people as I completed this research and wrote up my thesis. Firstly, I would like to thank the nine fellows who generously gave their time to take part in the research. I am grateful, too, to Frontline for supporting me to complete this doctorate, with financial support and through protected time to study. My peers on the course, Becky, Bec, Debbie, Mary, Natalie and Sharna have been a constant source of inspiration, friendship, support and learning. We bonded through the strange experience of the group relations conference and have never looked back. I am particularly grateful to my sister Claire, who provided me with a 'writer's retreat' in her beautiful home, allowing me to escape from working in my bedroom, where I had spent so much time in lockdown. Thanks, too, go to my supervisors, Tanya Moore and David Forbes whose support, guidance and encouragement has been invaluable. Finally, I count myself extremely privileged to have been taught and supervised by Andrew Cooper before his untimely death. I learnt so much from Andrew. His contribution to social work is immeasurable.

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# 1 Introduction

This thesis describes an action research project that I completed as a doctoral student of the Tavistock and Portman, while working as the curriculum lead for Year 2 of the Frontline programme. The aims of the research are expressed in the main research question 'How can we improve and learn from the experience of participants on Year 2 of the Frontline programme?' The dual purposes of the research, to improve the experience of Year 2 participants of the programme, and to consider the relevance of the study to the wider social work community and social work education, are encapsulated in this question. In addition, the study is organised in relation to the following sub-questions:

- What are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?
- What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers?
- What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme tell us about the capacity for practice-based research and research-mindedness in early career social workers?

With a focus on emotional experience, the research extends knowledge relating to the experiences of early career social work and completing practitioner research. This is achieved through an examination of processes across the 'domains' of society (Houston, 2010) and their impact on emotional experience and the capacity for 'research-mindedness'.

As indicated in my main question, action research methodology aims not only to investigate, but also to produce 'action' or change. So, in addition to the questions above, which I have titled 'investigatory' questions, my research also asks the following questions:

- How can fellows' stories of their emotional experience of Year 2 shape the planning and delivery of the programme?
- To what extent can fellows' stories provide a resource for learning and reflection for staff and participants engaged in the programme?

These questions are focussed on the research's aim of improving the experience of Year 2 participants of the Frontline programme. I have classified them as 'emancipatory' questions, reflecting the emancipatory character of action research methodology (Boog, 2003), which has historically focussed on improving the capacities and situations of dis-empowered or marginalised groups. Frontline participants might not be considered to be disempowered or marginalised. Indeed, it has been argued that that they are privileged in comparison to social work students training on other routes (Hanley, 2021). However, as will be argued below, their situation as newly qualified social workers, completing research on their practice is a challenging one. While the primary aim of these questions is change and improvement at a 'local' level, answers will also contribute to the wider knowledge base of social work education.

I completed the research within my own organisation, so I begin this introduction outlining the context in which the research took place, starting with my professional background. The focus and rationale for the research are presented, followed by a brief outline of the thesis structure.

## **1.1 My professional background**

I qualified as a social worker at the tender age of twenty-four. Three years earlier the Barclay Report (1982) advocated for a model of 'community social work' and this model heavily influenced my training, my outlook on social work and the trajectory of my career. The majority of my working life has been in community-based projects, funded through the third sector; working, for example, in three Sure Start/Children Centre programmes, a young carers project and a family intervention project. In the busyness of working and raising a family, a love for ideas and learning lay dormant until I undertook a post-graduate leadership course in my early fifties. This lit a spark and prompted a change of course. I went on to do a master's course in Early Years, which included the completion of an action research dissertation. This in turn sparked an interest in research, leading me to apply for a research position at a university and then a teaching post on the Frontline social work programme.

## **1.2 My current organisation and role**

I started work at Frontline in 2016 as practice tutor, going on to be a principal practice tutor and then joining the curriculum team, as the lead for Year 2 of the programme in 2020. The Frontline programme is a fast-track social work course, where 'participants' qualify as child and family social workers after one year, whilst working full-time in a local authority, under the supervision of a consultant social worker. In the first year of the programme, participants are taught three 'practice models', systemic social work, motivational interviewing and parenting interventions, drawing on attachment theory, trauma-informed and mentalisation-based approaches.

In the second year of the programme, when participants are employed by their host authority, they can undertake a master's programme. They are required to complete a piece of first-person action research, which involves researching their own practice. Using at least one of the 'practice models' they make changes to their practice, so that it better aligns with their values and then seek feedback from families and/or professionals. The overarching aim of the programme in the second year is to support participants' continued and developing use of relational practice models in the more challenging context of qualified practice, when working with an increased caseload and higher levels of risk.

The Year 2 programme is taught over eight days between November and June, with participants required to apply for ethical approval for their research from January and to submit their completed dissertation in August. In addition to attending teaching days, participants receive a minimum of five dissertation supervisions and are entitled to six independent coaching sessions. Reflexive groups, made up of four to five Frontline participants, meet together at least five times. Groups are organised by participants themselves and are occasionally attended by dissertation supervisors. The reflecting team structure (Anderson, 1987) is utilised, with participants presenting a dilemma from their research or research data, in order to benefit from the reflections and perspectives of others.

In my role as curriculum lead for the Year 2 programme I am responsible for the overall design and delivery of the programme, which I teach in collaboration with Frontline staff across four regions of England.

### **1.3 The focus of my research**

The focus of this study arose from my organisational context and a personal and professional dilemma relating to my role. I joined Frontline as an enthusiastic and passionate action researcher and advocated for this methodology for the Year 2 programme. I am drawn to action research's values and 'ontological commitments' which McNiff describes as 'democratic, egalitarian, morally committed, dialogical, inclusional and relational' (2017, p.39). These commitments, I believe, align with social work values and relationship-based practice (Ruch et al, 2018). In addition, I value the opportunity that action research provides for participants to develop and embed the relational practice skills they learn in Year 1 of the programme.

This commitment to a research methodology that focusses on practice improvement stems from my own experience. My training enabled me to be relatively proficient in helping in practical ways, but my relational interventions were relatively ineffective. I spent a lot of time trying to persuade families I worked with to do things they were reluctant to do, such as attending parenting programmes or drug and alcohol services, often with limited effect. Teaching on the Frontline programme and observing participants' practice, I witnessed something more effective and impactful. Using reflections and affirmations (Miller and Rollnick, 2013), helped families to feel heard and understood and could be used to elicit their own motivations for change. Genograms (McGoldrick et al, 2020) and the use of strategic, reflexive and circular questions (Tomm, 1988) enabled families to explore and think differently about their relationships and intergenerational beliefs and behaviours (Byng-Hall, 1995). Advocating for first-person action research in Year 2 of the programme, I aimed to strengthen participants' use of relational practice in their first year as qualified social

workers. I wonder if my commitment to this methodology is informed, in part, by guilt about my own past practice and a desire to repair this past by supporting better practice in the present (Zagier-Roberts, 1994).

Despite my beliefs in the value of first-person action research, I am also aware that the programme can be emotionally and academically challenging when combined with the demands for newly qualified workers in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). The challenges of the Year 2 programme are also of concern to my organisation, due to the relatively high levels of 'attrition' from the programme, when participants remain in their social work posts but fail to complete the master's programme.

The Frontline programme is funded by the Department for Education and is required to bid for continuations of its contract. Prior to bidding for the 2024 contract, the organisation proposed a review of the Year 1 and 2 curricula. The 2023 cohort of participants will be offered a choice of completing an action research project or a literature review, with the aim of reducing the level of attrition from the programme. However, prior to this curriculum change, my research focuses on the participant experience of completing action research. In addition to this focus on local experience, the study also explores issues of concern to the wider social work community, notably the challenges of intellectual work, research and critical thinking, for early career social workers.

#### **1.4 Rationale for the research and the epistemological and ontological approach**

Frontline routinely carries out large scale satisfaction surveys of Year 2 participants. These provide valuable quantitative data relating to participants' experience of the programme. This study, however, takes a different approach. In order to answer my question, I have undertaken a small-scale action research study, informed by a psychosocial lens. It adopts qualitative methodologies to explore the experiences of nine 'fellows' (ex-participants) of the programme, five who completed and four who withdrew. As an action research study, my research has an emancipatory as well as an investigatory purpose. As its name suggests action research requires researchers to take action in addition to exploring phenomena (McNiff, 2017). Reason and Bradbury describe action research as:

'a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes... bringing together action and reflection theory and practice in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people' (2008, p.4).

Action research's aim is to create a preferred future based on an investigation of the present (McNiff, 2017). The choice of action research as my overarching methodology was informed by an ontology that sees reality as something that can be created rather than found. From a social constructivist lens, realities are 'multiple, mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.110). Social constructionism widens the lens from individual meaning-making to the social construction of meaning through relationships and communication between people (Hedges, 2010). The aim of my

research, to not only understand, but to 'reconstruct' and make change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) reflects a constructivist and social constructionist epistemology.

As an 'insider' researcher (McNiff, 2017) I positioned myself as a 'passionate participant' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.112) in the research process, rather than a dispassionate observer. This position required cognisance of the power held in my role as well as my commitments and values and their influence on the research process. With the support of my supervisors and doctoral seminar group, I aimed to adopt a reflexive stance to the research process (Ide and Beddoe, 2023), mindful too of unconscious processes that I may not be fully aware of (Hollway & Jefferson 2000) in order to open myself up to new knowledge and learning.

As a psycho-social study, the research draws on ideas from systems and object-relations theory, with the former drawing our focus to interpersonal relationships and context and the latter to interpersonal, and unconscious emotional experiences (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). My aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the emotional experience of the Year 2 programme which quantitative data, gathered in the bi-annual surveys completed by Frontline, could not encompass.

This focus on 'emotional experience' aligns with a body of psycho-social research which asserts that 'the emotional experience of the socially situated subject of policy is...capable of disclosing dimensions of policy that are invisible or marginalised' (Cooper, 2018, p.174). In line with the emancipatory commitments of action research, and my psycho-social approach, I drew on my increased understanding of the *emotional experience* of Year 2 participants in order to make changes in *policy, design and delivery* of the programme, to improve that experience for current and future participants. In addition, my exploration of the emotional experience of

completing research in early career social work makes a significant contribution to deepening knowledge in the wider professional field, beyond the Frontline programme.

### **1.5 Timing of the research**

Research interviews were carried out between December 2021 and May 2022, at a time when the global COVID-19 pandemic was still influencing daily life in the UK. Eight out of nine research participants completed Year 2 of the programme between November 2020 and August 2021, with one completing in the previous cohort. The pandemic caused a shift to increased working from home and teaching on-line, which impacted on the experience of the programme.

### **1.6 Thesis structure**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides a review of literature pertaining to my research questions. Chapter 3 outlines action research methodology and the methods used to answer my research questions. I also consider the ethical considerations required of me as an insider researcher and describe how the action research cycle structured the research process. In Chapter 4 I present the findings of my research, including pen portraits of my research participants and two emblematic cases which demonstrate the research process and exemplify some of the key themes emerging from the data. I then go onto explore these themes with reference to the data. In Chapter 5 I discuss my investigatory research questions, with a particular focus on psycho-social elements of the research process. My emancipatory questions are the focus of Chapter 6, as I explore the influence of the research on the design and delivery of the Year 2 programme. Chapter 7 returns to my overarching research question and discusses

plans to apply learning from the research. Chapter 8 includes some final reflections on the research process.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This review explores literature relating to my research questions, considering what is already known about the emotional experiences of early career social workers and practitioner research, as well as the use of student narratives in shaping curricular and supporting others. I begin with an explanation and justification of the approach I have taken to literature, drawing on the ontological and epistemological position outlined in the introduction. I then go on to explain the search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria employed to find literature of relevance to my research focus and questions. My review then divides into three further sections where I review literature relating to debates in social work education that provide the wider context for my research, followed by literature relating to my investigatory and emancipatory questions.

### **2.2 My approach to literature**

My approach to literature reflects my ontological position that meaning, or reality, is created through our active engagement with the world, rather than something that is separate from ourselves to be found. Therefore, in reviewing literature, I am actively constructing knowledge, choosing to focus on some areas, rather than others, drawn to some arguments and positions and rejecting of others. This is a reflexive process informed by my 'social graces' (Burnham, 2012) and experience as a White British, first generation middle-class, cis-gendered woman working in academia. In contrast, reviewing literature to address a 'gap' in knowledge, reflects a positivist ontology

where knowledge is fixed, knowable, and separate from the researcher (Walker, 2015).

By exploring literature relevant to my research questions and synthesising the knowledge acquired with analysis of my own data, my aim is to extend the field of knowledge relating to the emotional experience of early career social work and practitioner research. This reflects Herr and Anderson's (2005) description of the role of literature in action research. In their view, action research creates new knowledge by *extending* what is known:

'We see a dialogue of sorts taking place between the researcher's growing observations and data and what others have written and understood about similar questions or contexts. The end result should be that the data analysis is pushed by relevant literature and the literature should be extended through the contribution of this action research.' (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p.85)

In adopting a social constructionist approach to literature, I draw on Wisker's description of a literature review as 'an ongoing dialogue with the experts, theories and theorists underpinning your work' (2007, p.170).

This has parallels with Montuori's (2005) view of reviews as creative inquiries and participation in a community of discourse. He encourages us to 'engage with literature...as a living dialogue in which one can bring all of one's lived experience, questions, and creativity' (2005, p.379). Rather than considering each piece of literature in isolation, Walker (2015) takes inspiration from Montuori, suggesting that we consider how papers relate or "speak" to each other in discussion and respectful debate.'

Reviewing literature, I was guided by two contrasting appraisal tools. Markovic's (2021) systemic framework for the appraisal of literature suggests the adoption of four different positions or 'views' when reviewing a paper. The 'author's view' is a description of the content without judgement, whereas the 'personal view' considers what we dislike and like about the paper. The self-reflexive position asks us to question why we respond as we do, considering the values and beliefs which inform our responses. Finally, in critiquing the article we consider what we can learn from it and how we might apply that learning.

CASP checklists (2018) enable the researcher to assess the quality and validity of research papers through asking a series of questions relating to the efficacy of, for example, methodology, ethics, data analysis and findings. Reflecting my social constructionist ontology, I found myself drawn to Markovic's framework (2021) and Walker's (2015) relational approach to literature, as they enabled me to adopt a reflexive, critical and synthesising stance towards the literature. Using the CASP checklists, in contrast, enabled me to consider the 'quality' of the research, by nationally recognised standards of 'trustworthiness' in academic research.

In a world of seemingly limitless information, what we know and what we learn is influenced by societal context. Walker reminds us that publishing is informed by a political context and that 'some discourses are socially privileged and subjugating, while others are marginalised, silenced and subjugated' (McCarthy, 2001, p.255 cited in Walker, 2015). There may be ideas relevant to my research questions that remain unknown to me as they are unpublished or are published in journals or other formats that are not included in the databases I have searched. In addition, Montuori (2005) argues that disciplinary fragmentation causes closed systems of knowledge.

There may be useful knowledge relating to my research questions in other professional and academic disciplines which I have not explored.

### **2.3 Search methods: Databases, key words, exclusion and inclusion criteria**

In my dual roles as curriculum lead and doctoral student I had access to three online libraries. I started my searches using the University of Lancaster databases turning to the other two libraries for literature not available through Lancaster. The databases I drew on most frequently were PsychINFO, Psych articles. Pep archive, Psych books, SocIndex and Ebscohost EBooks. I also found newly published articles and blogs relevant to my interests on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

My review begins with an overview of the current debates relating to social work education, in order to situate the research in its wider context. To find literature and research relevant to this debate I used the following search terms: social work education, fast-track, training, curriculum, apprenticeships, university, in different combinations, which led to the identification of fifteen relevant research and discussion papers.

To explore literature relating to my investigatory research questions I deconstructed the questions and created sub-themes. This enabled me to arrive at keywords and phrases which I used in various combinations to search for literature. For example, for my second investigatory question: *What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers?* I developed the following keywords and phrases:

'emotions', 'social work/er' 'newly qualified social worker/s', 'early career social worker/s' 'assessed and supported year in employment' 'emotional containment'

For my third investigatory question: *What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme tell us about the capacity for practice-based research and research-mindedness in early career social workers?*

I added the phrases 'practitioner research', 'action research' 'practice-based research', 'professional development', 'research-minded'.

I did multiple searches, combining these key terms and phrases in various ways.

For example, a broad early search combining the following three search terms; 'emotions'; 'social worker', 'research' brought hundreds of results from which I found six articles of relevance to my study. Combining 'social worker' and 'action research' brought fewer results and three studies relevant to my review.

I followed a similar process for my emancipatory research questions arriving at search terms including student stories, curriculum, experience, education, storytelling, narrative, coproduction, social work, which I combined in several ways.

In addition to using search terms, I used the 'snowballing' technique (Aveyard, 2010) to follow up articles of interest from the reference lists of selected articles.

In order to draw on the most recent and relevant research I largely limited the search to literature from the year 2000 onwards, written in the English language. However, I have included some less recent literature which still felt relevant to my research focus. I am aware that in focusing on articles written in English I am complicit in reinforcing the dominance of white Western English language discourses to the exclusion of more marginalised voices.

## **2.4 Learning from literature**

The next section of this review is divided into three sections, starting with an exploration of the current debates relating to social work education in UK. I then go on to explore literature relating to my investigatory research questions, with the final section exploring literature relating to my emancipatory questions.

### **2.4.1 What are the current debates relating to social work education in the UK?**

The Frontline programme is a relatively new model of delivering social work training, which has been running since 2014. To provide a context for the experiences of Year 2 Frontline participants who took part in this research, and to consider their relevance to wider social work education, I now review literature relating to the ongoing debates concerning the structure and content of social work education in the UK.

There are a variety of routes available to qualify as a social worker in the UK, including undergraduate and graduate courses delivered through the university sector and work-based apprenticeships and fast-track courses delivered in partnership with universities (the latter only available in England). The diversity of training routes can be seen as offering potential social workers choice (Frontline, 2020). Conversely, Hanley (2022) argues that student social workers should be brought together in training, rather than separated into different routes, receiving the same financial support. He argues that a 'comprehensive social work education' (ibid. p.127) would better reflect social work's commitment to social justice, diversity and equality.

Social work education has been a focus of significant debate, particularly in the last ten years since the publication of two government commissioned reports on social

work education by Narey (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014). Debates include: who should be able to train as a social worker (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Dillon, 2007, 2011, Hanley, 2021); the balance between the teaching of social science theory and practice skills (Higgins et al., 2016, Narey, 2014, Thoburn, 2017); and the requirement for social work training to be generalised or specialised (Thoburn, 2017, Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Narey, 2014). I will discuss what the literature says in each of these areas, to situate the experience of Frontline participants in this wider context.

#### **2.4.2 Diversity and inclusion in social work education**

A desire to widen participation in higher education to students from diverse backgrounds dates back to a government directive in 1997 (Dillon, 2007). Hanley (2021) argues that social work courses have a track record of success in widening participation to disadvantaged populations, but that this success has been re-framed as a 'burden' by some commentators. Notably, Narey and Croisdale-Appleby's reviews argued that the academic calibre of some students admitted to qualifying programmes had not been sufficient to meet the 'intellectual complexity' of social work (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, p.40). Reay et al. (2010, cited in Fletcher et al., 2015, p.123) argue that student diversity and academic excellence are often pitched against each other.

Dillon (2007) explores the conundrum of promoting widening participation in social work courses, while at the same time selecting students 'suitable' for social work training. Widening participation is presented as complex, as it must be balanced against the requirement to uphold academic and professional standards and social work values. Fletcher et al. (2015) argue that social work courses need to move

beyond 'equal access' to 'equal outcomes', by adapting organisational cultures and processes to provide an inclusive environment that enables students from diverse backgrounds to succeed.

The Frontline programme provoked controversy from its inception, through a focus on 'academic excellence' when recruiting potential applicants, rather than widening participation. Hanley (2021) argues that this focus perpetuated existing inequalities in the UK education system, and so is at variance with the social work values of social justice and empowerment. The financial support for Frontline participants, which is more generous than for other routes, is argued to represent a further contribution to existing inequalities. Hanley (ibid) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014) also raise concerns that privileged applicants completing fast-track programmes would 'game' the system, using their social work qualification to move into better paid work outside the sector, impacting on frontline services. However, large scale, longitudinal research by Scourfield et al. (2023) found that attrition for early career social workers from fast-track programmes was lower than for all social work graduates (12% after 18 months and 18% after 15 months respectively). Retention was found to correlate with perceptions of the local authority employer as supportive and social workers' intrinsic job satisfaction.

Responding to criticisms relating to diversity and inclusion, Frontline has shifted its focus in recruitment, reducing academic requirements and increasing activity designed to widen participation (Frontline, 2020, 2024). In the last five years the number of racially minoritised participants on the programme has risen from 15% to 26% (Frontline, 2024), although this is still lower than the 36% of racially minoritised students recruited to undergraduate courses in 2019 (Community Care, 2020), perhaps reflecting the legacy of its founding principles.

### **2.4.3 Social work curricula: social science and practice skills**

Higgins et al. (2016) assert that Narey and Croisdale-Appleby's reports (2014) represent two competing paradigms of social work. Narey's report is seen to represent a process and task driven vision of social work, focussed on 'making children safe' (Higgins et al., 2016, p.621). Croisdale-Appleby's report, on the other hand, presents a broader view of social work, reflected in the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2024), where social workers support, empower and protect (Higgins et al., 2016). The authors argue that the creation of fast-track programmes, like Frontline, are a product of the first paradigm, designed to train students in the skills they need to be effective social workers, without the underlying social science knowledge that may help them understand the complex situations of the people they work with. The Croisdale-Appleby report (2014) reflects these concerns.

Higgins et al.'s (2016) case study of a social work degree programme in the UK, drawing on the views of 48 key stakeholders, however, demonstrates some of the challenges faced by students attempting to apply their social science knowledge in the practice placement. A split between learning in the university and practice in the placement was experienced by students, with their practice supervisors focussed on job processes and rejecting of evidence informed practice. This is also reflected in Lane's (2023) more recent study of social work practice learning, exploring the work of a social work teaching partnership. The research, which involved interviewing a range of 35 social work professionals, identifies a gap between academic teaching delivered by the university partner and the 'challenges of social work practice, particularly in terms of depth and complexity of the knowledge and skills needed for frontline practice' (ibid, p.27).

Lane (ibid) identifies the split between theory and practice mirrored in the distinct roles played by the university and placement in student learning. While good relationships existed between the university and placement providers, this relationship was focussed on securing placements, rather than the promotion of evidence-based learning in the placement, leaving the quality of the students' learning in the placement solely dependent on the placement provider.

Higgin's et al. (2016) and Lane's (2023) research suggests that, while university led courses aim to provide social work students with a broad social science education, the split between the university and the placement creates challenges for the implementation of this learning in the placement. To address this Lane suggests 'co-location of research, teaching and practice... where mutual learning for the university and the placement provider takes place and is developed through shared research.' (ibid, p.36).

Domakin and Curry (2018) report on an action research study conducted in their roles of practice tutor and consultant social worker on the Frontline programme. The study explores the opportunities for integrated learning offered by the unit model. The authors explain that the structure of the Frontline programme was influenced by the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model, in which the weekly 'unit meeting' is used to discuss the work with children and families (Goodman and Trowler, 2012, cited in ibid). Participants of the Frontline programme work together in units of four to five members under the guidance of a consultant social worker (CSW) who is the case holder for all the work in the unit and the practice educator. The practice tutor is a social work academic who attends the three-hour unit meetings every three weeks, also delivering teaching to participants on the day of their visit and at 'recall days' to larger groups of students.

Domakin and Curry (2018) describe how collaboration between the practice tutor and consultant social worker (CSW) promotes opportunities for integrated learning i.e. the everyday application of theory into practice. The unit meeting is structured according to the principles of a reflecting team (Anderson, 1987) to allow exploration of multiple perspectives to inform planning and decision making. Using cultural genograms (McGoldrick et al, 2020) and hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987) participants are encouraged to consider the interplay of relationships between the worker and the family, relationships within the family and wider structural issues, such as poverty, class, and race. While the CSW has responsibility for overall decision making, the practice tutor's role is to make conceptual links with theory and research. In this way, the student learning is facilitated by joint dialogue about practice, and through relationships between students, the CSW and practice tutor.

This integrated model of learning, I would suggest, addresses some of the concerns expressed by Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Higgins et al. (2016), that fast-track programmes focus too narrowly on the skills required 'to do the job' rather than wider sociological and psychological understanding. The focus on relationships and wider sociological influences in systemic thinking and the regular enactment of these approaches in the weekly unit meeting go some way to addressing the challenge of applying theory in practice, identified by Higgins et al. (2016) and Lane (2023), perhaps also addressing Lane's desire for the co-location of teaching and practice. I would argue too, that the completion of first-person action research, as outlined in Chapter 1, represents another method of applying theory directly into day-to-day social work practice.

Smith (2021) observed six Frontline unit meetings for his doctoral research, adopting a psycho-social lens to consider how anxiety inherent in the social work task

impacted on the processes of containment and thinking in group supervision. His study builds on the work of Domakin and Curry (2018) through its detailed examination of the unconscious emotional processes that take place in group supervision. A potential limitation of Domakin and Curry's (2018) study is that data is based on their own reflections and does not include the voices of participants of the programme. My own doctoral research includes these voices and moves from a focus on experiences in Year 1 of the programme, to emotional experiences in Year 2.

#### **2.4.4 Generic or specialist social work**

The arguments for and against generic or specialist social work reflect the different social work paradigms identified by Higgins et al. (2016). Narey's report (2014) no longer sees social work as a unified profession, supporting early specialisation to enable social workers to develop the specific skills required to work with either children and families or adults. Croisdale-Appleby (2014), on the other hand, supports the view that social workers should be trained generically. In her defence of university social work education Thoburn (2017) argues that this route to qualification allows students to 'take risks' in their learning journey. They may start their training with a desire to work with adults but may change their mind through their experience in a child and family-based placement. Students of fast-track programmes, in contrast, complete most of their placement days in a single placement. Frontline participants in their first year complete 170 days in their main placement and only 30 days in a contrasted learning experience and so are unable to develop the required skills and knowledge to work in adult social work during their training.

### **2.4.5 Summary**

Frontline participants inhabit a contested territory in social work education, as they complete a specialist, fast-track social work programme that continues to be seen by some in the sector as divisive and controversial. This context forms part of the experience of Year 2 participants and so is of relevance to this study. Having reviewed the literature in this area, I would argue that some of the concerns expressed relating to the focus on 'skills' as opposed to 'social science' on the Frontline curriculum (Higgins et al., 2016, Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Thoburn, 2017) do not give full credit to the practice of integrated learning (Domakin and Curry, 2018) on the Frontline programme. However, concerns related to diversity and inclusion (Hanley, 2021), continue to be reflected in cohorts that are less diverse than university-based programmes (Community Care, 2020). Having explored some of the debates relating to the wider field of social work education, I now go on to explore literature relating to my investigatory research questions.

### **2.5 Literature relating to investigatory questions.**

Literature reviewed in this section relates to the questions:

1. What are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?
2. What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers?

3. What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme tell us about the capacity for practice-based research and research-mindedness in early career social workers?

In relation to my first and second questions, I explore literature and research relating to the emotional experience of being an early career social worker and the factors that support and detract from emotional containment and resilience. For my third investigatory question I review literature related to the capacity for practice-based research and research mindedness in social work. To begin the exploration of the emotional experience of early career social workers, I start with a broad investigation of the place of emotion in social work practice.

### **2.5.1 The emotional experience of social work**

There is a body of research and literature which explores the emotional experience of social work, for example Dore (2016), Dwyer (2007), Ingram (2013), Morrison (2008) and O'Connor (2020). For Dore, emotion is 'inherent within, inseparable from and indispensable to social work practice' (2016, p. 469). The ability to connect with our own emotions is argued to be essential for connecting with the emotions of others and is therefore identified to be a key social work skill (Morrison, 2008, Ingram, 2013). In social work we are tasked with uncovering and addressing human suffering; the darker aspects of life that are painful to witness (Cooper, 2018). We can therefore assume that the experience of newly qualified social workers will be suffused with emotion.

O'Connor's (2020) review of 28 papers exploring the place of emotion in social work practice suggests that emotion constitutes a paradox. On the one hand, emotions

are seen as a dynamic resource for 'sense making' which can inform and safeguard practitioners, children and families. However, in the studies reviewed, organisations viewed expression of emotion by social workers as predominantly negative. In the absence of organisational culture that accepts emotions as productive and appropriate, conflict was created between what was experienced emotionally and what was enacted in practice, resulting in 'dissonance, defensive ambivalence and distancing from emotional engagement'. The paradox for social work is that 'emotions are part of professional practice yet are not perceived as professional' (ibid, 2020, p.654). This is confirmed in Glumbikova & Mikulec's (2021) study of social workers' strategies for dealing with the emotional demands of working with families. They spoke of minimising and masking negative emotions as part of their professional identity and creating an emotional or spatial distance between themselves and those they worked with. However, this could not prevent 'reflexive obsession' (ibid, p.267), where they anxiously reflected at home and at work. The naming and expressing of emotions, seeking help from colleagues and pursuing pleasurable activities were identified as strategies for dealing with difficult emotions. The retreat from emotion and relational practice is situated by Cooper and Lousada in the long-standing trend towards centralised policy generation and enforcement which can be perceived as a 'permanently scrutinising, punitive superego' (2005, p.13). This can be argued to impact on workers' ability to connect with feelings and to think and act autonomously. Newly qualified workers' desires to work relationally (Gordon & Donnellan, 2010) are set against highly regularised and monitored contexts, using emotion-free processes as a defence against anxiety in the primary task (Cooper,2018). In addition to organisational defences (Menzies-Lyth, 1988),

Ruch (2005) argues that retreating from emotions and vulnerability is an understandable individual defence against powerful feelings.

### **2.5.2 What are emotions?**

Sebrant, exploring learning in the workplace, makes a distinction between feelings as 'private, subjective and bodily anchored' while emotions are 'culturally constituted by norms and rules that are derived from family, society, education and, more specifically, from professional and organisational values' (2008, p.194). The workplace is seen as one site where we learn the cultural rules about how emotions can be displayed. This is described by Hochschild (1990) as feeling rules and expression rules.

Trevithick (2014) citing Damasio (2012) takes a slightly different view of the differences between emotion and feelings. Feelings bring emotions to the conscious mind so that all conscious emotional experiences constitute a feeling. Trevithick (2014) also notes how past and present relationships and conflicts can be represented in emotions and feelings displayed through the unconscious psychodynamic concepts of transference, countertransference, projection and projective identification. Hedges (2010) writing from the systemic tradition describes emotions as communication to the self and others, showing us that 'something' needs attention. O'Connor brings together both systemic and psychodynamic understanding of emotion in social work, describing it as a relational construct:

'Practitioners' emotions emerge in interactional contexts involving subjective, conscious and unconscious experiences which include cognitive, sensory and embodied dimensions. They are dynamic complexes... occurring within the

context of social relationships, performance, identities and power.’ (2020, p.648)

### **2.5.3 Emotion and the psychoanalytic framework**

My research is informed by a psycho-social lens, so this section briefly reviews literature that elucidates key psychoanalytic concepts relating to emotional experience, which have been touched upon in the previous section and will be referred to again throughout my work. I draw on the ‘British school’ of ‘object-relations’ theory (Preston-Shoot and Agass,1990), informed by the work of key thinkers such as Klein (1946) and Bion (1962). Building on Freud’s research into the unconscious, they move beyond a focus on individual unconscious ‘drives’, to the exploration of ‘states of mind’ developed through early relationships (Waddell, 1998).

Waddell, defining the psychoanalytic term, explains that each ‘state of mind’, however temporary, ‘is founded in the past, and at the same time encompasses a possible future’. It may contain the ‘seeds of growth’ or ‘confine potential growth within a ...frozen mind state’ (1998, p.5). Feelings and relationships with others are thought to have their foundations in early infant relationships with their carers.

The concepts of defences and the ‘defended subject’ have their origins in the early psychoanalytic tradition and continue to play a significant role in psycho-social perspectives. Fundamentally, humans are believed to repress certain feelings or impulses, holding them in check by using *defences* which protect the person from the anxiety aroused by those feelings. Defences are ‘not only normal, but essential’ (Preston Shoot and Agass, 1990, p.23). However, awareness of potential defences may offer a way of interpreting feelings and emotions that are not consciously expressed or understood.

'Projection' is one 'defence mechanism' unconsciously employed in human relationships. 'Unacceptable' feelings, such as jealousy or anger are 'disowned and attributed to someone else, who may then be attacked as a result' (Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990, p. 24). 'Introjection' is the reverse of projection, where we take 'something' from the external world, including the feelings of others, into ourselves. Processes of projection and introjection also underlie the concepts of 'transference', 'countertransference' and 'containment'.

In the process of 'transference' feelings and experiences derived from significant figures in the past are unconsciously projected into relationships in the present. This may cause us to respond to a person in the present as we responded to a significant person in our past (ibid). The process of transference is normally used to refer to the unconscious reaction of the 'helped' person to the 'helper'. The concept of 'countertransference' also refers to the impact of unconscious processes in relationships and is used to refer to the unconscious responses of the 'helper' to the 'helped'. Casement (1985) divides countertransference reactions into two types, the personal and the diagnostic. Personal countertransference refers to a process whereby our responses to a person are influenced by our own personal history and emotional experiences. Diagnostic countertransference, on the other hand, is a reaction elicited by the other person's projections, which may enable a 'diagnosis' of the feelings projected.

The concept of 'containment' was developed by Bion (1962) to describe the process whereby the carer of the infant child mentally 'digests' the unbearable raw emotions projected by the baby, making sense of them and offering them back in a more tolerable form. In this way the baby's overwhelming anxiety is 'contained' by a 'thinking' other. Helping encounters can be viewed as a process of containment,

where the worker, supervisor, or therapist, for example, takes up the role of ‘thinking partner’ (Wolf, 2004, p.17 cited in Archard & O’Reilly, 2022), ‘digesting’ emotions, making sense of them and offering them back to the person in a more bearable form.

#### **2.5.4 The emotional experience of newly qualified social workers**

Having explored the concept of emotion, emotion in social work and emotion and the psychoanalytic framework, I now move on to explore literature relating specifically to the emotional experience of early career social workers. I found less literature that focussed specifically on the emotional experience of newly qualified social workers (NQSW’s), so I have also included literature on the emotional experiences of student social workers. I believe this has relevance for my study as it explores moving from learning to practice, also experienced in the ASYE.

Barlow and Hall (2007) interviewed students on placement and their supervisors. The former expressed feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious and incompetent, as well as shock, anger and worry. In their relationships with supervisors, they felt the rules for emotional expression were unclear and unspoken. Supervisors acknowledged that they underestimated the impact of student’s experiences; for them they were ‘normal’. This subsuming of emotion reflects, for the authors, the Enlightenment view that emotions are ‘less than’ rationale thought. Rajan-Rankin’s (2014) study reflects the pervasiveness of this discourse; some students linked emotionality in the self to lack of professionalism. A more recent study by Dore (2019) paints a more optimistic picture, where emotions are acknowledged and openly discussed between students and placement supervisors.

Gordon and Donnellan’s study of NQSWs paints a picture of initial enthusiasm replaced with declining well-being and frustration. The authors cite employers’

failure to 'properly recognise the person within the developing professional' (2010, p.305) as a key contributor. This 'de-humanisation' is set in a context where workers feel there is more interest in completing work in time than in the work itself, with high caseloads and administrative demands leaving less time for direct work with families. Supervision monitors rather than explores practice and is 'task focussed' rather than reflective. A more recent study by Wilkins et al. (2017) found a similar picture of the supervisory experience.

Sergill's (2018) study of five NQSWs has echoes of earlier studies. It finds that the 'neoliberalised workplace environment' had a significant impact on their emotional experiences and failed to meet their emotional needs. With an emphasis on 'performance', emotion became marginalised and a lack of containing experiences meant 'resilience' became the responsibility of the individual worker. This psycho-social study also identifies workers' early life experiences and personal dispositions as additional influential factors on emotional experience. Sergill argues that emotion should be re-established as central to and legitimate within social work.

Jansen's (2018) study of newly graduated social workers in Norway explores their daily working lives through the lens of complexity, both in the nature of child protection work, and the multiplicity of tasks and roles it entails. Lack of knowledge, experience and resources, time pressures, uncertainty, both in terms of what is happening for a family and how to respond; divergent views between different parties and the weight of professional responsibility all contribute to 'emotional strain'.

Jansen(ibid) argues that it is impossible to prepare students completely for practice, they should be prepared to be unprepared, as an essential element of being a 'newcomer'. More security in role was achieved through the experience of facing

and overcoming difficulties, a pattern described in literature relating to resilience (Adamson et al, 2014).

### **2.5.5 Resilience**

Much of the literature exploring the emotional experience of social work includes the discussion of the related concept of 'resilience', seen as a means for social workers to 'manage' the intensity of emotions involved in the role. Kearns & McArdle (2012) identify resilience as a multi-dimensional concept and focus on the 'process' by which 'resilience is enabled or supported by others in personal, professional and organizational contexts' (Donnellan & Jack 2010 cited in *ibid*, 2012). It is this 'process' that I felt had relevance for my research question, exploring the support that is important and helpful in the ASYE.

Cleveland et al. (2019) explored the emotional resilience of 14 early-career social workers, through semi-structured interviews. Regular reflective supervision was seen as a key source of support contributing to resilience, particularly if supervisors provided emotional support. Social workers who received this felt themselves to be 'lucky' in comparison to others. Peer support and supportive teams were also felt to contribute to resilience.

Adamson et al. (2014) interviewed experienced social workers who considered themselves to be resilient. Research participants were asked to identify the qualities in themselves and their context that facilitated resilience. Themes that emerged are explored and mapped against messages from previous research and literature. A conceptual framework for resilience based on three components; core attributes of the individual, practice context and mediating factors, is presented.

Synthesising the voices of experienced and resilient practitioners with messages from resilience research, provides a strengths-based articulation of the multi-faceted, developmental and changing nature of resilience. Views of what contributes to resilience offer potential ideas for supporting positive responses to challenges. Most of the findings resonated strongly for me; for example, the importance of hope, humour, autonomy; a sense of control; the importance of organisational and managerial support, all contributing to a sense of resilience.

Grant and Kinman have produced a body of research and resources designed to enhance both individual and organisational resilience. They define resilience as 'a capacity to handle environmental difficulties, demands and high pressure without experiencing negative effects' (2011, p.262). The authors identify the responsibility of organisations to support individual resilience, however the underlying focus on individual resilience has elicited the critique that resilience literature risks playing into the neo-liberal agenda of adapting to the status quo rather than challenging it (Garrett, 2016).

Grant and Kinman (2020) identify different competencies underlying resilience: emotional literacy, reflective thinking skills, empathy, social competence, social support, supervision and organisational support, coping skills and flexibility, self-compassion and self-care. Recommendations for enhancing resilience include 'mindfulness and relaxation, cognitive behavioural techniques, using supervision for reflective practice, peer coaching, self-awareness and action planning' (ibid, p.17). In their Organisational Resilience Toolkit, Grant and Kinman (2021) advise organisations to provide a secure base, appreciation for staff, and a learning organisation with a clear mission and vision that supports staff well-being.

Reading this body of work, I found myself agreeing with Taylor (2021); the resources in themselves are helpful but leave one feeling somewhat troubled. Taylor takes issue with the term 'resilience' with its associations with strength and 'hardiness' rather than sensitivity and vulnerability. Drawing on the work of Brown (2015), she stresses the importance of a willingness to acknowledge and share vulnerability, as a means to connect with others. Taylor worries that if we are too focused on being 'enthusiastic, optimistic, confident, trusting and cooperative' (Grant and Kinman 2020, p.9) we may be less willing to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities and attune to the vulnerabilities of others.

In their discussion of empathy, Grant and Kinman distinguish 'appropriate empathy' from 'empathetic distress'. The former represents genuine attempts 'to acknowledge and accept what service users think and feel' whilst keeping clear 'emotional boundaries' (2020, p.10). The latter involves 'over-empathising' which can lead to burnout and distress. Considering the different positions of Grant and Kinman and Taylor (2021) through a psychodynamic lens, Taylor is perhaps arguing for openness to countertransference as a way of connecting to and understanding the emotions of others (Casement, 1985). In contrast, Grant and Kinman perhaps suggest that social workers defend themselves against the strongest emotions in order to remain resilient and maintain their professional role.

When discussing the importance of reflective supervision as a way of managing emotions, Grant and Kinman (2020) suggest that emotional disclosure may be avoided by supervisees due to a fear of being judged as weak or vulnerable. In addition, supervisors may worry about containing feelings expressed. They suggest that social workers develop self-awareness and manage these barriers effectively, although how to do this is not discussed. This perhaps represents a limitation in their

argument. If social workers are required to maintain 'emotional boundaries' with children and families, these same boundaries may be enacted in the supervisory relationship, potentially limiting the full exploration of both workers' and families' feelings.

I am reminded of O'Connor's (2020) review of research which suggests that social workers who connect with and feel the distress of those they work with are seen by themselves and others as lacking resilience and unprofessional. Brown (2015) argues that you cannot numb emotions selectively, so if social workers numb feelings of distress at work, they are likely to be numbing personal emotions too. As Taylor (2021) says, 'whilst detachment from emotions and the development of a 'thick skin' might be seen by many as a sensible way of surviving the demands of work, a way of being resilient... this is not the social worker I want knocking on my door when I am most in need'.

Wengraf's (2004) case study of an individual social worker's career history provides a fascinating insight into the influence of personal histories and unconscious processes when managing the tension between maintaining professional boundaries and responsiveness to need and vulnerability. From this perspective individual social workers balance the impulses to 'give' to families, or help their development, while at the same time avoid being overwhelmed, informed by their own personal histories and the working through of their own unconscious processing of past events and feelings (Zagier-Roberts, 1994). However, Wengraf (ibid) argues that bureaucratic organisations, which function through rules, hierarchies and maintaining boundaries predispose them to promote boundary relations in their view of human development. This echoes O'Connor's (2020) findings where too much 'relating' is viewed as unprofessional.

Kearn and McArdle (2012) explore three NQSWs stories of resilience in their first year of child protection practice. Participants' ability to 'reframe' discomfort and uncertainty as challenges, through a self-reflexive approach, is seen as central to the growth of resilience. This has echoes of Adamson et al.'s (2014) finding that practice wisdom and experience contributed significantly to resilience. All three participants highlighted 'the significance of feeling valued and included as fully fledged and autonomous professionals by their new managers and team colleagues' (Kearns & McArdle, 2012, p.389). In addition, the authors found that the nature and quality of the professional support from both supervisors and peers had the strongest impact on participants' self-efficacy.

### **2.5.6 Support, self-efficacy and making a difference**

The importance of support is a theme that emerges in Hussein et al.'s (2014) large scale longitudinal study of social work students as they entered the workforce. The aim was to explore the links between qualifying education, organisational factors and decisions to leave. Analysis showed that those who felt they lacked supportive colleagues or managers had lower levels of job satisfaction. Having a supportive team was found to be statistically relevant in relation to intention to leave; those with a supportive team were less likely to leave or to intend to leave.

Self-efficacy is a concept that is linked with resilience in both Grant and Kinman (2017) and Kearns and McCardle's (2012) research. Self-efficacy has been defined as 'an individual's assessment of his or her confidence in their ability (to) execute skills in a particular set of circumstances and thereby achieve a successful outcome.' (Holden et.al,2002, p.116, cited in Carpenter et al, 2015). Carpenter at al. (2015) completed a longitudinal study testing the competence and confidence of NQSW's

on the NQSW programme (which evolved into the ASYE). It is noted that self-efficacy is not a measure of actual performance, but rather 'a belief about what a person can do in a particular set of circumstances' (ibid, p.174). Self-efficacy was found to significantly increase over time. Stress also increased through the study, but there was no correlation found between self-efficacy and stress. Job satisfaction levels were found to be high.

These findings have parallels with those of Stalker et al. (2007). In their review of research investigating emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, they found that both can coexist in child welfare workers because of the perception of 'making a difference'. Grant and Kinman (2017) also cite how 'compassion satisfaction', or the emotional benefits of helping people in distress can mitigate the impact of work-related stress (Stamm, 2002, cited in ibid, 2017, p.1983). Similarly, many of Adamson et al.'s participants focussed on the quality of their practice in support of service users, 'linking their own resilience to competence and effectiveness with others' (Adamson, 2014, p.538). These studies indicate that self-efficacy, our belief that we can do the tasks allocated to us, is important for resilience and that time in the job and experience contribute to self-efficacy. This, combined with the belief that we are making a difference in the lives of others, can mitigate the inherent stresses in social work practice.

### **2.5.7 The experience of Frontline participants compared to other qualifying routes**

A longitudinal study (Johnson, et al., 2022) tracking the careers of child and family social workers includes a survey of newly qualified workers in their ASYE, providing valuable quantitative data on the experience of the first year of practice. 231 newly qualified social workers surveyed for the 4th wave completed the ASYE between

October 2020 and June 2021, of whom 8% entered social work through the Frontline programme. 66% of those surveyed were White, 19% Black/Black British, 7% Asian/Asian British and 3% mixed ethnicity. 17% reported having a disability or long-term health condition and 43% had caring responsibilities. However, findings are not reported in relation to the demographic characteristics of respondents, so it is not possible to discern whether there are variations in experience in relation to participant characteristics.

Of all those surveyed 63% felt stressed by their job and 44% felt that their workload was too high. 77% associated stress with the amount of paperwork they had to complete, with 58% linking stress to insufficient time for direct work with children and families. High staff turnover, lack of resources, high caseloads, difficult decision-making, working culture and lack of administrative and management support were also cited as reasons for stress. In levels similar to Carpenter's (2015) study, 71% found their job satisfying overall.

The majority of respondents felt well prepared to work in social work, though those trained through Frontline were more likely to feel very well prepared for social work and work with children and families compared to those training through other routes. A majority were positive about the support they received from managers, despite over half of respondents working over their contracted hours. Regular reflective supervision was the experience of the majority, who also found the experience of the ASYE effective in helping them transition from learning to practice.

Significantly, those trained via Frontline were more likely to say that they felt stressed in their job and their workload was too high. Frontline participants were also most likely to say that they had insufficient time to do direct work with children and

families compared to other entrants. The report hypothesises that this may be due to Frontline participants doing their master's degree in the ASYE. I take a different view. Participants undertake their master's studies predominantly in their own time so this should not impact on the amount of time available for direct work.

Interestingly, Frontline participants report spending less time in direct work with families than those trained on other routes. Again, the authors hypothesise that this may be influenced by time spent doing their master's. Alternatively, I believe this may be influenced by a loose definition of direct work. Frontline participants are taught to use practice models to work with families therapeutically, so are likely to define direct work in these terms. Direct work is sometimes defined more loosely as time spent directly with children and families, so this loose definition may have influenced the findings.

### **2.5.8 Diversity, inclusion and emotion**

I conclude this section of the review, which has focussed on the emotional experience of early career social workers, with a discussion of the place (and absence) of diversity and inclusion in the literature. Fifteen of the studies reviewed in the previous section relate to primary research. Of those, five make no mention of participant demographics, five identify the age and gender of participants, with the remaining five noting the age, gender and ethnicity of participants. However, only one of the studies explores emotional experience in relation to participants' identity. Rajan-Rankin's (2014) qualitative study found the 'minority experience' of race, religion and sexuality 'an important foregrounding factor in the management of emotion' (ibid, p.2438).

The absence of discussion of participant identity in relation to emotion in the literature confirms Rajan-Rankin's assertion that 'the social, political and cultural contexts within which emotions are constructed are often overlooked' (ibid, p.2429). I agree with her assertion that emotions are experienced, reproduced and embodied in social hierarchies including race, class, gender and sexual orientation. For this reason, studies of emotional experience should explore the connections between socio-political and cultural contexts and identity. In conducting psycho-social research I have aimed to do this in my own study.

I find the connection between emotional experience and minoritised identity to be an under-researched area. However, the growing diversity of the social work workforce, the populations we work with and social work's commitment to diversity and inclusion (SWE, 2019) suggests this is an important area for further exploration. Existing studies also indicate the need for further research. For example, the What Work's Centre's review (2022) of 27 studies relating to ethnic minority social workers in the UK 'found little data and evidence on the well-being of ethnic minority social workers despite several large-scale studies on the topic for social workers in general' (ibid.p.7). However, included studies 'identified experiences of racism which impacted on well-being.' (ibid, p.7). The links between other minoritised identities, such as sexuality and disability and the emotional experience of social work, also appear to be under-researched, with only a small number of studies such as Fairtlough et al.'s (2014) exploring the experience of LGBTQ+ social work students.

### **2.5.9 Summary**

In this section of the review, I have explored literature relating to the place of emotion in social work and the emotional experience of social work practice, including the

role that the concept of 'resilience' plays in this experience. Adopting a critical and psychoanalytic lens I have considered how the 'retreat' from emotion and an emphasis on 'resilience' may impact on the relational aspects of social work practice. Finally, I have noted an absence of consideration of identity in the literature reviewed, which leaves the particular experience of minoritised social workers under-researched. I now move on to explore literature relating to my third investigatory question; the experience of completing practitioner research.

## **2.6 What does research and literature tell us about the experience of completing practitioner research?**

### **2.6.1 Introduction**

In this section of review, I explore literature relating to my third investigatory question, notably student and social workers' experiences of completing practitioner research and their capacity for 'research-mindedness'. Meyer et al. (2006) describe practitioner research in simple terms, as any research carried out by practitioners. Action research is one form of practitioner research which, in contrast, involves practitioners researching their own practice or the practice of others with the aim of improvement (McNiff, 2017). Shaw and Falkner (2006, cited in McBeath and Austin, 2015, p. 448) describe practitioner research as 'evidence-based, interactive, experiential, understanding focussed, valid, real world and deep'.

I have found only limited research relating to the experience of being both an early career social worker *and* completing practitioner research, which suggests that this study will contribute to extending the wider social work knowledge base. In the last three years, a small number of Frontline fellows have published articles relating to

their own first-person action research, in this way adding to a small, but growing knowledge base.

I begin with a review of literature exploring research and learning as an emotional process. I then go on to consider the experience of students and social workers completing research, and the capacity for research and 'research mindedness' in social work.

### **2.6.2 Research and learning as an emotional process**

Undertaking research can be argued to be part of a wider process of learning, or more specifically professional learning (McNiff, 2017). Writers from the psychodynamic tradition remind us of the emotional nature of learning itself. Writing about action research, Meyer et al (2006), argue that we all have a 'dynamic unconscious relationship' with the process of learning, where we may avoid situations that provoke anxiety. Salzburger-Wittenberg et al. describe the powerful emotions that can be evoked in the learning process, 'helplessness in the face of not knowing, fear of inadequacy, fear of being judged stupid in comparison with others' (1999, p.57). From this perspective completing research is an emotional process just as social work practice is inseparable from emotion.

Carello & Butler (2015), rather than focussing on the emotional nature of learning itself, consider how to alleviate potential vicarious trauma and re-traumatisation which can be elicited through exposure to traumatic material in social work courses and placements. Vicarious trauma is defined as 'the condition wherein exposure to information about the victimisation of others results in emotional, cognitive, and other symptoms for the clinician that echo aspects of the victims experience' (ibid, p.263). From a psychoanalytic viewpoint this might be viewed as countertransference.

Carello & Butler (2015) outline five key principles for trauma-informed teaching practice: ensuring safety, establishing trustworthiness, maximising choice, maximising collaboration, prioritising empowerment. In addition to designing curricula guided by these principles, they recommend teaching the concepts of transference and countertransference and modelling discussion of their own emotional reactions to material. In this way they encourage detailed analysis of both their own and students' emotional reactions to teaching.

McLaughlin (2003) describes how teachers' motivation and professional identity can be refreshed through researching their own practice. However, the act of viewing things differently involves taking risks with professional and intellectual security, with periods of questioning and self-doubt. Data analysis can be an emotional process, with the temptation to distort data to align with researcher values. Researchers found collaboration with others in a 'community of learners' important for containment and hearing alternative perspectives. McLaughlin shows us that conducting action research can be both emotionally risky as well as professionally motivating.

Heen (2005), drawing on her own experiences as an action researcher, stresses the importance of noticing and drawing on feelings in first-person action research. Paying attention to her own feelings is shown to bring new insights to the research process. In her study a research participant used power through gender which evoked powerful emotions in Heen. By 'staying with' and then 'disidentifying' with feelings Heen was able to use them as information for her study. Heen indicates that emotions evoked in the research process can be both painful and powerful processes for learning and change.

The emotionally challenging nature of practice-near research is identified by Cooper; it reflects the emotional experience of practice itself. Researching others 'up close' is a visceral and emotional experience, where the boundaries of the researcher's self may become 'fluid and uncertain' as we become 'psychically mixed up' with others (2018, pp.192-193).

### **2.6.3 Social work students' capacity for, and experience of practitioner research**

While the place of research in social work training and practice is contested (Beddoe 2011), the teaching and completion of research forms part of many social work courses (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013). In their audit of research teaching in social work courses in the UK, MacIntyre and Paul identify three main purposes for research teaching: 'promoting the role of research for effective practice; learning how to make critical use of research; gaining knowledge and understanding of research methodology and skills' (2013, p.691). In Year 2 of the Frontline programme all three purposes are acknowledged but the role of research in promoting effective practice is prioritised.

In their study of master's students' attitudes to research, Karki et al. (2023) found that student social workers saw a separation between social work identity and researcher identity. The authors hypothesise that this may be due to research being taught in an 'abstract' way, rather than related directly to practice. They suggest as a solution that 'evaluation' research, rather than 'conventional' research, should form the basis of research curricula, as students are more likely to undertake this form of study.

Gleeson et al.'s (2023) study into social work student's experience of research methods teaching confirmed previous studies relating to attitudes to research.

Students were anxious about engaging with research, perceiving it to be 'difficult', whilst acknowledging its importance to practice. However, in placements students encountered negative attitudes to research and evidence-informed practice, so lacked role models for the practice and application of research in practice.

In relation to practical barriers to research, MacIntyre and Paul (2013) identified that social work students are often advised against undertaking primary research due to ethical concerns. Their training positioned students as 'consumers' rather than 'producers' of research. Pullman and Fenge suggest that a lack of engagement with research in social work programmes 'might impede social worker engagement with research, due to a lack of knowledge, confidence and skills to conduct research in practice' (2024, p.63).

Vincent & Hamilton (2021) explore the experience of 22 social work master's students who completed research as part of their studies. They completed a thematic analysis of the students' reflective accounts of the research process and semi-structured interviews with four participants when they had graduated and had entered practice. Participants describe a range of emotions experienced during the research process, including feelings of excitement, pride and enthusiasm, as well as feeling overwhelmed, anxious and confused. Maintaining motivation and focus was difficult for some. Those who completed primary research with service users found this an emotionally challenging experience, but also one that enhanced their professional development, as they were able to apply research skills in their practice.

#### **2.6.4 The benefits of research for social work students and practitioners**

Vincent and Hamilton (2021) found that the experience of completing research enhanced the 'research-mindedness' of participants. However, once they entered

practice, they found it harder to access and draw on research to inform their practice in workplace cultures which were not informed by research. Nash (2011) also completed thematic analyses of student research reports. Her study explores the experience of social work master's students in New Zealand who completed primary research relating to migrant experience. Nash identifies that the research process developed the self-reflexive stance of the student researchers which she believes enhanced their professional development as social workers.

The role of research in enhancing self-reflexivity and professionalism is also discussed by Riemann (2011) who describes his work with social work students. He asks them to complete and discuss 'self-reflective ethnographies' of their practice, focussing on the sequence of events, changes in their own inner states and the possible perceptions of others. Riemann sees this as a method for researching one's own practice and developing a collective research base to identify practice issues and possible responses. The focus on individual practice and developing new perspectives through discussion with others has parallels with first-person action research. However, the 'action' stage when changes to practice are made is not included in this model. In contrast to Vincent and Hamilton's (2021) study, Riemann does not seek feedback from students on how they experienced this form of research. Rather, the narratives are presented as a way of demonstrating students' ability to take a self-reflexive or 'meta' position in relation to their own practice, making 'their own practice strange' (2011, p.265).

### **2.6.5 Social worker capacity for research and 'research-mindedness'**

Liedgren defines a 'research-minded practitioner' as someone who is characterised by their 'curiosity, critical reflection and capacity for critical thinking' (2022, p.88).

The first characteristic is described as a trait, whilst the second and third can be learnt. Research-minded practitioners are not necessarily conducting research, but, due to their qualities and capacities, the author argues that they should be encouraged or facilitated to complete research. McBeath and Austin (2015) suggest that research-minded practitioners are well placed to address 'practice puzzles' by asking "‘Why do we do it this way?’ and ‘How can we do this better?’" (ibid, p.448). They argue that organisational support must be in place in order for research-minded practitioners to undertake practitioner research, which should be reflected in organisational culture and processes. Examples of this include the framing of research as beneficial to organisational and practice development, the promotion of experimentation, provision of resources, time, networks, and systems of support for practitioner research.

Much of the literature relating to social worker capacity for research and 'research-mindedness', however, discusses the challenges and barriers to completing research. Literature highlights attitudinal barriers (Karki et al., 2023) and practical barriers (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013, Pullman and Fenge, 2024). In light of this literature, the completion of primary, first-person action research by hundreds of Frontline participants every year feels perhaps contrary to existing trends in the wider social work field. Morriss (2018) highlights the lack of support for and invisibility of doctoral and early career researchers in social work, in comparison with other professional and academic fields. Similarly to Year 2 participants on the Frontline programme, these researchers are juggling full-time work with part-time study, with the concomitant pressures.

Pulman and Fenge (2024) carried out mixed methods research with 22 self-selecting participants to explore capacity to undertake research by practitioners working in

local authority social service departments. They found interest in developing research skills, and applying research in practice, but respondents faced a complexity of barriers, including lack of time due to work pressures, lack of confidence in research methods and difficulties navigating ethical issues without the support of their employing organisation.

In relation to time and work pressures, Adamson et al.'s (2014) research with resilient practitioners may have relevance here. Participants identified that creating a boundary between their professional and personal identities and protection of personal time was a key component to remaining resilient. The importance of protecting work/life balance perhaps indicates that completing intellectual activity, including practitioner research, while working as a social worker, may impact on resilience if it is not possible to contain both activities within normal working hours. Pulman and Fenge (2024) suggest that the research-practice 'gap' they identified could be filled by developing partnerships between higher education and local authorities in order to strengthen research capacity.

Buck et al. (2022) provide an example of such a partnership in their description of a research 'hub' delivered by a social work teaching partnership comprised of higher education institutions, local authorities, NHS Trusts and voluntary agencies. Over three years the partnership supported practitioner research over a broad range of social work issues. Key factors that facilitated research activity were practitioner conferences, allocation of funding, a user-friendly application process, the matching of practitioners and academics, and support from online resources and workshops. In terms of benefits, the authors believe these have been 'personal, professional and collective' (ibid, p.68). Professionals' critical reflection skills and practice were enhanced as was the capacity to share research and build 'learning organisations'

and professional identities. Sadly, funding for this initiative has reduced, limiting the capacity to build on the early success of the partnership.

In another positive example of practitioner research, Ashworth and Burke (2023) discuss the ethical challenges that arose in their roles as 'insider' practitioner researchers, when they carried out research with their social work colleagues. As social work managers they identified tensions between the roles of employer, researcher and research participants, reflecting the inherent challenges and ethical dilemmas encapsulated in social work practice. They felt, however, that participants were able to openly express feelings, due to their pre-existing relationships.

#### **2.6.6 Research and identity**

In parallel with literature exploring the emotional experience of social work, the majority of research reviewed in this section either does not refer to the identities of research participants, or the identities of participants are not discussed in relation to findings. Therefore, exploration of the impact of identity on attitudes towards, and experience of research are absent. Nash's research (2011), in contrast, highlights that several participants with minoritised identities were able to explore aspects of their own experience and identity through the process of the research, enhancing their reflexive stance to social work practice. Reimann (2011), too, highlights how the ethno-autobiographical research process enables student social workers to explore the impact of issues of power, relationships, and identity on social work practice.

#### **2.6.7 Summary**

In this section of the review, I have explored literature relating to the experience of and capacity for carrying out practitioner research. While there is some evidence of

successful achievement of practitioner research, much of the literature relates to the attitudinal and practical barriers for both students and social workers. I now go on to review literature relating to my emancipatory questions.

## **2.7 What does research and literature tell us about using students' experiences as a resource for reflection and learning and to shape and develop teaching?**

### **2.7.1 Introduction**

This section of the review explores what is already known in relation to the questions:

- How can fellows' stories of their emotional experience of Year 2 shape the planning and delivery of the programme?
- To what extent can fellows' stories provide a resource for learning and reflection for staff and participants engaged in the programme?

The review is divided into three areas of focus; the first exploring students as co-creators of academic programmes; the second examining the use of student stories to evaluate programmes; the third considers the place of sharing stories as a source of emancipation, learning and support.

### **2.7.2 Students as co-creators**

Bovill et al.(2011) identify several benefits of students taking the role of co-creators of academic programmes; these include improved student engagement, enhanced learning and agency through participation, as well as an enhanced understanding of what constitutes learning itself. The authors identify three forms of student participation in pedagogical planning; students as co-creators of teaching approaches, of course design and curricula. They give examples of students

employed as consultants, creating shared goals with academics, completing observations and providing feedback, as well as third year students employed to support the redesign of curricula for first year students. The authors acknowledge that changes in power relations required by this democratic approach bring challenge. They also note that enhancing student participation does not replace the importance of academic expertise in facilitating learning.

Bovill (2020) critiques the approaches to co-creation outlined above, explaining that these normally only involve a small number of highly motivated students. She argues instead for a whole class approach to co-creation, giving examples of where groups of students have acted as 'co-navigators' of courses. In a study that perhaps more closely aligns with my own, Smith et al.(2021) carried out participatory action research with a group of undergraduate students gathering their views of the course in focus groups and then using analysis of their voices to inform changes in the course design and curriculum. This coincided with increased satisfaction levels from students.

### **2.7.3 Using student stories as tools for evaluation**

Sherwood (2020) asked 47 undergraduate students to write stories about their experiences of the course that she taught, for the purpose of gaining richer insights into students' experiences of undergraduate learning. The author's aim was to use this new knowledge to improve teaching practice and support for students.

Reflecting the nature of the childcare course they attended, students wrote stories in the third person in the form of fables or fairy tales. Sherwood sees stories as a way of making sense of experience so that the writer 'makes their worlds knowable, not just to us and others but also to themselves' (Sherwood & Nind, 2014 p.461 cited in

ibid, 2020). Stories reflected a complexity of emotions, including, for example, the emotional challenges of entering a new social setting, forming new relationships, being introduced to, and assessed on new ideas. These challenges exist within a context where students balance different roles and identities, such as student and parent, or student and social young person.

For Sherwood, the experience of reading and analysing student stories provoked an emotional response; stories highlighted the connection between increments in knowledge and managing emotion. She designed her teaching to reflect this dynamic 'merging the practice of transferring knowledge with developing relationships with students... adopting a pedagogy that is open and friendly that encourages cooperative co- learning' (2020, p.329)

#### **2.7.4 Sharing stories as a resource for learning, support and reflection**

Storytelling is defined by Alterio & McDury as 'a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit' (2004, p.29). Writing in the field of higher education, the authors argue that storytelling enhances learning and reflection by helping students to make connections between themselves and others, thought and feeling. Learning through stories is seen as relational, coming through reflective dialogue with others. In the author's experience, students' motivation to tell stories emerges from emotions and feelings in work placements, with storytelling providing an emotional release. They find that students are able to make sense of their experience if they can make connections with intense or unresolved feelings from the past.

Fitzgibbon & Harrett (2012) describe a research project they conducted with undergraduate students who were encouraged to share their learning stories. They found that sharing these stories, particularly those containing difficulty or failure, enabled students to share a commonality of experiences and empathy for others for the emotions expressed. As tutors and students learned more about each other, tutors were able to create a more supportive and less anonymous learning environment for a large cohort of students.

From the field of healthcare, Greenlough & Collard used patient stories from the Bangladeshi community to promote learning and service development. Storytelling is seen as a powerful means of 'communicating, learning and problem-solving' (2003, p.ix) which contrasts to the task of taking a patient 'history'. The former includes the selection of particular details, the ones that are most important to the narrator. Stories also contain an emotional element; they are not just about what happened but about how the characters feel. In contrast, the taking of a medical 'history' is restricted to medical 'facts', losing the complex emotional, holistic and contextual experience of illness. I am reminded of child and family assessments, which are required to be holistic, but have been critiqued for failing to fully encompass the voices and lived experiences of children (O'Reilly & Dolan, 2016). Stories are seen to form an important part of clinical learning, as in evidence cited, doctors, for example, store clinical knowledge in the form of stories rather than abstract facts (M.Eraut,1999, cited in Greenlough & Collard, 2003).

Greenlough & Collard (2003) drawing on the work of Alterio (2003), explore the advantages of using stories in the education of professionals, which include the value of sharing experiences, connecting with others, valuing emotional realities, multiple perspectives and complexity. The authors believe that a narrative approach

is particularly valuable for exploring 'otherness', worlds and experiences that we can never know directly, in this example, the marginalised and disadvantaged Bangladeshi community. They also believe that stories can be used to promote imaginative and critical thinking and as a research tool. While Frontline participants are not a marginalised community comparable to the participants in Greenlough & Collard's research, it could be argued that as students are dependent on the organisation for their qualification, they have less power than employees. For this reason, eliciting their stories could be argued to be a means to access their 'otherness' and promote new thinking.

As a family therapist, Ingram (2013) worked with another potentially disadvantaged and marginalised group. She contributed to an action research project where clients were asked to write their stories of overcoming mental health, trauma and relationships problems. For some clients the process of writing their stories was one of empowerment and self-compassion bringing about further possibilities for change. The sharing of stories enabled connection with other peoples' experiential knowledge which helped clients to speak about and reflect on their own situations. This study inspired the design of my own research, as I hoped that by sharing my research participants' stories with the wider cohort of students I would create connectivity with the latter's emotional experiences.

### **2.7.5 Storytelling and emancipation**

Froggett (2002) identifies the importance of storytelling in the emancipation of subjugated peoples. She explains that subjugation involves two processes, degradation of the body and the suppression of voice and story. For this reason liberation movements always involve the recovery of storytelling. For some groups

of people there are still stories waiting to be told. If and when their stories are told, a community or wider society needs to be ready and willing to listen, so that the groups' existence can become part of public consciousness. In this way 'the realisation of the narrative is the precondition of an emancipatory impulse' (ibid, p.175). Eliciting and sharing narratives that have previously been unheard, I would argue therefore, aligns with the emancipatory aims of action research.

### **2.7.6 Summary**

In exploring what is known in relation to my emancipatory questions, I found only a small amount of research pertaining to students as co-creators of curricula, suggesting that co-creation of curricula is either a rare activity in higher education or an under researched area. There is more research relating to the creation and sharing of student and patient narratives, although none relating specifically to social work education. However, the research I reviewed indicates that the creation and sharing of narratives can enhance self-awareness and reflection, as well as emotional connection and empathy, potentially aligning with the emancipatory aims of my research. The role of narrative in emancipation of peoples (Froggett,2002) provides a rationale for the co-creation and sharing of fellows' stories in this research project, aligning with action research's emancipatory aims.

### **2.8 Conclusion**

Through this review of research and literature I have explored the contested territory of social work education that Frontline participants occupy, as well as the emotional impact of both social work practice and practitioner research. I have found that research relating to the emotional experience of social work students is more extensive than that pertaining to early career social work, indicating that the latter is

an under researched area, which this research can contribute to. Research concerning the emotional experience of practitioner research by social workers is also limited, and I have found no research relating to the experience of completing action research by social workers, indicating that this research will extend knowledge in this area. The majority of research reviewed fails to consider the impact of minoritised or marginalised identity on emotional experience, suggesting this is another under researched area, where this research can make a contribution. Finally, while there is some research relating to the use of shared narratives in higher education, I have found no research pertaining to the co-creation and sharing of student narratives in social work education, indicating that this research will extend knowledge in the enactment of its emancipatory, as well as its investigatory aims.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I outline the rationale for the use of action research as my overarching methodology, through an explanation of the ontological and epistemological positions that influenced the design of my research. I then go on to describe the research methods employed to answer my research questions and the ethical decisions made prior to and during the research.

### **3.2 Action research: ontology and epistemology**

As outlined in my introduction, I chose action research as my overarching methodology. Action research's focus on 'action' as well as research, provided the rationale for this methodological choice, as my aim was to investigate *and* improve the experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme. In the process of investigating and improving at a 'local' level, I also aimed to generate new knowledge of benefit to the wider social work community.

Action research is an overarching term in itself, encompassing a wide variety of approaches, including participatory, first, second, and third-person action research. Each of these iterations reflect differences in the positioning of researcher and research participants in relation to each other. Herr and Anderson's (2005) typology of researcher positions include the 'insider' studying their own practices (first-person action research) and the 'insider' collaborating with other 'insiders'. I have adopted the latter position, defined by Reason and Bradbury as second-person action research, where the practitioner inquires 'face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern' (2008, p.6).

Marshall advises caution in using this term, for in order to be second-person she argues that the research must 'develop a community of inquiry with all participants becoming co-researchers, shaping research processes as well as topic(s)' (2016, p.6). While my research includes elements of co-creation of knowledge, participants were not involved in all research processes, therefore, it might be argued that my research sits somewhere between first-person action research, focussing on exploring and changing my own practice, and second-person action research. Marshall calls this 'first-person inquiry in collaborative relationships' (2016, p.6).

I will now outline some of the philosophical and epistemological roots of action research in order to explain my own epistemological and ontological position. Pragmatic philosophy, exemplified in the work of Dewey and Lewin, is argued to be one of the epistemological foundations of action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2011). In this tradition, knowledge is seen as a product of continuous cycles of action and reflection; thought should not be separated from action. Ideas are rejected unless they produce beneficial outcomes for communities.

The synthesis of psychoanalytic thought, object-relations theory and action research date back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when the founders of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations drew heavily on Kurt Lewin's legacy (Neumann, 2005). Action research was used as the dominant mode of research to fulfil the institute's aim: 'the study of human relations in conditions of well-being, conflict and change, in the community, the work group and the larger organisation, and the promotion of the effectiveness of individuals and organisations' (ibid, p.120). A combination of group relations, object-relations and systems theory were used to understand group and institutional dynamics (ibid, 2005). Drawing on this legacy, Newton and Goodman assert that systems-psychodynamic approaches bring particular advantages to the

process of 'learning in experience' which they see to be at the heart of action research (2009, p.292), by guiding the action researcher to notice, absorb and explore the emotional discomfort and unconscious communication of research participants.

As mentioned above, systems theory contributes another epistemological position to action research. In this approach, understanding the world comes from studying 'not just the components, but also the way components are organised into systems that interact with their environments, including other systems' (Greenwood, 2015, p.427). Boundaries, rather than separating systems, connect them in complex ways; the world is an 'interdependent, open system' (ibid 2015, p.428).

Systems theory builds on evolutionary theory; a particular change is one of many possibilities in a dynamic universe. Ideas from systems theory inform action research's emphasis on local knowledge and lived experience, as the diversity of human experience offers up multiple possibilities for change. Action researchers uncover variations in experiences and in a cyclical process of reflection, action and evaluation move forwards towards adaptation and reformulation. There is no final outcome, but rather further possibilities for adaptation and change (Greenwood, 2015).

The development of action research and social constructionism occurred contemporaneously, with constructionism underpinning much, but not all, action research (Gergen & Gergen, 2015). For social constructionists, social processes give rise to knowledge; what we believe to be true is constructed culturally and historically. People may coalesce around a shared understanding or truth, but there is no one 'transcendental' truth, rather multiple truths, which may be in conflict with

each other. Knowledge and emotion are created through relationships; therefore, the focus of human science moves from the individual to relationships (ibid, 2015). The implication for research is that the researcher cannot stand separately from the researched, as both co-construct meaning together.

Houston (2010) argues that the epistemological, ontological and ethical premises of critical realism concord with the cyclical nature of action research and the latter's commitment to social change. Critical realism differs from social constructionism in arguing that there is a 'real' world, with different layers of reality. There is an empirical level of experienced events; an 'actual' level, of all events whether they are experienced or not and finally a causal level comprised of the unseen mechanisms which generate events (ibid, 2010). Humans are seen to interact with social structures and, similarly to social constructionism, they make meaning when experiencing these structures.

As with systems theory, critical realists believe that the social world is made up of complex interconnecting systems with their own generative mechanisms, which make outcomes and events difficult to predict. Context, time, unseen mechanisms and human agency all contribute to outcomes. Bhaskar (1978) argued that if mechanisms are found to have harmful effects it is the duty of the researcher to change conditions so that emancipatory mechanisms are initiated. Here Houston (2010) sees parallels between the moral commitments of critical realism and action research.

Critical realism encompasses the concepts of a multi-layered society and the social construction of meaning but adds an additional layer of meaning making which is perhaps acknowledged, but not explicitly highlighted in other approaches, notably,

the 'unseen forces' that shape events. Within my overarching methodology of action research, I draw on psycho-social ideas, which highlight the unconscious processes which shape both feelings and behaviour. Critical realism's focus on these processes, within relationships and wider structures has informed my thinking. However, social constructionism's emphasis on collaboration and the equality of differing perspectives has also influenced my research design. The following quote, from authors writing from a social constructionist/narrative position, highlights the potential concordance between these differing positions:

'A participatory/cooperative research paradigm involves the therapist/researcher and client/research participant working together to discover and transform an as yet unarticulated and unknown territory into a different space that is new for both parties.' (Perlez & Brown, 2018, p.176).

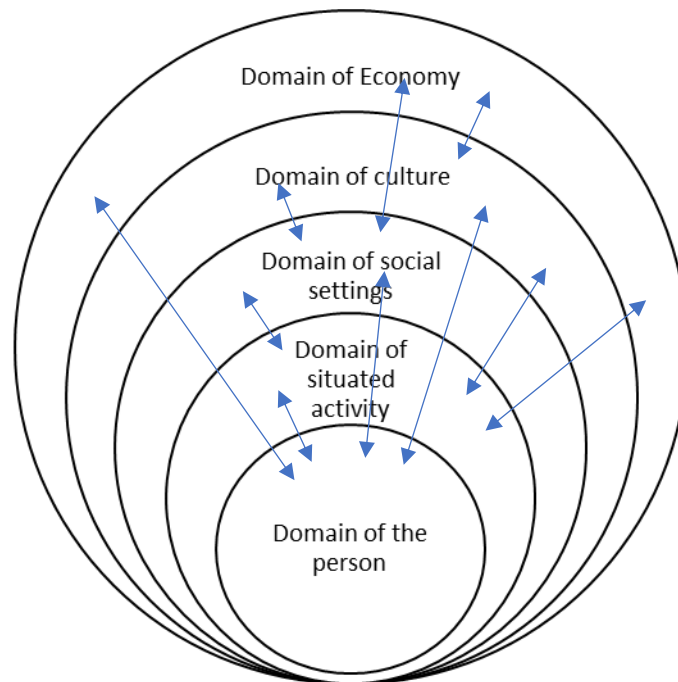
Critical realism purports a model of reality where unseen generative mechanisms at the level of the 'real' intersect with events at the level of the 'actual' to impact on lived experiences (Houston, 2010). This focus on 'unseen mechanisms', which I have called 'processes', influenced the construction of my first 'investigatory' question. Critical realism conceives of society as stratified into distinct, but interdependent domains. In Table 1 I outline these domains as defined by Houston (ibid) and consider some of the generative mechanisms or processes that may be present for participants of this study. In Chapter 5 I use this framework to make sense of and discuss my findings. Outlining the domains in table form does not illustrate how each domain intersects with others in complex ways, so this is demonstrated in Figure 1.

Table 1

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Generative Mechanisms</b>
Domain of the person	According to critical realism, individuals have human agency, but they are also subject to a rich collection of biological and psychological forces or 'mechanisms'. As a psycho-social study, I explore how mechanisms from the psychoanalytic tradition, such as defences, transference and countertransference, projection and introjection may have been at play for myself and the participants of this study.
Domain of situated activity	This domain refers to social encounters between people. For research participants, this would include, for example, visits to children and families, supervision with their manager, and research interviews with me as researcher. Psycho-social mechanisms occur within the context of social relations, so the mechanisms outlined in the domain of the person, are also at play in this domain. In addition, the mechanism of power also informs this domain, for example, in the power differential between myself as researcher and the research participant.
Domain of social settings	This domain includes formal organisations, such as local authorities and the Frontline organisation. Psycho-social mechanisms can also be present at the level of the organisation, for example, in organisational defensive behaviour, which in social work can manifest in a performance management culture and risk adverse practices (Cooper, 2018, Ruch & Murray, 2011)
Domain of culture	This domain includes 'belief systems, norms, rituals, social practices, customs and tastes that generate meaning and social cohesion but also serve to divide and oppress.' (Houston, 2020, p.81). Belief systems about the need to protect children from harm, for example, or the relative value of academic study and research, might be at play in this domain.
Domain of economy	Our society operates as part of a global capitalist economy, which informs the funding of public bodies such as local authorities and Frontline, and the unequal distribution of resources influenced by the profit motive. Mechanisms at this level impact on social work, as the majority of children and families coming to the attention of services are on the losing side of capitalist mechanisms, often without access to resources that support the raising of children, such

	as well-paid employment, secure housing and safe neighbourhoods.
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Figure 1



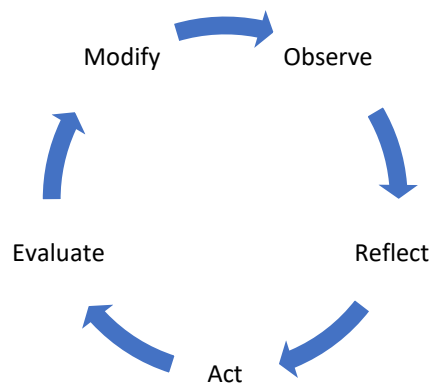
In summary, my epistemological and ontological position, choice of research methodology and methods was informed by a blend of ideas from systems theory, social constructionism, critical realism and psycho-social approaches. Drawing on critical realist and psycho-social ideas enable the ‘research’ or ‘investigatory’ aspects of my action research project to explore the unconscious processes and emotional experiences of my research participants. As stated in my introduction, however, my choice of action research methodology was also informed by the alignment with the emancipatory aims and values of social work. I wanted my research not only to investigate the situation of Year 2 participants, but to make that situation better and this is represented in the ‘action’ stage of my research.

Before going on to outline the research methods used for research interviews and analyses, I discuss how my research design was structured and carried out in relation to the action research cycle.

### 3.3 Research design: The action research cycle

As stated above, action research epistemology sees knowledge as the product of continuous cycles of action and reflection, so action research methodology is often represented diagrammatically as a cycle. The model which informed my research design was McNiff's (2017, p.12).

Figure 2



#### 3.3.1 Observe: Recruitment of participants and interviews

This stage involved 'observation' of the issue I was exploring: participants' experience of the Year 2 programme. In order to 'observe' this issue in more detail I carried out interviews with fellows of the Year 2 programme, some of whom had completed the programme and some of whom had withdrawn. My aim was to carry out in-depth interviews, so I planned to recruit seven to eight participants, with an equal distribution of those that had completed and not completed the programme. As

a single researcher completing qualitative research, I believed this would provide a manageable amount of data within the timescale of the doctoral programme.

Recruiting a relatively small sample from a large cohort (up to 400), I was aware that it would be impossible to reflect the full diversity of the larger group in a small sample. As well as including participants who had completed and withdrawn from the programme, I felt it was important to recruit participants from different regions across the programme. While Frontline is a national programme, I was aware that experiences across different regions may vary. Frontline has been rightly criticised for being less diverse than other social work programmes (Community Care, 2020) and since 2020, has made efforts to address this (Frontline, 2024). I wanted my sample to contain diversity in terms of ethnicity, but I was aware that it would be difficult to reflect the many different areas of potential disadvantage relating to social work education, such as disability and LGBTQI+ identity (Fairtlough et al., 2013), particularly as I would be relying on participants to volunteer to take part. The limitations of my approach to recruitment are further discussed in Chapter 8.

I emailed dissertation supervisors in my organisation, explaining the purpose of my research and asking them to contact their supervisees from previous cohorts to ask if they would be interested in taking part. When potential participants contacted me, I arranged a meeting with them over Microsoft Teams to discuss my research on an informal basis. After this meeting, if potential participants were happy to go ahead, I sent them my information and consent forms, with the offer to follow up any questions they may have. Only when signed information and consent forms were returned did I consider potential participants to be recruited to the research.

My initial email to supervisors resulted in contact from six fellows. After contacting me, two of the six did not respond to my request for a Teams call, so these potential volunteers did not take part. Speaking to the remaining four volunteers, I noted that they had all completed the programme. Two were from racially minoritised backgrounds, all were women, working in the south of the UK. In order to have more diversity in my sample I sent out a further email to dissertation supervisors asking them to approach men, fellows who had withdrawn and those working in the north, who may be interested in taking part. This resulted in contact from five fellows, four of whom responded to my request for an initial Teams call, taking the total number of research participants to nine.

Table 2

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Racial Identity</b>	<b>Geographical location</b>	<b>Programme status</b>
Beatrice	Female	White	South	Completed
Helen	Female	East Asian	South	Completed
Freya	Female	South Asian	South	Completed
Martha	Female	White British	South	Completed
Robert	Male	White British	North	Completed
Lily	Female	White British	North	Withdrew
Danielle	Female	White British	North	Withdrew
Katie	Female	White British	South	Withdrew
Chloe	Female	White British	North	Withdrew

I conducted research interviews over Zoom, due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. With the consent of participants, I recorded interviews, which I then transcribed.

### **3.3.2 Reflect: Data analysis**

In the 'reflect' stage, I reflected on and analysed the interviews. Reflection and analysis occurred after all interviews and formed the basis of a thematic analysis of the data. Detailed discussion of this stage of the research is contained in Chapter 4.

### **3.3.3 Act: Making changes to the programme and co-creating one-page stories**

In this stage I drew on the voices of my research participants and my learning through the process of reflection and analysis to make changes to the design and delivery of the Year 2 programme. Research participants' one-page stories were created and shared. This stage of the research is discussed in Chapter 6.

### **3.3.4 Evaluate and modify: Evaluating learning and planning further changes**

This stage involves evaluating my learning through the research process and considering the next steps I need to take to improve the participant experience based on this learning. This is discussed in Chapter 7.

### **3.3.5 Variations to the cycle**

In the reality of the research process, each stage did not follow directly on from the other, as represented in the diagram. I moved backwards and forwards between observation and reflection, as I reflected on and analysed one interview, before carrying out another one. Similarly, some actions were taken before the observation and reflection stages were completed. Representing the reality of my research would create a more complex, messy diagram. However, holding these stages in mind when planning and executing my research provided a helpful reminder of both the investigatory and emancipatory elements of my research.

### 3.3.6 Validity and generalisability in action research

The concepts of research validity and generalisability tend to be associated with positivist or realist research, drawing on the ontological and epistemological positions of scientific research (McNiff, 2017). As a values-based, morally committed methodology, action researchers' stance differs from scientific research. Herr and Anderson's validity criteria for action research are linked to its goals. The research will have 'process validity' if it contains a sound methodology and generates new knowledge. It will have 'outcome' validity if it achieves new actions and 'catalytic' validity if both the researcher and research participants achieve new learning. Finally, it will have 'democratic' validity if the results of the research are relevant to the local setting (2005, p.55).

While the focus of action research is localised change, McNiff argues that it can contribute to wider professional knowledge and practices:

While many practitioners would not claim that their work is 'generalisable' in that it can be applied to all like situations, they would agree that it is generalisable in that others can learn with and from stories of practice and adopt or adapt these to their own practices as deemed appropriate' (2017, p.31).

Cooper writing from a psycho-social perspective argues that small scale qualitative research can have wider significance:

The closer one comes to a particular case, the more its uniqueness and particularity demands to be understood, but equally, the more its value for the illumination of all other cases with which there is a family resemblance becomes evident' (2017, p.193)

Drawing on the wisdom of these authors I hope to demonstrate the validity of my research, as measured by Herr and Anderson's (2005) criteria as well as its relevance for social work and social work education, beyond the Year 2 programme at Frontline.

### **3.4 Methods used for research interviews and analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Free association narrative interviews (FANI)**

Drawing on the synthesis of psychoanalytic thought and action research pioneered by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Neumann, 2005), and to access the benefits that psycho-social approaches bring to action research (Newton and Goodman, 2009), I was keen to draw on research methods that incorporated a psychoanalytic approach in the investigatory stage of my research. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) developed the FANI method for interviewing and data analysis. Both researcher and research participant are seen to be 'defended' subjects, who may not fully know or understand why they experience things as they do or may even disguise the meaning of some of their feelings or actions. Defences are a powerful, but often unconscious mechanism to protect the self from uncomfortable or painful feelings and experiences (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). The biographical narrative interpretative method (Wengraf, 2001) is another psychoanalytically informed approach, in which a single question is used to elicit a biographical narrative. Considering both these approaches I decided that FANI was perhaps better suited to my research focus of participants' experience of the Year 2 programme; my primary focus was not personal biography.

FANI is defined as a critical realist approach, where a relationship between research participant's representations of their lives and experiences can be established. It is

argued that research participant's inner worlds 'cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and...experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world.' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.4). This is, in essence, the psycho-social approach encompassed in FANI. In this sense FANI provides an alternative to both traditional survey-based and post-modernist research such as feminist and narrative approaches and the 'hermeneutic turn' that the latter two represent. Both feminist and narrative approaches foreground the voices of research participants, particularly those from oppressed or marginalised groups in society. They critique the 'expert' positioning of the researcher, which is seen to replicate the power structures of wider society. In contrast, Hollway and Jefferson argue that research narratives, similarly to day-to-day conversation, cannot and should not be taken at face value.

FANI's approach for eliciting narratives uses a limited number of open questions to gather meaning in as much depth as possible. The aim is to elicit stories or 'free associating' narratives; the way the story is told, the points that are emphasised and the values expressed are seen to represent choices made by the narrator, which hold significance, perhaps beyond their consciousness. 'Why' questions are avoided, as they may lead the participant to defensive responses or intellectualisations. The interview questions I devised for first interviews were:

1. I'm interested in your experience of balancing being a newly qualified worker, doing your ASYE and the master's programme. When you think back to Year 2, what experiences and feelings come to mind?
2. Can you tell me about personal experiences that drew you towards social work?

3. Can you tell me about your initial feelings about researching and changing your own practice?
4. Can you tell me about your feelings as the year went on?
5. How much did you feel supported?

The aim of these questions was to elicit narratives relating to ex-participants' experiences of the second year of the programme, led, as far as possible, by their own experiences, beliefs and values. The aim of my first question, for example, was to facilitate participants' free association in relation to their experiences and feelings relating to the programme. There was of course, variation in how participants responded to these questions. For some they brought forth long and detailed narratives. Others gave shorter responses. In these cases, I followed the advice of Hollway and Jefferson by reflecting participants' words back to them, in the hope of eliciting further narratives. I tried to keep follow up questions to a minimum, although I didn't always fully succeed in this aim. As far as I could I tried to use the participant's own words and ordering for follow up questions, to preserve the participant's meaning.

FANI includes two interviews, so that researchers can test out emergent ideas and hypotheses formed from the first interview. This is followed by a 'gestalt' analysis, where the participant's narrative is considered as a whole, rather than broken into component parts. Biographical data, themes and ideas drawn from the data and a descriptive 'pen portrait' is created for each research participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The aim of the pen portrait is to write something that brings the research participant 'to life' for the reader, preserving their 'wholeness' (ibid, 2000). The researcher is tasked with identifying the research participant's defences, which

may be present in inconsistencies, contradictions and changes in tone in the participant's narrative. As a social worker, rather than a trained psychoanalyst, I was hesitant about my ability to notice my own and participants' unconscious processes. However, writing in my reflexive journal as well as sharing my data in an anonymised form with my doctoral seminar group and supervisors proved helpful in this process.

### **3.4.2 Co-research**

While I was drawn to FANI as a method that incorporates a psycho-social approach in the interview process, I felt less aligned to FANI's approach to data analysis. In FANI, this is completed separately from the research participant, with the understanding that they may not agree with the analysis, perhaps due to their own defences. This positions the researcher as more 'expert' than the research participant in their own life and potentially replicates the power differential between the two. Archard considers this problem for social work researchers and suggests that they 'may see the sharing of analyses as necessary to democratise the psychoanalytic explanation of qualitative social work research' (2021, p.198).

I felt somewhat uneasy when I read Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) interpretations of their research participants' lives and unconscious defences. Perhaps this was informed, in part, by the large power differential between the researchers and their participants who were from marginalised white working-class communities. While many of the researchers' insights may have resonated for the participants, it is inevitable that there would have been misinterpretations or inaccuracies too, aside from their defences, as narratives are always partial accounts and meanings ascribed by the narrator may be different for the listener.

I felt a lack of alignment here with action research values of collaboration and democracy and so drew on ideas from co-research methodology (Epston, 1999) to adapt my approach. Working as a narrative therapist, Epston named his clients as 'practitioner researchers', in this way identifying them as the primary experts in their own lives. He identified himself, the therapist, as the 'participant researcher' who participates in the client's 'journey of discovery' (Perlez & Brown, 2018, p.181). As a 'co-researcher' the client is seen as the source of 'local knowledge', which may have gone unseen or not been 'given sufficient credibility to be voiced or heard' (ibid, p.181). The participant researcher bears witness to 'local and situated wisdoms' which leads to new discoveries that can be of benefit to the 'membership' to which the practitioner researcher belongs. These local and situated wisdoms are drawn together to form 'archival knowledges' (ibid, p.181) which can benefit the community. For Epston, this took the form of letters between himself and 'practitioner researchers' which were made available, with the consent of authors, for the benefit of the wider patient community. I could see how this methodology aligned with action research's requirement to elicit benefits, or solutions, in addition to new knowledge.

Co-research (Epston, 1999) is a narrative approach, which centres the voices and experiences of clients. FANI (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), whilst also centring the stories and experiences of research participants, also looks for unconscious processes in research interview. As a way of integrating the ideas of the defended subject from FANI with the more collaborative approach of co-research I added two additional steps to the interview process. I shared my reflections on first interviews, relating to both myself and the participant and our possible defences, after first interviews and prior to the second interview. I also wrote a short list of questions to

ask participants, drawing on my reflections from the first interview. This enabled us to explore ideas that emerged in the first interview in more depth and consider the participant's thoughts on my interpretations. At the end of the second interview, I asked participants if they would be happy to co-create a 'story' to share for the benefit of others in the 'community', in this case Year 2 participants of the Frontline programme. In this way I hoped to build 'archival knowledge' of participants' experiences, for the benefit of others. Participants could write the story themselves, or if they chose, I could write a draft which they could adapt and change.

Sharing my reflections with participants, I was aware that I could not be truly transparent about all my thoughts and feelings. Due to my own unconscious defences and social positioning, I would have blind spots and biases. I also had a duty to do no harm to participants, which restricted what I shared at times. Despite these limitations, I felt a better ethical alignment with this approach than following the FANI method in its purest form. I am aware, too, that I applied the co-research method in a limited way. I only shared reflections and analyses of first interviews, rather than both interviews, with participants, meaning that my interpretations are privileged. Working within the time constraints of the doctoral programme as a single researcher, my research design was only partially collaborative, bringing it perhaps within Marshall's definition of 'first-person enquiry in collaborative relationships' (2016, p.6).

### **3.4.3 Voice-centred relational method (VCRM)**

My early attempts to analyse participants' first interviews drawing on the 'gestalt' and looking for inconsistencies or contradictions in accounts proved difficult. I felt uncertain and unsure if I was analysing the data in the 'right way'. I was acutely aware, particularly as an insider researcher, that my own social position and biases

would influence what I noticed and didn't notice in the data, and 'it is not easy to grasp the "unconscious" filters through which we experience the world' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.122). Presenting and discussing data with my doctoral seminar group and supervisors helped to bring new perspectives, but time limitations meant that not all my data could be discussed in this way.

I looked for a method of data analysis that would help to structure and organise my thinking and decided to use Mauthner & Doucet's VCRM(ibid) to analyse all of my research interviews. This method is underpinned by a 'relational ontology' which views 'human beings as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations' (Gilligan, 1992, quoted in ibid, 1998, p.125). This aligns with the systems and critical realist ontologies that underpin my overarching methodology. It translates into a method of data analysis that explores research participants' accounts in terms of their relationships with others and their social and cultural contexts.

The method involves several separate readings of the interview transcript. Firstly, the researcher reads for the 'plot', the story that is being told by the research participant. In the second reading, they consider how they are responding emotionally and intellectually to the text. A reflexive stance is taken to consider the influence of one's background, social position and experiences. Next, the researcher considers how the research participant speaks and feels about themselves, for example, whether they use the first or the third person, and what this use of language may represent. In the next reading, the focus is on interpersonal relationships, how the research participant relates to those around them. Finally, the participant account is considered in relation to the wider social, cultural and political context. Once these separate analyses have been completed, Mauthner and Doucet suggest that themes

can be identified across the data set. Delaying the 'reductionist' stage of data analysis, when transcripts are broken up into themes, is seen as a way of preserving the differences between, and uniqueness of, each research participant.

By adopting a more structured approach to analysing the data I felt I could organise my thinking better. Reading for my own emotional and intellectual responses I was still able to consider potential unconscious processes for both myself and the participants, which I highlighted in the text when I wrote up my analysis. Although VCRM is not a method that draws on psychoanalytic ideas, as FANI does, its focus on the stances of both the researcher and the researched and their relational and societal context, could be argued to mirror these elements of FANI's psycho-social approach.

#### **3.4.4 Thematic analysis**

Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (2006, p.79). A theme is identified as 'something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.' (ibid, p.82). What counts as important is clearly influenced by the researcher, so Braun and Clarke identify their model as 'reflexive thematic analysis' (2021). They specify seven stages of analysis which include 'familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up' (ibid, p.39).

Transcribing, then completing VCRM analyses of research interviews, whilst simultaneously looking for evidence of my own and participants' defended responses, enabled me to become deeply immersed or 'familiarised' with the data. In

this period of immersion, I found that themes started to emerge in my mind, in a seemingly organic and reflexive process. In this sense, I initially deviated from Braun and Clarke’s model as I did not start the process of analysis by reading transcripts to identifying ‘codes’ in the data, which they describe as ‘a feature... (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst’ (2006, p.88). Rather, I had started my analysis through the VCRM, through which I identified themes across the data set.

My initial themes related to my first investigatory question: ‘What are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?’. I used Nvivo software to input these initial themes identified across the data set. As I did this, I noticed new themes and reviewed my initial themes, combining some themes and re-naming others. In this way I followed Braun and Clarke’s stages of reviewing, developing, defining and naming themes.

Table 3: Diagrammatic representation of the methods and process of analysis

<b>Research method</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
FANI	First research interview	Interview transcript
FANI and co-research	Researcher gestalt analysis, with a focus on my own and the research participant’s defences	Written reflection to share with the research participant and questions for the second interview to explore issues raised in the first interview.
FANI and co-research	Second research interview where we discuss my reflections and questions prompted by the first interview.	Interview transcript
Co-research	Co-creation of the research participant’s one-page story of their	A one-page story of the participant’s experience to

	experience of the Year 2 programme.	share with current and future cohorts.
Voice-centred relational method (VCRM)	Analysis of first and second interviews incorporating the identification of defences	Emerging themes relating to the processes supporting and detracting from the emotional containment of research participants.
FANI/VCRM	Creation of pen portraits	Pen portraits of each research participant
Thematic analysis	Nvivo analysis inputting emerging themes across the data set	Themes relating to the processes supporting and detracting from the emotional containment of research participants.

### 3.4.5 Researcher reflexivity and keeping a reflexive journal

According to Bradbury the quality of action research is in part determined by the level of researcher reflexivity. Action researchers should take a 'personal, involved and self-critical stance' (2015, p.8). Etherington defines researcher reflexivity as 'the inclusion of the researcher's story, thus making transparent the values and beliefs that are held, which almost certainly influence the research process and its outcomes' (2004, p.27). Scheurich calls this the 'conscious and unconscious baggage' (2014, p.73) that we bring to the research. Both FANI and VCRM require researchers to be self-reflexive in their approach to research interviews and analysis. This was my aim, which was helped through keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

I used my journal to record my emotional and intellectual responses to different events, including research interviews, supervision sessions, reading, doctoral seminar groups and implementing ideas from my research into the design and delivery of the programme. These journal entries helped me to maintain a self-

reflexive stance and provided a useful source of data, as a record of my thoughts and feelings, which might otherwise have been overlooked or forgotten.

### **3.5 Ethics and power**

Ethical approval for this research project was sought and received through the Tavistock and Portman Trust Ethics Committee and Frontline. In line with ESCR's (2021) framework for research ethics, this process helped me to plan how to minimise any potential harm to participants and maximise benefits. This was something I tried to hold in mind throughout the research process.

In the process of recruiting participants, I aimed to give them as much information as I could about the purpose of my research, the theoretical frameworks I was using and what would be involved at every stage, so that I could be sure they were giving fully informed consent, (see appendix 10.3, information and consent forms). In both initial Teams meetings and information forms the voluntary nature of the research was emphasised and participants were told that they could leave the research at any time. I made clear that confidentiality and anonymity would be respected, aside from concerns that would require enactment of Frontline's safeguarding procedure. In line with this, pseudonyms have been used throughout the research and any details that would identify participants have not been included. Locations of interviews were agreed in line with government guidance relating to COVID-19, taking into account participants' need for confidentiality and safety.

I was aware that for fellows, discussing experiences, particularly of stressful times could be emotionally difficult. In addition to this I realised that my own interpretations of our discussions, particularly when considering defences against anxiety, may be distressing. I needed to be mindful of any potential harm that may arise and have

strategies in place to mitigate this as far as possible. I gave participants a choice of whether they wanted me to send them my reflections on first interviews via email, or to share them verbally at the start of the second interview. Before starting interviews, I checked that participants were happy to proceed and made sure that they knew that they could pause, take a break, or end the interview if they needed to. I offered a de-brief at the end of interview and signposted participants to external sources of support if they felt this would be helpful. This was not taken up by any of my participants.

In co-creating their one-page stories, participants were able to specify how this was shared and for what purpose, through their consent forms. So, for example, they could agree for it to be shared with staff, but not students or only to be used for planning purposes. In order to share my findings and discuss how we could use my research for the development and delivery of the Year 2 programme, staff members of the Year 2 working group were also recruited as research participants and were provided with information and consent forms (see appendix 10.3) in the same way as fellows.

I asked all participants if they would like to receive updates about my research, which they agreed. I have sent them updates relating to the progress of my research and how their voices have been used to shape the programme.

One of the first ethical dilemmas I faced in the research process was during the recruitment of research participants. As well as being contacted by fellows of the programme some participants currently taking the programme volunteered to take part. I felt uncomfortable saying 'no', as their willingness to take part and share their experiences felt admirable. However, I felt it would not be ethical to include current

participants in my research. Firstly, these volunteers would not have experience of the whole year programme. More importantly, they had yet to receive their master's qualification, so the power held in my role, as curriculum lead had greater significance than for those that were no longer completing the programme. For these reasons I thanked them for their interest, but I did not include them in my research sample.

A key ethical dilemma I encountered during the research process involved research participant Martha's participation. She was the first person I interviewed and shared my reflections with prior to the second interview. At the end of the second interview, I asked Martha if she would be happy to write a one-page story of her experience and she agreed. However, I did not hear from her for some time, so wrote a follow up email, apologising that my request had been a little vague and sending her an example of another participant's one page story. I stressed that writing a story was her choice, but if she did want to go ahead, I could do a first draft for her to amend, as I had done for other participants, if this was her preference. I didn't hear back from Martha, so did not contact her again apart from the research updates I sent to all participants.

I had to consider if, in not replying, Martha was in effect withdrawing from the research. I wondered if Martha, who had been very open about the difficult emotional journey through both years of the programme, now regretted speaking to me. Did the power of my insider researcher role, make it difficult for her to ask to withdraw? Maybe there was a more prosaic explanation. In the busyness of local authority work she may have missed my email or felt too overwhelmed with work to reply. There was no way of knowing. In our second interview Martha told me that she had found my reflections helpful in understanding her own emotional responses to the

programme, so I had gained the impression that she had found being part of the research beneficial rather than harmful. However, her lack of response led me to question this.

I considered whether I should include Martha's data in the research and decided, on balance, that I would include it. I wanted to honour the time that Martha had given to speak to me and the rich learning I had gained from speaking to her. The option to withdraw had been outlined in the information form and was explained to Martha in-person during the interview process and she had not taken this course of action. I cannot be certain that this was the right decision and I remain unsure about it.

Another ethical issue I encountered during the research process related to my interviews with Katie. Her experience focussed on Frontline's refusal to allow her to intercalate the master's until the following year. Katie's experiences raised key issues in relation to the implementation of the intercalation policy, and she gave her consent for these experiences to be discussed with the programme management team (PMT). I felt her story had less relevance for Year 2 participants in general, as only a small minority apply for intercalation each year. For this reason, I did not ask Katie to create a one-page story, but instead created a narrative based on her experiences that I shared with the PMT. While this was a variation from my research plan, I felt it met the aims of my emancipatory research questions, to draw on participants' experiences to shape the design and delivery of the programme.

### **3.5.1 'Insider' research**

Being an 'insider' researcher could be said to bring particular ethical challenges. Coghlan and Brannick (2010, cited in Holian & D.Coghlan, 2013) argue that there are three elements to being an insider action researcher: pre-understanding, role

duality and organisational politics. Pre-understanding relates to existing knowledge gained through the person's job role, which will include knowledge of organisational processes and culture. They argue that it is important for researchers to be able to distinguish between what they know, what they think they know and what they are unaware of. This was a challenge for my research. Much of what my research participants said sounded familiar to me, so it felt important to try to step back from the data, to see it if possible with 'fresh eyes' whilst at the same time acknowledging my closeness to it, as an insider researcher. Adopting a psycho-social lens and looking for my own and participants' defences helped me to do this, but it was not easy. I am aware that an 'outsider' researcher may have interpreted the data very differently from me, due to the impact of my organisation's culture and my role within it, on the research process.

The challenges of role duality and organisational politics coalesced at times. As mentioned in my introduction, Frontline plans to change the Year 2 curriculum with the introduction of the choice to do literature review. This is seen as a way of reducing attrition from the programme. I learnt of this proposed change when a document, written for the Department for Education, was shared with the whole organisation. Initially, I felt undermined in my role as both curriculum lead for Year 2 and as a researcher who was trying to bring about change. Even though my organisation had agreed to my research, I was left with the feeling that they did not see my research as a driver of the change they required, preferring instead to bring about 'top down' change.

In terms of organisational politics, though, I could see that both the Department of Education and Frontline were driven by the 'big picture' of attrition from the programme. In order to win a new contract from the government, Frontline needed

to demonstrate a way they could 'fix' this problem. My small-scale, qualitative research, in contrast, could not aim or claim to 'fix' this problem, but instead sought to incrementally improve the experience of the Year 2 programme. Framing my research in this way, I saw its value to me in my role as curriculum lead to current and future participants of the programme, which enabled me to overcome my initial upset and resistance to 'organisational politics' at Frontline.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the ontological and epistemological positions underpinning my overarching methodology of action research. I have introduced the reader to the methods I used in conducting my research and concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations and decisions that formed part of the research process. The next chapter outlines my research findings.

## **4 Findings and analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents my findings and analysis in relation to my first investigatory question: what are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants? It draws on the data collected in interviews with my research participants.

I begin the chapter with pen portraits of my nine research participants which were created as a part of the process of analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). I then go on to present two emblematic cases as a way of illustrating the way I applied 'gestalt' analysis (ibid, 2000) and VCRM (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) when analysing interview transcripts. Finally, I present a thematic analysis of the data in relation to the investigatory question above, where I begin to consider how the analysis can contribute to the wider professional field. This discussion is further developed in Chapter 5.

### **4.2 Pen portraits**

Hollway & Jefferson (2000) use 'pen portraits' as a means of bringing research participants to life for the reader. These portraits, it is argued, provide an overall sense of the people who took part in the research, for those without access to the raw data. In the VCRM analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998), the researcher first reads for the 'plot' of the interview. I applied a blend of Hollway and Jefferson's 'gestalt' analysis (2000) and VCRM to my interviews and found that combining the 'pen portrait' and the 'plot' enabled me to create a summary of the person and their situation in Year 2 of the programme. These anonymised portraits are presented

below, with some details withheld to further protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

#### **4.2.1 Martha**

Martha is a white British young woman. She was motivated to train as a social worker having experienced adult social care involvement in her family of origin. She initially planned to work in adult social care, but when she joined the Frontline programme she found she loved working with children. She completed her ASYE working with looked after children in the South of England. She described her manager and the team culture as very supportive and felt happy in her current role. In contrast, she described herself as 'very, very anxious and unhappy' in the first year of the Frontline programme, when she was working towards her social work qualification. She considered leaving the programme, but changed her mind when she was offered a job working with looked after children. She completed her action research project in her ASYE, gaining her master's qualification, but she was disappointed with her result.

At the start of the year she felt enthusiastic about researching her own practice as she felt it would be useful, but as her caseload increased significantly, due to high levels of staff sickness, she found herself avoiding working on her project, which felt like a chore. She was working long hours and so did not feel motivated to reflect on and write about her practice outside her working hours. She prioritised her social work role, which was important to her and her own wellbeing, but had regrets about not prioritising the dissertation. Prior to taking part in this research, Martha had not shared her feelings of anxiety with Frontline for fear of being judged as inadequate to be a social worker. Despite her success in completing the programme and her

enjoyment of her social work role, Martha compared herself unfavourably to other Frontline participants, who she believed to be more competent and confident than herself. She felt that Frontline's 'elitist' culture informed her thinking. In contrast, Martha's ASYE programme offered a safe space for reflection which Martha found invaluable.

#### **4.2.2 Beatrice**

Beatrice is a white woman in her mid-twenties whose family of origin live outside the UK and who completed her first degree in another country. She joined the Frontline programme after finishing her degree, moving to the UK for the first time. Having completed a social science degree, Beatrice was motivated to work with people, to learn about herself and others. She considered applying to TeachFirst as well as Frontline, but decided that the unit model, with the support of a consultant social worker in the first year best met her needs for support. Beatrice worked in a specialised team in a local authority in the South of England in her ASYE. Initially she was supported by a 'wonderful manager' who limited Beatrice's caseload and offered regular time for supervision and reflection. However, Beatrice's situation changed when this manager left and was replaced by someone who took a more task-driven approach to the work, offering no time for reflection or feedback. At this time Beatrice's caseload increased significantly and she had her first experience of a case going into proceedings. Beatrice's ASYE coordinator was an invaluable source of support through the year, advocating for Beatrice when her caseload became unmanageable and offering valuable emotional support like a 'mamma bear'. Beatrice's unit colleagues from the first year of the programme continued to support each other, keeping in touch via WhatsApp, answering each other's questions and keeping connected whilst working remotely.

When working under her first manager Beatrice felt enthusiastic about the action research project. She read for her project before the start of the working day and felt she was on top of the task. However, when her first manager left, and her caseload increased in number and complexity the dissertation began to feel like a chore. Beatrice was emotionally drained by the work and felt she was 'working on fumes'. She forced herself to continue with her research, but when she put aside time to work on the project, she found she was reading but not understanding and writing to put words on a page just to meet the word count. Before the dissertation submission date there was an emergency in her family, and she decided to leave the country to be with them. She submitted her dissertation by the deadline, hoping just to pass, but failed the first submission. Beatrice decided to stay in her country of origin to be with her family and resigned her social work post. Having left social work, she found she had the mental and emotional headspace re-write her dissertation and passed her re-submission.

#### **4.2.3 Helen**

Helen is a woman of East Asian origin who was adopted and brought up in the UK. After graduating from university, she worked in the corporate sector but found these jobs unfulfilling. She was inspired to apply to the Frontline programme through her own positive experience of adoption. She felt social work would be hard, but more worthwhile than her previous jobs.

Helen's story is one of getting through a difficult year, being proud of what she achieved, but ultimately deciding to leave social work. Helen found the second year of the programme very intense. This was influenced by several factors; moving on-

line mid-year and missing contact with people in the office and on teaching days; people leaving her team; and the constant pressure of needing to complete the dissertation. Helen had a supportive manager and team but felt a disconnect between how she had been taught to practice on the first year of the programme and what was expected of her in Year 2. She felt her local authority, in the South of England, prioritised working to timescales and recording, rather than the quality of interventions with families. She was sometimes expected to 'monitor' families rather than support change, which did not align with her values. Helen felt she was failing as a social worker; she felt ill-equipped and lacking in the resource to address the multiple disadvantages faced by families, such as poor housing and poverty and this informed her decision to resign her post.

In the first year of the programme Helen found reflective writing very difficult, but by the end of the year 'something clicked' and as she transitioned into the second year, writing about herself and her practice felt more achievable. While the work involved made the year very intense, Helen did not regret doing the dissertation and she is proud of what she achieved. She was surprised how personal her work was and felt hesitant about sharing it with her mother, despite their close relationship. Helen's action research project required her to change her practice to better align with her values. She found it hard to sustain the changes she made, which contributed to feelings of failure in her role.

#### **4.2.4 Freya**

Freya is a woman of Southeast Asian heritage who works in a safeguarding team in the South of England. Prior to joining Frontline, she completed the TeachFirst

programme, but left when she found that she preferred to discuss issues and mentor young people, rather than teach them. In addition to a teaching qualification, Freya has significant experience in the third sector, working and managing empowerment programmes for disadvantaged young people. In contrast to all other research participants, who completed the Year 2 programme in the previous academic year, Freya completed the programme two years ago.

Freya's is a story of difficulty followed by resolution. Her experience of Year 2 was influenced by her unhappiness with the local authority where she was working. She describes it as her 'most unpleasant year in social work'. At the end of Year 1 she was hoping to be allocated to a team which she understood to have an excellent manager. However, that manager left, and Freya joined a newly formed team with no pre-existing relationships. This left Freya feeling quite alone. She found her new manager's style uncomfortable, but as this was her first post as a qualified worker, she was unsure whether things 'had to be this way'. She spoke about her experience in what she thought was a confidential space, but her thoughts were shared, leaving her feeling exposed. Freya found her dissertation supervisor both supportive and inspirational. Her unit were also an important source of support; their relaxed, down to earth relationships remain important to Freya to this day.

Freya was interested in researching her own practice but was ambivalent about reflection; she recognised its importance, but worried about what it would bring to the surface. In the first year of the programme, she had found herself 'overthinking' much of the time, uncovering insecurities and aspects of her life that she was unhappy about. Freya wanted reflection in Year 2 to be better contained. She had

passed Year 1 of the programme but had not achieved the academic results she expected; this impacted on her confidence in her academic ability. Despite this she wanted to complete the Year 2 programme and pushed herself to achieve her aim. Towards the end of the programme, she did her working week over four extended days to enable her to complete her master's on the fifth day.

Frontline participants are expected to stay in their allocated local authority while they complete the programme, so Freya planned to leave her local authority as soon as she had completed her research. Freya is now much happier in a new local authority. She has a good relationship with her manager and team and feels she can be her authentic self. She appreciates that her manager gives her space for reflection, without her having to ask. The team check in every morning and Freya believes the good team culture directly influences the work that they do.

#### **4.2.5 Robert**

Robert is a white British man who joined the Frontline programme after working for many years in the IT sector. After completing a social science degree in later life, he wanted to move into a sector which would align with his values relating to social justice. He now works in a safeguarding team in the North of England. Robert found Year 2 challenging; getting the dissertation written at the end was a bit of a 'crunch' when he needed to put in a lot of extra time. He also needed to get a short extension after getting COVID-19. However, he found the teaching days motivating, he loved accessing reading through the library and the research had a positive impact on his practice. The ASYE was quite rigorous and structured in Robert's local authority which added an additional workload. Robert's manager was supportive, building up

his casework slowly and discussing theoretical ideas with him that helped his thinking.

#### **4.2.6 Katie**

Katie is a white British woman working in the South of England. Before joining the Frontline programme, she had worked in several roles supporting young people, including those with additional needs. She was motivated to become a social worker by a desire to provide better support and advocacy for children and families. At the Summer Institute, Katie realised that she had needed, but not received, support and protection as a child.

Katie felt overloaded with work very quickly in Year 2; a case escalated to proceedings from 'child in need' in a matter of weeks, and other families were in crisis. Katie was working long hours to complete court paperwork, so was feeling exhausted and did not have the mental capacity to complete the ethical approval process. A crisis in Katie's family of origin happened at this time and so personal issues were overshadowing her life. Katie asked to defer the master's for a year. Katie's dissertation supervisor and her local authority were supportive of this decision and helped her with the process. However, in applying their Intercalation Policy, Frontline argued that Katie should defer both elements of the programme, her job as well as the academic programme. Katie did not want to give up her employment and felt devastated by this decision. Despite a commitment to do the masters, she felt forced to withdraw from the programme. Katie has moved into a specialist role in her local authority and still hopes to complete a master's course as part of her career development.

#### 4.2.7 Lily

Lily is a white British woman working in the North of England. She lived independently from the age of seventeen after becoming pregnant. Lily worked for many years in roles supporting children and young people and completed an undergraduate degree in a related subject. When Lily gained a place on the Frontline programme, she decided that she would only complete the first year of the programme in order to get her social work qualification. She felt studying for two years might put too much strain on herself and her family. However, she changed her mind in order to be a role model for her daughter, who was now at university.

Lily would have preferred to have been given a choice of methodology for research in Year 2. Rather than focussing on her own practice, she would have liked to have explored a subject of interest to her. She felt that she was a naturally reflexive practitioner, so did not need the master's to enhance this aspect of her practice.

At the start of Year 2, Lily's caseload rapidly increased and by December she felt completely overwhelmed and that she wasn't coping. Despite being committed to completing the Year 2 programme, Lily found it increasingly hard to focus and think at this time. She was unable to attend the teaching days, as her manager booked meetings in her calendar that she had to attend. Struggling to understand what was required of her, Lily drew on the support of her unit colleagues when completing her ethics application, which she managed to submit. Lily had concerns about her manager's style, which she perceived as bullying. She was derogatory about the master's programme, which felt uncomfortable for Lily.

A worker in Lily's team resigned and she and Lily started sharing how they were feeling. For the first time Lily realised that she was not alone in her feelings. Lily spoke to a senior manager about her situation; however, she remained in her team for several further months until she was finally relocated after a formal investigation. Having struggled to make progress with her action research project Lily asked to defer the programme for a year but was advised that her application was unlikely to be successful. Lily did not submit by the deadline and was offered a capped re-submission. However, Lily felt she did not have the time or capacity to complete the research and dissertation within the timescales and so withdrew from the programme.

#### **4.2.8 Chloe**

Chloe is a white British woman working in the North of England. After leaving university Chloe worked in the adult mental health sector. Listening to adults' stories she recognised that many of their difficulties had their origins in childhood experiences. She decided that by training for children and families social work she could perhaps have a greater impact in her work.

Chloe found Year 2 stressful and overwhelming. For her, the three components of the year, the job, the ASYE and the master's, did not complement or support each other; altogether they felt unmanageable. Chloe felt that the master's programme was invisible to her local authority; they did not speak about it and did not take account of her additional workload when allocating her cases. Throughout the year Chloe's caseload was dominated by court work, which entailed working long hours,

in the evenings and weekends. She therefore had no capacity to complete the reading, writing and research required for the master's programme. Chloe found the ASYE workload more manageable but, due to her heavy caseload, she also struggled to complete that programme within the suggested timescales. Chloe found meetings with her ASYE coordinator unsupportive and a 'tick box' activity. She was told she was a competent worker, but her emotions were not acknowledged, even when she cried in a meeting.

Despite the stress of the year, Chloe was very keen to do the master's and only withdrew at the end of the programme, after seeking an extension. As far as she is aware no one in Chloe's local authority knew that she had withdrawn, as no one spoke to her about it. She did not raise the subject herself, as it was a painful decision to make. Chloe's dissertation supervisor was very supportive and knew that Chloe wanted to do the master's if she could. Chloe's family and friends advised her to withdraw from the master's as they were worried about her well-being. She followed her family's advice, but still has regrets about her decision.

#### **4.2.9 Danielle**

Danielle is a white British woman working in the North of England. Prior to joining the Frontline programme Danielle worked in the third sector in roles supporting children and families. She is passionate about issues of social justice and was motivated to become a social worker to have more influence and impact.

Danielle described Year 2 as a 'rollercoaster' and a 'baptism of fire'. At the beginning of the year Danielle's team experienced a high turnover of staff, with the manager and several staff leaving. This coincided with Danielle having a case in proceedings for the first time, when she felt she needed the support of more experienced colleagues, but this was in short supply. She questioned whether she could carry on, but the arrival of a new manager allayed these fears and Danielle again felt supported in her role. Danielle's ASYE supervisor and Frontline coach were additional sources of support that were invaluable for Danielle. She was initially enthusiastic about the master's programme and submitted her ethics application. She felt the opportunity of a free master's was too good to give up, as she felt she would never have the resources to fund a tertiary course herself.

As Danielle's workload increased, she found herself working longer hours. She needed weekends to relax and re-charge, so she began to postpone work on the dissertation. Her ethics application required amendments, which she put off making. She also avoided contact with her dissertation supervisor. She had significant events going on in her personal life and so decided to prioritise her well-being. Rather than actively withdrawing from the Year 2 programme, she let the dissertation 'slide'. She was committed to her job and completing the ASYE, so she felt this was the only way she could look after herself, given her multiple commitments at the time. She has regrets about her decision, feeling upset that those with fewer commitments were able to complete the programme, whilst she could not.

Completing the ASYE programme, Danielle felt a sense of pride in all that she had achieved and learnt over the year, her experience of the 'rollercoaster' leaving her feeling more prepared and resilient than at the start of the programme.

### **4.3 Emblematic cases**

Having introduced the reader to those that took part in my research, I now present two 'emblematic' cases (Alasuutari et al., 2008), which highlight many, if not all of the themes across the data set. These cases illustrate how I used a blend of FANI (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and VCRM (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) to reflect on and analyse the interviews, as outlined in Chapter 3, drawing too on my reflexive journal to explore my own responses and influence in the interviews.

In the process of analysing the data, a re-reading of Beatrice's first interview prompted the first emergence of initial themes. Commonalities between her words and ideas and those of my other participants clarified in my mind, which enabled me to draft a set of initial themes. As Beatrice's experience appeared to have much in common with my other participants I chose her as my first emblematic case.

Deciding on a second case was more difficult. As Beatrice had completed the programme, I decided to select a participant who had not completed, to represent the split in my sample. I initially ruled out Katie, as she had cited the inflexibility of the intercalation policy as the main cause of her failure to complete the programme. While the intercalation policy was also mentioned by Lily, the focus on the policy felt unique to Katie, so I felt her story had less commonalities with the other participants who failed to complete. Danielle's reasons for non-completion related to her personal circumstances, whereas for Lily and Chloe the pressures came mainly from their local authority context. The challenges of the local authority context was a common theme across all participants, but Lily's situation, which led to a formal

investigation, was unique to her. This led me to choose Chloe as my second emblematic case.

On an initial reading of their stories there are some key similarities and differences between Beatrice and Chloe. Both are white young women; Beatrice appears to be from a more privileged background than Chloe. Beatrice worked in the South of England, Chloe works in the North. Beatrice has left social work, Chloe continues in her role.

#### **4.3.1 Beatrice**

After transcribing Beatrice's first interview I carried out a 'gestalt' analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and then wrote up my reflections in a form that I was happy to share with Beatrice.

*Listening back to the recording, Beatrice strikes me as a mature, self-assured person and this fits with my image of a person who would take on a leadership role in an organisation. I am struck though, that Beatrice mentions her young age and lack of experience a couple of times during the interview, saying that with hindsight she would take more time before joining the programme. Beatrice also talks about a need for support from a CSW, which in part informed her decision to join Frontline, rather than Teach First. She emphasises the importance to her of containing, almost maternal figures; her first manager and the ASYE coordinator who was like a 'mamma bear'. This made me wonder how Beatrice sees herself; she talks about exploring her own identity through her studies, as a person who did her first degree, professional qualification and masters away from her home country. I am left*

wondering about Beatrice's sense of self now she has returned 'home'. Does she see herself as the mature self-assured person that I see?

There were a few times in the interview when Beatrice laughed when she mentioned what I imagined to be very difficult moments, such as her first manager leaving, not knowing what her team members looked like, the course surfacing inner turmoil. Beatrice shared some of the emotional impact of these difficult times; coming home feeling completely drained, working 'on fumes', having 'nothing left in me', crying in a session with her coach. Her speech was measured and calm and I wondered if the raw emotion of those terrible times were breaking through, but in a defended form, in the moments of laughter.

When Beatrice had a less supportive manager and a high caseload, the dissertation became a chore which she resented and struggled to motivate herself to complete. For Beatrice, it seems that her difficult and stressful work context impacted significantly on her capacity to gain benefit from the master's programme. A stressful and difficult context has had a similar impact for some of my other interviewees and many other participants on the programme. Beatrice faced extreme stress and pressure towards the deadline, when she experienced a family emergency. I am interested that Beatrice completed and handed in her work, despite this situation. I would like to explore how Beatrice feels about the project now, having re-submitted. Has the project been useful in any way? Do the bitter and resentful feelings remain? Would a different type of assessment have been more helpful, given the difficult situation she was in?

Beatrice mentioned times of feeling isolated when working remotely, separated from colleagues and with a task-driven manager who elicited feelings of inadequacy. She

*was giving her all, but receiving no feedback; she was left unsure if her 'all' was enough. Similar painful feelings of isolation have been experienced by others I have interviewed. I was struck, though, that despite this very difficult situation Beatrice had the capacity to make connections and benefitted from the support of others, such as her unit members and the ASYE group. In turn, Beatrice offered containment to others, such as the Frontline participants in the year below her. Here I got the sense of the 'mature' Beatrice, reaching out, getting support and supporting others.*

*I am very drawn to Beatrice's message that 'you are not failing if you are not excelling' and I would like to explore this with her further. I think this could be a very supportive message to share with future Year 2 participants, for whom keeping going and surviving the emotional labour of social work is an achievement in itself.*

After sending my reflections to Beatrice, I wrote in my reflexive journal:

*I have just sent my reflections on my first interview with Beatrice to her. I found sharing my thoughts as nerve wracking as it had done with Martha. I wasn't at all sure that I had got my reflections 'right'. Was I capturing the 'whole'? I think Beatrice was quite well defended against her emotions in the interview and perhaps this made it harder for me to connect with the emotions. When I started writing I found myself focussing on what practical solutions Beatrice might offer and minimising the emotional content, perhaps as she had done. Then I worried that she may feel unheard or misunderstood, so I included more about the emotional content.*

*Questions to ask Beatrice for the second interview.*

*What were her thoughts and feelings on reading my reflections?*

*Where has Beatrice arrived at in her exploration of her own identity?*

*Having handed in her re-submission, what are Beatrice's feelings about the dissertation? Would a different type of assessment been more useful in her challenging context?*

*What ideas from her story would be most useful for Year 2 participants?*

At the end of my second interview with Beatrice, I asked her if she would like to write her own one-page story, or whether she would prefer that I write the story for her to edit and change. Beatrice was one of only two of my participants to write her own story, which can be found in Appendix 10.4.1. Beatrice gave permission for her story to be shared with Frontline participants and staff.

As outlined in Chapter 3, I amended my approach to analysis of interviews during the data gathering process, deciding to structure my analysis in line with the VCRM, whilst including reflections on myself and my participants as defended subjects. After completing my second interview with Beatrice, I produced two analyses of my first and second interviews, drawing on this new blended method.

*Reading for the plot*

*(see Beatrice's pen portrait)*

*My emotional and intellectual responses (issues relating to my own and Beatrice's possible defences highlighted)*

*My responses to Beatrice are ambivalent. It feels impossible not to warm to her, an articulate, warm and self-assured young woman who is happy to speak to me about her experiences. That self-assuredness fits with her choice to take on a leadership*

position during the programme. My ambivalence comes in as I feel this is informed by what seems to me to be a position of privilege. She is white, brought up abroad, doing her first and second degrees in different countries, which suggests to me that she comes from a privileged background. Her speech is self-assured, but looking back at the recording I think I notice her defences when she laughs when talking about difficult things.

My ambivalence is informed by my own values, warming to people who come from less privileged backgrounds, but also connecting with people who feel similar to me. When Beatrice talks of her motivations for coming into social work, she is driven by her values, but there is something else about doing a graduate scheme, that feels more connected to getting a career, than social work values. I admire the support that Beatrice gives others and her message that you don't have to succeed all the time. I think this is a valuable message, but one that it is probably easier to believe from a position of privilege.

#### Reading for the I

I notice that there is slightly less 'I' in this narrative than others and I think this is because Beatrice took on a role that enabled her to hear about the experience of others; she can think of the experience of the wider group, the 'we' as well as her own personal experience.

#### Reading for relationships

Beatrice's first manager, the ASYE coordinator and the WhatsApp group feature as positive relationships. The latter takes the form of informal supervision, as well as a source of responses to questions. The coaching relationship was another source of support for Beatrice. In one session she broke down and cried and has heard that

*other participants had the same experience. She notes that for some Year 2 participants, coaching was their only space for sharing feelings.*

*Beatrice's relationship with her family plays a role in the narrative. As she has lived away from her family for some years, so some of the family connection has been lost. When a family crisis occurred, Beatrice is unsure about going home, because of her work commitments, but is persuaded by her ASYE coordinator that she can and should not be present for families on her caseload all the time.*

*Beatrice spoke about her relationship with her dissertation supervisor when I asked her about it. She described this as a supportive relationship with the practical task of getting a dissertation over the line.*

#### *Reading for cultural discourses and social structures*

*Performance management approaches and the subsuming of emotion in social work is a theme that informs this narrative. Class and race are also a feature of this narrative in terms of my responses. I am first generation white middle class. This may be the case for Beatrice too, but my impression is of someone who is from the white elite in a commonwealth country, which I believe to be a position of privilege founded on the oppression of black people. Beatrice expresses liberal values, but my perception of her privilege feeds into a concern that Beatrice represents what critics of Frontline say; it recruits those from white privileged backgrounds. I did not share these feelings with Beatrice. In keeping these thoughts and feelings to myself I am perhaps defending myself against the difficult and painful emotions this could evoke in us both, keeping the focus on the safer territory of Year 2.*

*The social grace of age (Burnham, 2012) also features, as Beatrice comments a few times about how she wishes she had done the programme later when she had more experience, rather than straight after university. For me, this contrasted with her mature presentation and her willingness to take a leadership role, which I guess is influenced by her privilege.*

## Second Interview

### Reading for the plot

*Beatrice's second interview focussed on her developing sense of identity, what the programme had taught her about herself and how she was still unsure about the direction she wanted her life to take. Beatrice had taken on a new job, but was already feeling 'tied down', wishing she had more time for herself. She spoke about how tough she had found the first few months of the first year of the programme, when her initial instincts had been to leave. Despite this she decided to stay. She found she was skilled at forming relationships, but struggled with challenging 'up', both with managers and families who pushed back in interventions. Beatrice spoke about a 'watershed' moment, when a fellow (ex-participant) spoke at a teaching day about the anxiety they felt in their role. She realised that she wasn't alone in how she felt. She valued teaching days where others spoke about their experiences which gave comfort from feeling they were 'all in it together'.*

### My intellectual and emotional responses (issues relating to my own and Beatrice's possible defences highlighted)

*I feel pleased that my reflections resonated for Beatrice and repeated what others had noticed about her in the past. **It has taken me a while to process that when***

Beatrice was talking about 'the great resignation' during lockdown, she was talking about herself realising that social work wasn't for her. My guess is that I struggled to hear this, because participants leaving social work is seen as 'failure' in the programme, as it has sold itself to government as 'the solution' to the recruitment and retention crisis in children's social work. In not hearing or understanding I was perhaps defending myself and perhaps Beatrice was defending herself and me by talking about the 'great resignation' in general rather than personal terms. When Beatrice speaks about being a nomad, I notice that I fall into a parental role, advising that Beatrice is young, so has time to find out what she wants to do. I am perhaps protecting myself here, thinking that Beatrice has time to come back to social work. When Beatrice spoke about the possibility of doing a literature review instead of action research, I felt she was guarded in what she said because she was aware of my belief in the value of action research. She wondered if a literature review would be as meaningful for her learning, but she recognised that doing a literature review would feel more familiar and 'doable' for participants. Beatrice said that when she was in the difficult context, a literature review would have felt more manageable, but she could see the value of action research now in her easier context. Here I felt she was taking my emotions in to account, when giving this balanced view, not wanting to upset me. In her leadership role Beatrice heard some participants desire to do a literature review. I got the sense that Beatrice would have been able to speak more freely to an 'outsider' researcher about this issue. Beatrice's message about building a community of support and acknowledging that things can't be good all the time is one that completely resonates with me and perhaps forms the underlying belief of my research.

Reading for the I

*Beatrice mainly stays with the I in this narrative, but switches to 'you' when talking about the potential impact of action research, when it is 'bigger than yourself' and could influence organisational change. Beatrice moves to the 'you' when talking about the benefits of having a community of people who share experiences.*

#### *Reading for relationships*

*The relationship that is developing between myself and Beatrice is a part of this narrative. Reading my reflections Beatrice felt it was as if it was written by someone that had known her a long time. Beatrice's relationship with other participants features, in her leadership role, bringing the views of others to Frontline, but also reaching out to participants and offering support.*

#### *Reading for cultural discourses and social structures*

*The construct of age is at play in this narrative, with Beatrice feeling restless and not wanting to be tied down to a career and myself advising her that she has time on her side. **What I think but don't say is that Beatrice also seems to have privilege, as she does not appear to have the financial constraints of other participants, which has enabled her to give up her social work career.***

### **4.3.2 Chloe**

After transcribing my first interview with Chloe I reflected on the interview and then wrote up my reflections to share with her, prior to the second interview.

*Re-watching the recording of my first interview with Chloe I enjoy the passion and intensity with which she speaks, which perhaps reflects the intensity of her experience in Year 2. There is an urgency and clarity in her manner which draws me in. There are a couple of occasions when she mentions that she is sounding*

*dramatic, which comes across like an apology. I wonder if, through her experience in the local authority, Chloe has unconsciously learned that expression of strong emotions is not the 'done thing'. I got the impression that the local authority could see Chloe's competence, but they could not see or hear that she was struggling. Maybe this has left Chloe feeling that expressing strong emotions does not get your needs met. Chloe acknowledged that managers were as busy as she was, so they weren't able to provide the support she needed.*

*I felt that Chloe straddled two positions when she described her situation in Year 2. On the one hand, she feels frustration and disappointment that her managers and ASYE coordinator did not speak about the master's or take it into account when considering her workload or emotional wellbeing. On the other hand, she acknowledges their busyness and wonders if she could have taken the responsibility for talking about it herself.*

*The weight and intensity of Chloe's workload when half her cases were in court, and she was doing many tasks for the first time feels very real and very relevant for participants in Year 2. I am left feeling that I need to talk about impact of court work in the master's teaching and prepare participants for this on the last recall day in Year 1.*

*When Chloe talked about her reasons for coming into social work, I got the strong impression of her as someone who wants to be proactive, to take on tasks herself, rather than referring them on, so she can make a direct impact on the lives of others. I was left wondering if the disappointment of not being able to complete the*

*master's in part stems from Chloe's identity as an organised person who gets things done, which could not be fulfilled when she had to withdraw.*

*Questions for second interview*

*How did it feel to read my reflections?*

*I was left with the sense that the organisation culture in your local authority focusses on getting the work done, rather than noticing and acknowledging the emotions that are part of doing social work and this left you feeling unnoticed and unheard, both when you were raising the pressures of your workload and when you withdrew from the master's and nobody noticed. What are your thoughts on this?*

*You spoke about the different components of Year 2 not supporting each other. Can you say a bit more about this?*

Before the second interview with Chloe, I structured my thoughts on the first interview using the VCRM analysis framework (issues relating to my own and Chloe's possible defences are highlighted).

### Reading for the plot

*See Chloe's pen portrait (VCRM analysis and 'reading for the plot' was used in the creation of Chloe's pen portrait).*

My responses to the narrative (with possible defences highlighted)

*I was drawn to how directly and passionately Chloe spoke about her experiences. It felt real and honest. But Chloe checked herself at times, apologising for being 'dramatic'. Throughout the interview she moved between expressing strong emotions and balancing or modifying this through consideration of other people's situations. For example, after describing situations where she did not receive the support she needed, or her emotions went unnoticed, she acknowledged that managers were busy and wondered if she could have spoken up more than she did. In another example, she balanced her negative feelings about the year, with positive thoughts and her overall enjoyment of her role. I wonder if Chloe's responses reflect the culture of the organisation she works in, as well as wider societal discourses, where expression of difficult emotions can be interpreted as weakness. Chloe perhaps defends herself against feelings of 'weakness' when she balances her negative feelings with positive ones. This oscillation could also be described as a movement between 'paranoid schizoid' and 'depressive' positions (Waddell, 1998). In the former, Chloe projects her anxieties and managers are perceived as 'bad objects'; in the latter, a more nuanced understanding is achieved, with managers understood to be both 'good' and 'bad'.*

*I felt Chloe's disappointment when the importance she placed on the master's wasn't acknowledged, as well as the hurt she felt when her manager didn't notice that she had withdrawn. Chloe spoke about herself as someone who is able to speak up and express their needs, while at the same time wondering if she could have spoken up more. This contradiction perhaps represents the dilemma Chloe faced. Whether she spoke about her feelings or kept them to herself, they went unnoticed. I wonder*

*if Chloe moved from speaking to not speaking as a defence against the pain of not being understood. This still failed to bring relief from anxiety as her feelings remained unnoticed.*

### *Reading for the I*

*Chloe stays with the 'I' for the whole of the interview. Despite feeling stressed and overwhelmed for much of the year, she presents herself as someone who is organised and seen as competent by her managers, someone who can 'do the job'. I wonder if the power held in my role as an 'insider' researcher is at play here. It is perhaps important for Chloe to present herself as a 'competent' worker to me, as a counterbalance to the 'vulnerable' Chloe, who was unable to manage the competing demands of the full-time work, the ASYE and the master's. I wonder too if Chloe's presentation of herself as competent also acts as a defence against feelings of inadequacy that may be evoked when discussing her 'failure' to complete the master's.*

### *Reading for relationships*

*Chloe's relationships within her local authority appeared to work at the level of the surface, rather than at a deeper emotional level. When Chloe expressed feelings of stress this was unacknowledged. When she cried in a meeting with her ASYE manager, they thought she was 'fine'. Chloe suggests that the fact that she was doing her job competently stopped others from fully seeing what she was going through on an emotional level. It appears that managers defended themselves against Chloe's anxiety, only seeing the 'competent' Chloe, unable to tolerate or contain her anxious feelings.*

*In contrast to the lack of emotional containment offered by her managers, Chloe describes her dissertation supervisor as 'amazing' and someone who understood her motivations to complete the master's. Her friends and family did not understand this desire and encouraged her to withdraw, aware of the stress that she was under. It was her dissertation supervisor who seemed to know and understand Chloe in this context, and this was valued by her. However, this understanding did not reduce the demands of work and ASYE programme, which prevented Chloe from completing the master's.*

#### *Reading for cultural discourses and social structures*

*The focus on getting the job done and not attending to the emotional components of the job is a theme of this interview. Everyone is stressed and overwhelmed so they cannot see or think about the different responsibilities Chloe has or what she is feeling; everything comes down to getting the job done. This is illustrative of the wider trend in social work practice of focussing on management of performance and timescales, rather than the relational and emotional components of the work.*

After the second interview with Chloe, I completed a second analysis, using the VCRM framework (issues relating to my own and Chloe's possible defences are highlighted).

#### *Reading for the plot*

*The theme of not being noticed or supported as a human being continues in this second interview with Chloe. When she was feeling overwhelmed with her caseload Chloe spoke of crying on the phone to her manager, but this went unacknowledged. It was the same in ASYE supervision. Chloe was motivated to do*

*the master's, but no one in her local authority showed any interest in it, rather they actively questioned its value.*

*There is a connected theme of disconnect, with each aspect of the year not connecting with the other. The master's is not discussed at ASYE reviews or in relation to Chloe's work.*

*While the caseload was manageable at the start of the year, and Chloe got ahead with her ASYE portfolio, later in the year, she suddenly got a lot of court work, which was the tipping point in her failure to complete the master's.*

### *My emotional and intellectual responses*

*When Chloe was talking about my reflections, I sensed that she had found reading them uncomfortable. I felt the power differential between us, as I had a sense that Chloe wasn't fully comfortable with what I had written but didn't feel happy to say this. So, I asked her directly and she said that I wasn't right about her motivations for going into social work. I had said that she wanted to do more of the work herself, rather than referring on. I see this as a positive thing, as it fits with the systemic view of social workers as the facilitators of change. Chloe, alternatively, seemed to see this as a negative thing and said she is happy to refer on and doesn't take all the responsibility for change. I felt the presence of her local authority here and an organisational culture with an emphasis of passing the work on to manage the workload.*

*There are more of my ideas in this interview, for example when I talk about an anti-intellectual culture in social work. I spoke about others having these views; in fact, I had these attitudes when I was in practice. I am perhaps aligning myself with Chloe*

here, defensively splitting myself from the 'bad' anti-intellectual practitioners, coming alongside Chloe as a 'good' practitioner who now believes in theoretically informed practice development.

*When I talk about emotions not being noticed, Chloe agrees and picks up the connection I make with social work practice. However, rather than talking about missing emotions in practice she talks about missing 'things', which I interpret as issues or concerns. Is it too difficult to consider that emotions in families may go unnoticed? Does the focus on 'getting the job done' and the subsuming of emotions in her local authority, make it more difficult for Chloe to consider or engage with the emotional lives of the families she works with?*

*The idea of 'taking responsibility' continued to feature in Chloe's narrative as she questioned again whether she should have taken more responsibility for her situation and spoken up more. Chloe's motivation for taking part in the research seemed to be driven by a desire to change the experience for future participants. She was unable to change her own situation during Year 2, but perhaps she could make a difference now. Chloe is the only one of my participants who volunteered ideas for change, suggesting that dissertation supervisors attended ASYE review meetings to raise the profile of the master's. Chloe perhaps felt that her attempts to discuss the master's at these meetings had failed, so the presence of the dissertation supervisor would improve this. This could well be the case, but on a practical level it would be difficult to resource, due to the constraints of staff time.*

*Reading for the I*

*Chloe uses 'I' when she talks about her motivations for coming into social work and the emotions she felt in Year 2, when she is connecting to her personal experiences and drivers. She moves to 'you' when talking about practice, so this discussion feels less personal to her.*

#### *Reading for relationships*

*Lack of relationship, or meaningful relationships continue as a feature of this narrative. The ASYE, master's and work components of Year 2 are experienced as separate by Chloe; they are not in relationship with each other as the ASYE programme and work context do not talk about, value or take account of the master's. Working remotely Chloe feels she is 'out of sight, out of mind', nobody knows if she is alive or dead. Chloe illustrated this lack of connection when recounting how her manager believed she had taken a week's sick leave, when she hadn't.*

#### *Reading for social structures and discourses*

*Work ethic and the stigmatisation of illness (mental or physical) feature in this narrative, as Chloe is offended that her manager wrongly believed she had taken sick leave when she had not. Chloe prioritised her work and sacrificed the master's, so the manager's belief represents an affront to those values of prioritising work and avoiding going on leave.*

*The value given to academic achievement and research in social work, also features, with the lack of interest or investment in the master's by Chloe's managers, contrasting with her own motivations to complete the work.*

At the end of our second interview, I asked Chloe if she would like to write her own one page story, or whether she would prefer that I write the story for her to edit and change. Chloe asked me to write her story, which I drafted and sent to her to approve. Her story can be found in Appendix 10.4.7.

### **4.3.3 Summary of emblematic cases**

Beatrice and Chloe's experiences of the Year 2 programme include several of the key themes identified across the wider data set. They were motivated to complete the master's and could see the benefit of researching and changing their own practice for themselves and others. For both though, increases in their caseload, particularly in court work, impacted on their capacity in terms of time and emotion to engage with the master's programme. The subsuming of emotion and a focus on process and task characterised case supervision and the ASYE programme for Chloe. For Beatrice, reflective supervision ended when her first manager left, but her ASYE coordinator, coach and peers continued to offer space for emotional containment. Both found their dissertation supervisor a valuable source of support. Completing the programme during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic generated feelings of isolation for both Beatrice and Chloe, with increased working on-line. In all four of their interviews there is a focus on experiences in their local authorities, rather than on the Year 2 programme itself; this again is replicated across the data set. These themes, and others that emerged in the wider data set, are explored further below.

Considering interviews with Beatrice and Chloe through a psycho-social lens, they both described the year as one of significant emotional challenge, whilst at the same time appearing to defend themselves against the strength of these emotions. They smiled and sometimes laughed when talking about their experiences. Re-watching Zoom recordings, I notice that I respond in kind. In a parallel process to the subsumation of emotions experienced in local authorities, we mask or disguise painful emotions with smiles and laughter. Psycho-social processes in the research data are explored further in Chapter 5.

#### **4.3.4 The experience of racially minoritised participants**

As I selected two white women as my emblematic cases, with whom I share the same social grace (Burnham, 2012) of race, I felt it important here to reflect on the learning I gained from the interviews with Freya and Helen, the two racially minoritised participants of my study. As will be shown in the thematic analysis below, Freya and Helen's experiences mirror those of the other participants of the study. However, both mentioned one aspect of their experience that was not mentioned by the white participants of the study. They both identified that they found reflection and self-reflexivity (Toksuka, 2014) emotionally challenging. The possible reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 5.

#### **4.4 Thematic analysis**

As I completed initial analyses of the first and second interviews, themes began to form in my mind, as I outlined in Chapter 3. This was a reflexive and subjective process where my values and experiences will have influenced what I noticed and the sense I made of the data. In this sense the themes were 'generated', rather than 'found' (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes that emerged related my first investigatory

research question: What are processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?

Table 5, below, presents themes and sub-themes grouped according to whether they relate solely to Frontline or local authorities or whether they are felt across both domains. Themes with ten or more references are highlighted. Nvivo provided a quantitative summary of the themes which is outlined in Appendix 10.2.

Table 4: Themes relating to investigatory question 1

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Local authority support	<b>Supportive team manager</b>
	Supportive team
	<b>Supportive ASYE manager</b>
	Support from other ASYE's
Local authority detract	Maternal figures
	<b>Staff turnover and sickness</b>
	<b>Performance management culture</b>
	Not wanting to lean on others
	Managers busy and stressed
	<b>Local authority not supporting masters</b>
	<b>Increasing caseload</b>
	Doing things for the first time
	<b>Court work</b>
	Frontline support
<b>Wanting to change practice and make a difference</b>	
Coaching	
The support of the unit	
<b>Dissertation supervision</b>	
Support from other Year 2's and fellows	
Learning influences knowledge of the self	
Dissertation gives space to reflect	
Frontline detract	Worry over academic work
	Reflection brings up difficult emotions
	Not prepared for the reality of social work
	Lack of deadlines
	No choice of methodology
	Less contact with dissertation supervisor
	<b>Intercalation policy</b>
	<b>Frontline culture</b>
	Dissertation closely linked with practice

	Dissertation always in the background
	Action research unfamiliar.
Local authority and Frontline detract	<b>Working on line</b>
	Timing
	Struggling to reach out for support
	Personal and family issues
	<b>Feeling isolated</b>
	<b>Feeling overwhelmed</b>

As well as identifying themes relating to my individual research participants' experiences, I also identified themes relating to social structures and dominant discourses, which helped me to consider the socio-political and cultural contexts impacting on the emotional experience of my participants (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). The overarching themes of social structures and dominant discourses were divided into sub-themes: the importance of individual achievement; Frontline as an elitist programme (dominant discourses); the structural disadvantage of mothers; class privilege (social structures). Quantitative summaries of these themes are provided in Appendix 10.2.

I will now go directly to the data, the voices of my participants, to provide evidence for my choice of themes relating to investigatory question 1.

#### **4.4.1 Aspects of the local authority that provided support to participants in Year 2**

##### **4.4.1.1 Support from team managers**

Seven out of nine participants spoke of their team managers as supportive in Year 2. Beatrice compared the emotional support provided by her first team manager to the task-focussed approach of her second manager. For her, the change in managers

directly impacted on her emotional well-being and her capacity to complete the master's. She speaks of her own and others' experiences.

*It hinged on the kind of manager I had, and I noticed that with the other participants who were giving me some feedback, that management was such an important part of how one felt contained or supported or heard or um you know able to share when they were struggling. And for me that first six months was serene, like I had an incredible manager, and it was the kind of transition that people hope for. She was very, very welcoming, warm, making sure that she was there and present for me right at the beginning.*

For Helen, her manager is a source of partial protection:

*My manager is very good in the sense that she protects us a lot from things. She knows what ability we are working at, she knows our capacity. So, she was really good at protecting us, but from wider seniors and wider team not very much, but I think it was ok because of the closeness I had with my team and manager at the time.*

For Robert, his manager's knowledge and support for the Year 2 programme provided the protection he needed to complete the programme. Her theoretical knowledge and interest in Robert's research also provided him with valuable support.

*I was very lucky to have what I think of as a very good manager and very supportive and so she was sort of careful to gradually build up my caseload and the complexity of the work that I was doing, and she recognised that I had the Year 2 of the programme alongside. And because she was systemically trained, we could talk about the theory and so she could help me a little bit with some of my thinking and a few suggestions as well, so it was more than*

*just giving me a bit of space to do it, it was, yeah, she was genuinely interested in it.*

This theme affirms findings of the literature review where studies such as Adamson et al.(2014), Kearns & McArdle (2012), Hussein et al.(2014) and Johnson et al.(2022) all highlight the role of supportive management for worker wellbeing.

#### **4.4.1.2 Support from teams**

Chloe, Helen, Katie, Danielle and Martha all spoke about their teams as a source of support. Speaking of her current situation Martha said:

*In terms of support from the team and the kind of culture of the team, the work that we do I've been SO happy.*

For Chloe and Danielle, support from their teams provided a substitute for management support that was not always available. Danielle compared her experience in Year 1, where she had relied heavily on her line manager, to her current situation:

*You kind of adapt a working relationship with your colleagues, and you will kind of look after each other a bit more rather than... yeah... Not that that didn't happen in the unit. But it just made you kind of try and rely on other people a bit more than just your manager.*

This theme echoes the findings of Cleveland et al. (2019) and Hussein et al. (2014) in highlighting the containing role of supportive teams.

#### **4.4.1.3 Support from ASYE coordinators**

Beatrice, Danielle, Lily and Martha all cited their ASYE supervisors as sources of support. For Beatrice, Lily and Martha they took the role of advocate. Beatrice said:

*We could come to her and say our case load is absolutely wacky and she would come to our managers or come to our supervision and say, 'look they are struggling, they need to have something taken off their plate.'*

For Danielle, they were someone that held her in mind:

*And my ASYE practice tutor was fab really, really lovely, would email all the time, just checking in, how's everything going, um so that was really useful.*

In addition to the role of advocate, Martha's ASYE coordinator provided valuable space for reflection:

*I think it was just...for me anyway it was just very powerful to have that hour and a half every four weeks or something just to take a step back, bring anything I wanted to the space and I also found because I found it so helpful I was then planning for it, so like in the month I would make a note, I would say oh that would be good to tell xx, I want to tell xx that I want to talk about that. And so it was much more natural for me, I was like, I was looking forward to having that space.*

This staff member appears to have provided a valuable source of emotional release and containment for Martha and her colleagues.

*I know from just anecdotally speaking to my LA they would always say oh yeah, sometimes I just go and cry and sometimes I have to go to her supervision and have a cry. So, I think particularly in xx we've all found that very beneficial actually.*

Beatrice and Martha both identified this support as taking a maternal quality.

Beatrice described the coordinator as a 'mamma bear', while Martha said she was

'very, very motherly'. This theme contributes to the wider social work knowledge base in highlighting the particular role that ASYE coordinators can in offering spaces for reflection and emotional containment for newly qualified social workers.

#### **4.4.1.4 Support from other NQSWs**

Beatrice and Martha both spoke about support they received from other NQSW's. For Beatrice the support was practical, as they asked and answered each other's questions via a WhatsApp group. For Martha, sharing experiences, particularly when she was struggling, felt supportive.

*Meeting with the other ASYE's...and just feeling a sense of ok we are all having moments of struggle, we are all going through it... them saying some of the things that I'm thinking before I say it that really helps me actually.*

While the importance of supportive colleagues is highlighted in the literature, as argued above, there is less known about the importance of peer support between NQSW's. The increased role that social media play in connecting social work colleagues, particular during and since the pandemic, has been highlighted by Cook et al. (2020).

#### **4.4.2 Aspects of the local authority that detracted from support to participants in Year 2**

##### **4.4.2.1 Performance management culture**

A focus on social work tasks and processes, and the subsumption of emotion were mentioned by Beatrice, Chloe, Freya, Helen and Lily as detracting from their experience in Year 2. I grouped these experiences under the theme of 'performance management culture'.

Beatrice describes this in the shift from her first to her second manager:

*So, I was so familiar with my previous manager who was so...um... curious about how I was doing, and I didn't realise how valuable that was until I had someone who was kind of 'Have you done x y z, good, talk to you later, I'm busy'. It was (laughs) a very big shock to the system.*

Chloe's emotions are not acknowledged by her managers:

*And they're like, how are you doing? And I'm like, not very good. No, I was so brutally honest. Like I cried on one of my meetings. I was that bad. And it was like, yeah, you're competent carry on.*

Helen outlines the focus on tasks and timescales in her local authority:

*I feel like there's more push like just make sure you see the family, just make sure they are seen, rather than ok, like what sessions have you planned, what is the purpose of you going to see them. But it feels like they more care about ok, you've seen them, tick, done.*

This theme confirms findings from extensive research exploring the impact of performance management culture and 'neo-liberal' environments on social work practice and well-being (Cooper, 2018, Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016, Sergill, 2018).

#### **4.4.2.2 Increases in caseload**

Six out of nine participants cited increases in their caseload directly impacting on their capacity to complete the master's. For Beatrice, Chloe, Danielle and Katie, doing court work for the first time was an additional pressure that detracted from their engagement with the programme. Beatrice said:

*But as soon as my cases started to... you know there were things that went to court, went to child protection, so as the complexity got greater, I think I found myself working longer hours, feeling more emotionally drained um, feeling like I needed time off, but that there wasn't the chance to take it um because there was too much going on where I didn't feel I could be absent.*

For these participants the protected caseload of the ASYE was not a reality. Chloe said:

*And then they just, bam, here's a load of court work, um, or pretty much, oh, more than half of my caseload was just ended up in court, within the space of a month.*

Chloe explained that it was not just the increase in caseload, but doing certain tasks for the first time, as a NQSW, that meant additional pressure:

*Like, if you give me something maybe that like now what I had, then it wouldn't be as stressful because I've done it before. But when you're doing so many things for the first time and everything you know, but it's, it's really difficult.*

This theme echoes the findings of a significant body of research that highlights the impact of high caseloads on worker well-being, as well as Johnson et al.'s (2022) findings in relation to Frontline participants in the ASYE.

#### **4.4.2.3 A stretched system: staff turnover, sickness, busy managers**

High staff turnover and sickness was mentioned by five participants as detracting from their experience. This not only increased workloads and pressure, but also feelings of instability or isolation. Freya said:

*Noone really knew each other...the turnover of staff was all the time. Every week someone would be leaving from that team.*

Both Chloe and Beatrice recognised that their managers were overstretched, which impacted on the support they could offer. Beatrice said:

*The kind of work that people were undertaking was very emotionally demanding and I reckon it was reflected throughout the system, so where managers were feeling pressure to kind of get things done and we were then not receiving the same kind of time that they might have had otherwise that we were, you know, maybe floundering for a way to have an outlet.*

For Danielle, reductions in staff, combined with taking on new challenges, made for a stressful situation:

*The manager going, and then us having not a lot of staff and to get into court proceedings for the first time. So, everything just happened all at once very quickly.*

Knowing how stretched others were made it harder for Beatrice, Danielle, Freya and Helen to reach out for support when they were struggling. Helen takes some responsibility on to herself saying:

*I know how busy everyone else is as well. I don't want...it's hard to be like, can I have ten to fifteen minutes of your time. Um, so yeh, maybe it's perhaps it's me not prioritising very well.*

The impact of recruitment and retention on social workers' well-being and practice, are well-known (Turnpenny & Hussein, 2020). However, the impact of high turnover and staff shortages on feelings of isolation and the ability to reach out for support,

provide a level of detail and nuance that extends knowledge, with consequent relevance for the wider professional field.

#### **4.4.2.4 Lack of interest in or support for the master's**

Chloe, Lily and Martha all cited their local authorities' lack of interest in, or support for the master's programme as detracting from their experience. Lily said:

*My manager was constantly putting things in my calendar and not supporting me to attend them when I was when I was saying it's recall day... It was her and the advanced practitioner who were bitching about it and making me feel quite uncomfortable.*

For both Martha and Chloe, colleagues as well as managers did not see value in completing the masters. Martha said:

*Having like... your team mates maybe, your colleagues, managers not valuing the university side of it as well, then made me think well I'm not going to value it as much and not, like not to say they weren't supportive, they were, but ultimately their priority was this work needs to get done, not your uni work needs to get done, you know.*

Chloe faced a similar challenge:

*Not just from managers, but different colleagues would go, 'well, what you doing master's for, that's not, you don't need to do that.' You know? And you'd be like, 'well, I want to do it, you know, I want to do that.' 'Well, you don't need to, you can get this, this, this, and this job by not having it.'*

This theme reflects the findings of Gleeson et al.'s study (2023) which found that students faced negative attitudes to research and evidence-informed practice in their placements.

#### **4.4.3 Aspects of the Frontline organisation and programme that provided support to participants in Year 2**

##### **4.4.3.1 The benefits of researching your own practice**

In the first interviews I asked participants how they felt about researching their own practice. All participants, aside from Lily, felt completing action research would be of value to them and their practice. So, the majority of participants started the programme feeling that their projects would support their practice, even if they felt anxious about taking on a new academic challenge. At the beginning of the year, Beatrice enthusiastically engaged with literature and saw the immediate benefits for her practice:

*It was this piece of literature that was answering these questions that I was grappling with and felt quite inspired and thought oh gosh, this was something the whole team could benefit from.*

Similarly at the start of the year Martha believed the project would be beneficial:

*I was really looking forward to it and I was really happy that it was going to be something so personal because I thought this is not going to be just a piece of research, it's going to actually be helpful to me, it's going to improve my practice.*

Robert described the benefits he saw to his practice:

*And I found the reading helped me with my casework. And reflecting on my own practice helped me with my casework so it was a...you know it was.. it wasn't just a net cost if you like. It was a bit of benefit to helping me with my day-to-day job as well.*

Freya and Robert described how the master's programme helped them to reflect on their practice. Freya said:

*What I really liked about the dissertation is that it forces you to stop, reflect, understand and unpick. You can't do that normally unless you have to.*

Robert found teaching days helpful:

*The quality of the speakers was very good and that's always, you know if you feel like you are getting insight from the day then I find that really motivational. It inspired me to go away and spend time reflecting again.*

For Helen and Robert, completing the master's enhanced their understanding of themselves, personally and professionally. Helen said:

*There was something with the dissertation that forced to me to really, really drill down, which was hard but good.*

Robert is perhaps speaking about both years of the programme when he says:

*I was sort of really impressed by the quality of the whole programme...um and the whole journey. The way that it takes you on that personal journey is really powerful. It's affected you know I'm not just saying this, it's changed who I am, you know. Doing the programme and doing this job has affected my life outside work in a positive way. I feel like..um.. I look at things from a different*

*angle now (smiles) um. And that's it, it's been a real growth experience for me, that maybe you wouldn't expect a bit later on in life.*

Acknowledgement of the benefits of completing practitioner research and the motivation to engage in research activity provides a counterbalance to literature that cites practical and attitudinal barriers (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013, Pullman and Fenge, 2024) and is reflected in the literature which explores social workers' experiences of completing research (Vincent & Hamilton, 2021, Buck et al., 2022, Ashworth & Burke, 2023).

#### **4.4.3.2 Support from dissertation supervisors**

All nine participants spoke positively about the support they received from their dissertation supervisor. While some mentioned practical advice, such as sending reading and answering questions, comments focussed more heavily on the relational support and reflective space offered through supervision. For example, Freya said:

*Talking to my tutor one-to-one and being able to build that relationship when you can try to dive a bit further, like cross, you know to dive a bit further in and trying to create that safeness where you can talk a bit about things.*

Beatrice described how her supervisor provided both practical and emotional support:

*So, she was very organised in that sense, we always knew when we were going to have our next meeting, even if there was nothing we brought to discuss in it, because you know we had been running round like headless chickens. She was very understanding, she said just call, do we need to have*

*a reflective space just to see how you are doing. So that was also a really nice listening ear for us...*

While a lot is known about the role of supervision in social work, less is known about the distinct role of dissertation supervision in social work, so this research extends the knowledge base in this area of the professional field.

#### **4.4.3.3 Support through coaching**

Beatrice, Danielle, Freya and Helen mentioned the support they received from independent coaching sessions, organised through Frontline. Danielle said:

*I did the coaching programme with xx who was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I mean I could see that essentially it was motivational interviewing sessions, but it was um, not but, and that was fab. It worked brilliant for me.*

Beatrice spoke of herself and others in describing the coaching space as one where it was safe to be vulnerable:

*There was one where I broke down and cried and she had to talk me through that and very similar thing in the other sessions. I remember hearing about people being very vulnerable and being able to be reflective and open up and have those moments when they could cry with another person and go through their feelings with that. So that support was very useful.*

Helen found coaching sessions of direct benefit to her dissertation:

*They were a massive influence into my dissertation and were incredibly valuable. So, I was really thankful to have that opportunity as part of Year 2.*

Little is known about the role that coaches can take in offering emotional containment to social workers, so this theme has the potential to contribute new knowledge beyond the Frontline programme.

#### **4.4.3.4 Feeling prepared by Year 1 of the programme**

Beatrice, Freya and Martha felt that the first year of the Frontline programme prepared them well for the ASYE programme, citing the focus on reflection and reflexivity as helpful. This made the ASYE programme the least onerous aspect of the second year for these participants. Freya put it simply:

*I definitely think year 1 reflections help you with reflective logs and everything that is expected of you in your ASYE year.*

Martha thought that Frontline participants were better prepared for the requirements of the ASYE than NQSW's from other programmes.

*A lot of other NQSW's that I knew from work were saying what are these reflections, these logs we have to do? I was like ... oh ... (laughs) I already did 8 of them and it's a different way of writing and it's a different way of thinking. I've already got into that headspace of being able to do that, so I felt I was very, very well prepared for that.*

Johnson et al.'s (2022) research reported that those trained through the Frontline programme felt better prepared for child and family social work than those trained through other routes. However, this theme suggests that the particular focus on self-reflexivity in Year 1 of the programme helped participants meet the requirements of the ASYE programme. This theme, therefore, has potential implications for the wider field.

#### **4.4.3.5 Support from unit colleagues**

Relationships formed with their unit colleagues in Year 1 of the programme continued to offer support to Beatrice, Freya, Lily and Katie in Year 2 of the programme. For these participants close bonds formed in their first year provided significant emotional support. Freya said:

*As a unit I think we came together and we checked in with each other quite a lot and I think my unit is really, really strong and we are still friends today and I think that is the best part of the Frontline model.*

Lily said:

*There was definitely support from my unit, so we were so close, and I think the value of attending the Summer Institute and developing them bonds before we even started. We've become friends for life, like real best friends and that support. It's still. We speak daily, so I'm not in (LA) anymore. We speak daily. It's that support was so invaluable, it really was. And without that support, I wouldn't. I don't know where I would have been.*

While the unit model is unique to the Frontline programme, this theme provides knowledge relating to the benefits of training and working together as a small group. While the potential disbenefits of this model, notably, a lack of connection with wider teams has been noted (Smith et al.,2019), this should be balanced with the benefits identified in this theme.

#### **4.4.3.6 Support from other Year 2 colleagues and fellows**

In addition to unit colleagues, Beatrice, Martha and Robert, spoke about the support they gained from the wider cohort and Frontline fellows. In the relative isolation of working on-line, contact with others who were going through the programme, or who

had completed it, provided some sense of community and shared experience. For example, Beatrice said:

*There was a recall day, and I can't remember the fellow's name, but he was speaking about how he wrote his dissertation on his own anxiety, and his anxiety with approaching managers, with approaching families. And that was quite a watershed moment for me because I thought, oh, my goodness, other people are anxious about this as well.*

In Robert's local authority others in his cohort withdrew from the master's, reducing a feeling of community of going through an experience with others. Robert, however, did keep in contact with the one person in his organisation who continued on the programme:

*The one person in my authority who did continue and do the dissertation, um was always around, we just...I suppose the two of us just kept in touch a lot about how it was going and that sort of thing, so it was good to have one other person there, a peer.*

This theme speaks to the importance of human connection and the sharing of experiences for emotional containment. This, I would argue, may be of increasing importance to social workers, because of the growth of working from home and on-line since the pandemic, which reduces the amount of in-person contact that social workers have with their colleagues.

#### **4.4.4 Aspects of the Frontline programme and organisation that detracted from support to participants in Year 2**

##### **4.4.4.1 Action research methodology**

For Beatrice, Freya and Robert, unfamiliarity with action research methodology impacted on their confidence at the start of the programme. Beatrice felt that a more familiar methodology may have made things easier for her and others:

*It's more familiar to me to do a standard dissertation, I've done one before for my bachelor's...It might feel more doable, you've got evidence, you've done it before you've passed. And that might have felt like, I can do this, like I can just bash it out. And I've got the evidence that I can. And so that that's probably that's likely where my head was at.*

It took Robert a little while to understand the task ahead of him:

*It sort of took a little bit to get my head, a little bit of reading to get my head round how this would actually work...um... you know and it's a different, it's a very different kind of research.*

This theme echoes Gleeson et al.'s (2023) study which found students were nervous to engage in research activity that was new to them.

##### **4.4.4.2 The challenge of academic work, autonomous learning and the focus on practice**

For Chloe, Freya and Katie, embarking on a large piece of academic work brought feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Katie said:

*It's quite daunting for me, you know academic stuff doesn't really come naturally to me I am very much a, I learn through doing and so that's why*

*Frontline was so great um, but as it was coming into Year 2 that was really daunting for me.*

For Chloe, Danielle and Robert, more autonomous learning in Year 2, compared to the strictly organised programme in Year 1, made it more difficult to maintain motivation and momentum. Danielle said:

*I'm very much a person I have to have deadlines as well, if things are floating along, I need someone to tell me, cos I'll have a hundred things, especially with the job a hundred things to do before that. But if you tell me you've got to get it done by four o'clock today I'll have it done by four o'clock no problem.*

For Beatrice and Helen, the master's was a constant presence, which made it difficult to fully enjoy down-time from work. For Martha, the project's focus on practice, meant that working on the master's gave her no respite from thinking about work:

*I thought if I am spending my weekends doing this I am working, like I'm not getting any break, I didn't view the master's as a personal thing, or as something I was doing and enjoying as I had maybe at the beginning of the year. And maybe that's because the master's was so focussed on me, my work, what I was doing with these families, the conversations I was having, it always felt like an extension of work.*

Adamson et al.'s (2014) findings relating to the importance of maintaining a clear division between work and home for resilience are of relevance to this theme.

Studies, like that of Pulman and Fenge (2024), that note the challenges of balancing work and research activity, also speak to this theme.

#### 4.4.4.3 A disconnect between Year 1 and Year 2

Three research participants referenced a feeling of being unprepared for the realities of being a NQSW by the first year of the programme. Helen identified a disconnect between how she had been taught and wanted to practice in Year 1 of the programme, and how she was required to practice in Year 2:

*I think maybe I had a bit of a, not a fluffy idea of what social work was, I knew it was going to be really, really hard... Yeh I guess I thought, there were lots of times where I was, this is not how I want to practice, but I felt like I was being forced to.*

While it was recognised that the first year of the programme was intense and challenging, due to the demands of a full-time placement and academic programme, for these participants, this did not fully prepare them for the increased intensity of working as an autonomous, qualified social worker. Danielle felt that these challenges made the demands of completing a master's programme even greater.

*The first year, you've got loads of work, you're learning on the job, and it is intense. But your second year, you're really doing it. And that's intense in your first day. Like you think, oh, this is stressful in your first year, you haven't got a clue until you're properly doing social work, you haven't got a clue... And then to put a master's on top, I was just like, no.*

The participants of Sergill's (2018) study felt some anger and frustration at how ill prepared they felt for practice. Jansen's (2018) also notes how NQSW's felt unprepared for the complexity they faced. While participants of this study did not appear to be angry, the challenges they experienced when transitioning from student to NQSW are reflected in the wider social work knowledge base.

#### 4.4.4.4 Reduced contact with Frontline staff

For Chloe, Danielle and Martha, the reduced role of the dissertation supervisor in Year 2, compared to the fortnightly visits from a practice tutor in Year 1, was felt as a reduction in support. Chloe would have liked her dissertation supervisor to act as an advocate for her and the master's.

*Your practice tutor sort of leaves you to it a little bit. Is there not a way they could come to sort of ASYE meeting reviews and sort of have their input a little bit and, or just that as a support for the participant to be like, oh, you know, like, I don't know, just to talk about their caseload and perhaps if there is something a bit intense, you know, that could be reflected on?*

For Danielle, the reduced contact impacted on her motivation to engage in the programme:

*If I wanted the opportunity to speak to my supervisor I could have done, I just kind of chose not to, there was no kind of pressure on me to engage in that, so I just kind of went um and just didn't really um..*

For Martha, the support provided was practical, rather than emotional.

*It very much focussed on dissertation support, um, so I suppose I would consider Frontline's support of me in my second year more practical um, as opposed...I don't really feel I had emotional support from Frontline in my second year, not that I asked for it.*

This theme speaks to the importance of supportive roles that provide emotional containment, reflected in the wider literature relating to supervision and resilience, for example Cleveland (2019) and Grant & Kinman (2020) and the impact that can be felt when levels of support are reduced.

#### 4.4.4.5 A culture of high expectations

Freya, Helen and Martha spoke of the high expectations they placed on themselves as an additional pressure, which they felt were influenced by the ethos or culture of Frontline. Freya put it like this:

*I think in terms of like the grad scheme sometimes it can make you want to...always strive for the best... It's this essence of like needing to be perfect.*

Martha said:

*I think a feeling of, you are picked out of a big group of people, you are high achievers, you are really good at what you do, you're going to be very employable, you're ...er...you have more skills than other social workers, that kind of feeling...um...I think sometimes leads me to feel like I have to live up to that and that I'm failing if I'm not living up to that or if I don't see myself as living up to that and maybe that comes back to the comparison again.  
Definitely.*

For both Martha and Helen, a culture of high expectations impacted on their capacity to reach out for support when they were struggling. Helen said:

*I don't know why I struggle to reach out for support. I wonder if its ego or shyness or feeling like I should know by now. Or putting those expectations on myself and then when I don't meet them, I don't want other people to know that (laughs).*

Little is known about the impact of high expectations and cultures of excellence in social work education. This theme is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

#### 4.4.4.6 Intercalation policy

The inflexibility of the intercalation policy, to enable participants to defer the master's in exceptional circumstances, was cited by Katie as the reason for her withdrawal from the master's. With the support of her dissertation supervisor, Katie battled hard to defer, but ultimately gave up, as the combination of her circumstances and the stress of not being heard became too difficult:

*There was so much going on that just wasn't, I just wasn't, I was just going to have to let this go because after banging on doors for three or four times and xx was having to negotiate for me, which you know I can't thank her enough for listening to me moaning and getting upset at the time because I was just you know I really wanted to do it. And then her going back and voicing that for me, after three or four times I just thought, you know we are not going to, we're not going to get anywhere from here. So, I just said I am just going to have to withdraw.*

Lily also mentioned enquiring about intercalation, due to her difficult circumstances in the local authority. She was encouraged to continue rather than intercalate, which ultimately was not possible for her.

*But I asked if I could defer my master's for a year, and I was told that I could start the process to apply to defer. I was told that it was quite unlikely that the permission would be granted so could I consider giving it a try.*

Frontline's policies in relation to intercalation are specific to the organisation and so perhaps do not hold wider relevance for the professional community. It should be noted, however, that Frontline has faced criticism in the past relating to the impact of

inflexible policies on participant wellbeing (Graduate fog, 2019) which led Frontline to allow participants to opt out of the Year 2 programme.

#### **4.4.5 Aspects of context, not specifically related to Frontline or the local authority that detracted from support for Year 2 participants**

##### **4.4.5.1 The move to on-line working**

All participants undertook the Year 2 programme in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a move to on-line working, for both practice and learning. This was cited by Beatrice, Chloe, Danielle, Freya, Helen and Martha as detracting from their experience in Year 2. A lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues and fellow participants was perceived as isolating, making it harder to reach out for support when they were struggling. Helen describes the impact on her work and academic life:

*I found working from home really difficult. I think I am very much, bounce off other people and not having the day-to-day interaction with the wider team, my manager I found really hard because, I, I don't know why, it's so much easier to turn to someone and ask them a question, rather than having to give them a call or send them a message, so I just felt quite...it took me a long time to adjust and at the start I felt quite isolated. And I think when you come together as a wider collective, outside of your unit and you are all going through the same thing, there is a lot of assurance in that, a lot of togetherness that kind of gets you through. And recall days we'd often um meet up after or we would have lunch together and it was... I didn't really realise how much I valued that until we lost it.*

Working on-line Chloe felt that she was invisible:

*I just feel like in a day, no, no one checks in on me. And I obviously I do bring it up on myself and I check, I make sure someone knows I'm alive. Um, but that's how that felt at that time when it did have like a team that should have known where I was, I was like, what?... I think remote working had been a big impact on the support I got. Um, I suppose that out of sight, out of mind a little bit.*

For Beatrice, this way of working was isolating:

*I never met my manager...either of them (laughs). In my entire first year I had no face-to-face manager interaction. And I think that's quite bizarre. I think I only met two or three members of my team in person. And my team wasn't very big on putting cameras on, so half of them I didn't know what they looked like (laughs). I just knew what their voices sounded like. Um so within that space I think it was very isolating. Upon reflection I can really understand that. I think at the time it was just like this is how it's working, this is how it is...um...yeah I think it was quite isolating.*

Cook et al.'s (2020) research highlighted how social workers adapted to on-line working, with virtual team meetings and on-line supervision becoming a new 'secure-base' where they could receive support and emotional containment. Team members and managers signalling their availability, in regular slots, or informally, was key for ensuring connectivity. Freya spoke of the benefits of this on-line connectivity, with a daily on-line check-in featuring in her new job. However, this theme suggests that the on-line connectivity experienced by the participants of Cook et al.'s (ibid) research, was not experienced by some participants of this research. This elicited feelings of isolation and impacted on their capacity to reach out for support. Studies

have explored the impact of the pandemic and the move to on-line working on practice e.g. Ferguson et al., (2022), and large-scale studies have reported on overall social worker well-being (Ravalier et al.,2023). This theme extends knowledge relating to the emotional impact of increased working on-line.

#### **4.4.5.2 Personal and family circumstances**

For Beatrice, Danielle, Katie and to a lesser extent Robert (who caught COVID-19), events in their personal and family lives impacted on their capacity to engage with the programme. Katie took on significant additional caring responsibilities, due to a crisis in her family. Beatrice left the country to be with her family and Danielle had to take time to plan for a significant family event. Data is not included here for reasons of confidentiality.

#### **4.4.5.3 Timing**

For Chloe and Danielle, the timing of the demands placed on them compromised their ability to complete the master's. Danielle summarised it in this way:

*Yeah, it just wasn't the time. Yeah. And there's something about timing, that it's not about motivation. It's not about desire. It's just about timing.*

Chloe felt that a little more flexibility in the way the three components of the year were timed would have helped her complete the master's:

*That's why, I mean, with the components, like nobody communicated for the timing of it. Like they could've, I think holding off finishing of my ASYE for a month while I finished my master's would've just changed a lot of things for me.*

The issue of timing is probably unique to Frontline participants, who complete a master's, alongside the ASYE programme in their first year of qualified practice.

However, this theme reflects findings from the wider field relating to the challenges of completing research while working as a social worker (Pullman & Fenge, 2024).

#### **4.4.5.4 Feeling overwhelmed**

Beatrice, Chloe, Helen, Katie, Lily and Martha all spoke at length about struggles they had with completing the dissertation, whilst working full time as social workers.

I created a theme of 'feeling overwhelmed' to represent the feelings of having too much to do, without the time or emotional capacity to complete the master's.

Beatrice felt she was:

*drawing on fumes (touches chest with fist) (laughs) is how it felt, so when I did sit down at the computer, I just didn't feel um energised.*

For Chloe, the three components of the year became unmanageable:

*But it got to that point where I really can't do this, you know, one of the components had to give and unfortunately it had to be that one, because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to live (laughs).*

Katie's work and life situation meant that she struggled from the start of the programme:

*Yeah, overwhelming, because at the time I just remember, like I couldn't think about ASYE and the ethical approval part of, it just, it just seemed miles away. And it just, I was just so exhausted after the working day, to put that time and effort in to thinking about ethical approval, it just wasn't possible for me. It just was not possible for me. Um so I didn't even get past the ethical approval because everything was just so overwhelming.*

Lily also struggled at the start of the programme:

*And I think because I was so overwhelmed with work, I desperately wanted to have a two-week holiday over Christmas. And I felt like my body needed it. I was really struggling. I kept sitting down to do my ethical proposal, and I don't know how, but I did manage to do it. It consumed so much of me I found it really difficult and it shouldn't have been that difficult, but I knew it's because of the place that I was in.*

This theme contributes to the knowledge base relating to the emotional experience of social work explored in the literature review. The processes across the different domains of reality (Houston, 2010) that contribute to feelings of overwhelm are explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

#### **4.4.5.5 Struggling to reach out for support**

Chloe, Martha and Helen spoke about the difficulties they had in reaching out for support, which appeared to connect across their experiences in the local authority and the Frontline programme. For Chloe, as outlined above, she saw herself as someone who could ask for help, but then also questioned whether she could have done more:

*Um, but yeah, that's, that's something I just kept thinking and should I have reached out more? I do feel that I did reach out, but then I wasn't in the head space to reach out more than I could, than I did.*

For Helen, as well as the high expectations she placed on herself, the struggle to process her emotions and the busyness of her context impacted on her ability to ask for help:

*I think maybe I sometimes it takes me a while to process myself how I am feeling and then after I have processed it, trying to articulate it is quite hard.*

*Then also I think in the day to day, do have time? You have so much to do constantly that you just have to get through, so by the end of the day when you finally close your laptop you are so burnt out.*

Martha worried that seeking help may be perceived as weakness and may cause others to question her ability to do the course or the job:

*So I think that then all combines to make me think I'm not going to ask for help, it's not, it like, it doesn't feel worth it to me when I think about all of these things, that I know wouldn't happen but in my head could happen, if I was to ask for help then would it be a question of 'Are you right for the course? Can you, can you be a social worker if you can't handle this? Can you support other people emotionally if you can't handle your own emotions? Of if you can't handle, you know you're struggling with your mental health and wellbeing. How can you support a family you work with who has mental health concerns?' I think all of those feelings come up when you know...ultimately...I didn't ask for help.*

These extracts of data illustrate complex, ambivalent thoughts. Chloe did seek support but wonders if she could have done more than she did, while also recognising that she was not in the 'headspace' to do this. Helen struggled to process her emotions, and in the busyness of work did not take the time to reach out and discuss them with others. Martha worries that her insecurities and worries will be taken as a sign that she does not have the capacity to be a social worker, so she keeps them to herself. The ability to show vulnerability and seek support appears to be difficult for these participants, demonstrating that capabilities required for emotional resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2020) maybe hard to acquire and enact.

#### 4.4.5.6 Social structures and dominant discourses

Completing VCRM analyses of the interviews also enabled identification of themes relating to wider social structures and dominant discourses that impacted on participants' experience of the programme. For example, Lily described the influence of her position as a single parent on her capacity to complete the master's, reflecting the structural disadvantage of mothers, particularly single mothers in society. She said:

*I've got two children, I'm a single parent and my daughter's got additional needs. So that leaves me very limited time actually available to work. And I need rest and recuperation time as well.*

Martha described the impact of class inequalities on her confidence in her own abilities:

*I know that there is quite a lot of ...um... privately educated people on Frontline and I think...this is completely anecdotal but what I always think is that people who have had a private education like are more confident and ... you know...can command a room a bit more and have like.. um maybe a more complex vocabulary than me and stuff like that makes me feel very, very insecure.*

The presence of privately educated participants perhaps reflects Frontline's foundational aims of recruiting 'high achieving' graduates into social work (Maxwell et al., 2018) which has led to the programme being perceived as elitist. Lily believed that her managers' lack of interest and support for the Year 2 programme was informed by feelings of insecurity stemming from this perception:

*Their understanding of, of the programme as well, it wasn't, they didn't want to understand it, they didn't want to take the time in their mind, you know, it was it was dismissed, it wasn't, wasn't important. So, I really strongly feel like it will come down to insecurity.*

I also identified the influence of dominant discourse relating to the importance of individual academic achievement in Freya, Helen and Martha's interviews. Martha identified herself as someone for whom academic achievement came easily, but then contradicted this view, feeling she was not a high achiever in comparison to others on the programme.

*I've always had very positive feedback for my academic work, and it's always just been something that I've felt I am naturally good at, you know it's not something where I've had to really put in the same amount of effort as other people to get the grades that I've got. So then that was quite a disappointment to me and it was quite difficult to remind myself, well look, you are doing, you are working full time, trying to do uni, trying to do your ASYE you are in a pandemic, but then there's always just that other side to me that like well, so is everyone else and they've done well so, it's definitely that comparison and I think I have felt. I don't think that's specific to Frontline especially, I think I'm just quite like that in general. I compare myself to other people and I think why am I struggling when they are not?*

Helen feels a sense of pride in completing the master's, for completing in difficult circumstances and for the result she achieved, perhaps reflecting the value she places on academic achievement:

*But if I could go back and decide whether to do the master's I would still decide to do it because although it was a really hard time...um...the outcome that I got from it I was really, really happy about and it is a source of pride. Is that the right word?*

The impact of Frontline's culture and wider societal discourses are discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have introduced the reader to the findings of the 'investigatory' aspect of the research, the FANI interviews with nine fellows of the Frontline programme, with the presentation of their 'pen portraits'. Two 'emblematic cases' (Alasuutari et al., 2008) enabled me to demonstrate how I completed VCRM (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) analyses for each interview, whilst at the same time looking for my own and participants' possible defences, in line with FANI's psycho-social approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). A thematic analysis, related to my first investigatory question 'What are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?' has been presented, with consideration of how identified themes confirm or extend the social work knowledge base.

The next chapter extends this analysis, considering how my findings at a 'local' level contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers and those conducting practitioner research, beyond the Frontline programme.

## 5 Discussion of investigatory questions

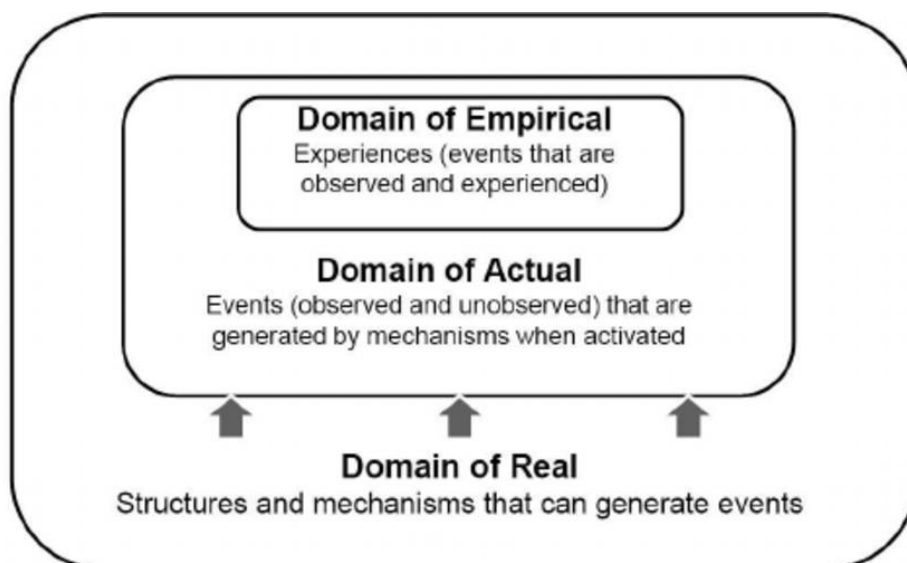
### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the thematic analysis of Chapter 4 providing further discussion of my three investigatory questions:

1. What are the processes in the local authority and Frontline programme which support or detract from the emotional containment of participants?
2. What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers?
3. What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme tell us about the capacity for practice-based research and research-mindedness in early career social workers?

Discussion of these questions is framed through the lens of critical realism; the key organising concepts are outlined in the table below.

Figure 3



(Radulescu & Vessey, 2009)

Houston's (2010) model of a stratified society, as outlined in Chapter 3 and in Tables 1 and 2 is also applied.

## **5.2 What are the processes in the Frontline programme and the local authority that support and detract from the emotional containment of participants?**

All nine participants found managing the practical and emotional demands on their time challenging in Year 2. For some this felt more overwhelming than others. The discussion below explores processes across different domains that may have contributed to these feelings, exploring those that support and detract from emotional containment, structured according to Houston's (2010) model of a stratified society.

### **5.2.1 The domain of the person**

*Every time I tried to start it, I just... my brain wouldn't function. So, I suppose I just got to a point of...this is not going to happen. And I'm prolonging the torture for myself because I really want to do it. I'm saying I'm doing it. I'm committing my weekends to do it. I'm sitting down spending hours trying to do it but doing nothing. And I'm just going round in a vicious cycle. (Lily, first interview)*

*Last year it felt more like treading water and trying to keep your head afloat (Helen, first interview)*

Lily and Helen describe, in different ways, the terrible anxiety of feeling 'stuck', unable to move forward and progress. Being overwhelmed is felt like a paralysis, being stuck in the realm of emotion, where thinking is compromised. At the level of

the individual person, unseen biological processes linking stress and cognition will have influenced participants' experiences. Neuroscience has identified that increased stress activates the 'primitive' survival mechanisms of the brain, reducing activity in the 'thinking' pre-frontal cortex (Arnsten, 1998). Bion, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, describes the 'nameless dread' (1962. p.96) when feelings are uncontained, meaning thinking is not possible. With multiple and increasing demands on their time, participants like Lily found it hard to think when they made time for their dissertation, leading to a 'vicious cycle' of further stress.

Beatrice also described a reduced capacity to focus on and engage in work on the master's when she was feeling overwhelmed:

*Funnily enough I would put aside time to do it and then would procrastinate even within looking at it. It would be things like, I would be reading, but not really reading or looking at the pages but not really editing, it was just.. it wasn't very productive.*

### **5.2.2 The domain of situated activity**

Participants work full-time as newly qualified children and families' social workers as they complete the Year 2 programme. Literature including that of Dore (2016), Dwyer (2007), O'Sullivan (2019) and Cooper (2018) identify the emotionally demanding nature of this work. Novice status is stressful too (Jansen, 2018, Salzburger-Wittenberger et al, 1999) so this, combined with the challenging nature of the work, provides an additional layer of anxiety for Year 2 participants.

Home visits and multi-agency meetings form some of the key tasks or situated activities for children and families' social workers. Considering these activities through a psycho-social lens, unconscious processes of projection and introjection

(Waddell, 1998) will be experienced by participants in their day-to-day roles. Dealing with situations of poverty, discrimination, human suffering and harm to children, they will 'often find themselves the recipients of unbearable, intolerable feelings from families' (O'Sullivan, 2019, p.16).

Participants did not tell me about the details of their work with families, perhaps because I did not ask, and this was not the direct focus of my research. They spoke in more general terms of cases 'going to child protection' or 'court work'. They may have felt it important to respect the confidentiality of children and families. At the level of the unconscious, they may have been defending themselves from painful feelings, reminders of that work, or perhaps even fear of being judged by me, a teacher from the programme. In a process of unconscious projection and introjection, participants' anxiety about their work may have become part of me, limiting what I asked them about the work, so processes during the situated activity of the interviews appear to have limited or inhibited discussion of the work. However, although it was not spoken about in detail, the social work task and the emotions it evoked was present in all of the interviews.

Helen was the only participant to speak directly about the impact the work had on her.

*I had a lot of families calling me like, 'why aren't you doing more', 'why haven't you sorted my housing for me', 'why haven't you done this' and it got me really, really down, because I was oh my god I'm a terrible social worker, why can't I fix these things to the point where I handed in my notice, because I can't do this.*

Families in need of scarce resources saw Helen as a person who could help them to access them and projected their anxieties from their position of need on to her.

Feeling unable to meet these needs, Helen found herself the carrier of those anxieties and in a process of introjection, felt the powerlessness and anxiety of the families (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990).

Lily speaks about being given court work tasks before she had received her qualification and the impact of this time on her. She does not go into detail, but the impact on her well-being is clear:

*So I wrote a SWET. And then that was another social worker put their name to it. But it was a very, very difficult period. And I recall in December time having a bit of a breakdown and being so distressed and distraught and feeling I couldn't cope, and I couldn't manage.*

Danielle mentions the work, briefly, in the context of the loss of a manager and the impact this had on her:

*We didn't really have a manager for a few weeks. And we were trying to hold things together and this was at the same time as I'd removed my first child, so I probably needed the most kind of support, so I just thought 'what am I doing?' Like this is crazy. I don't think I'm able, I really did consider whether I wanted to stay in social work.*

So, while the social work tasks they were doing were only alluded to by participants, I believe it is safe to conclude that the work itself contributed to feelings of being overwhelmed, as it is the overarching context for the issues they *do* talk about.

The importance of the availability of relationships that offer containment for difficult or anxious feelings is highlighted in the thematic analysis. The opportunity to share thoughts and offload anxieties and have them returned in a more manageable form, is also recognised as an essential part of social work in the literature relating to supervision (Bostock et al., 2022, Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, O'Sullivan, 2019, Wilkins et al., 2017). The situated activity of reflective supervision as well as informal advice and support was available for most participants, but compromised for some, by a combination of factors, including the move to on-line working, high staff turnover and more task-focussed supervision offered by some managers. Increased working on-line, for example, meant there were less opportunities to check with colleagues that they were doing things correctly, or to reflect on or discuss their work.

There is a loss of immediacy of peer support (Cook et al., 2020) when working on-line, where participants need to make the conscious choice to seek support, which they were sometimes reluctant to do, knowing that their colleagues and managers were busy. In addition, master's teaching on-line left some participants finding less opportunity for informal discussion with their peers. In these situations, the unconscious process of 'containment' (Bion, 1962) was compromised. With a reduced capacity to share anxieties and have these 'contained', anxiety can become the aforementioned 'nameless dread' (Bion, 1962, p.96), an overwhelming feeling, where thinking is not possible. The majority of participants of this study had some opportunities for off-loading and containment, through a combination of supervision, coaching and support from peers. However, it appears that the extent and availability of this support was not enough for most to prevent feelings of being overwhelmed.

While feelings of overwhelm impacted on Lily and Beatrice's capacity to think and

focus on their dissertation, Freya, in contrast spoke about ‘overthinking’ and ‘thinking all the time’ in Year 2 and the strategies she had now developed to combat this.

Compartmentalising work and home life is important for managing the stress of social work and maintaining resilience (Cook et al., 2020, Adamson et al, 2014), so ‘thinking all the time’ as well as ‘not being able to think’ are both problematic.

Outside work, while relationships with friends or family can offer emotional containment, this may be limited by the need to maintain confidentiality.

‘Overthinking’ at home, may represent rumination on anxieties, that due to a lack of a container (Bion, 1962) have nowhere to go, leading again to feelings of being overwhelmed.

The situated activity of completing academic work, in this case action research, in addition to their social work roles, contributed to feelings of overwhelm for participants, impacting on the domain of the person, as identified above. Anxieties relating to the unfamiliarity of the methodology, expressed by Robert and Beatrice and insecurity about their academic ability, articulated by Lily, Freya and Martha, contributed to these feelings.

### **5.2.3 The domain of social settings**

Working full-time in local authorities, while at the same time continuing as participants on the Frontline programme, participants were subject to unseen generative processes across two organisations. Performance management culture, now prevalent throughout social work organisations (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016) was identified as detrimental to their experience by six participants. A ‘tick box’ culture, with a focus on tasks, as opposed to the emotional elements of the job, left participants with limited containment for the emotions inherent in the social work

task. Avoidance or lack of recognition of the emotions involved in social work is well documented in social work literature, as a form of defence against the 'primary task' (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990, Ruch, 2005, Cooper, 2018). This is perhaps most graphically illustrated in the data by Chloe's descriptions of meetings with her managers where her emotions were seemingly ignored.

Frontline, as outlined in Chapter 2, is a relatively new 'social setting', set up in the wake of reports by Narey (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014) which suggested greater priority should be given to academic ability and qualifications in social work training and recruitment. The organisation launched with a commitment to recruit 'high calibre' graduates (MacAlister et al., 2012), setting a culture of high expectations and excellence.

Frontline's organisational culture document for staff reflects the aspirations of excellence and constant improvement:

*Having high expectations means everyone having the right behaviours and skill to do great work. We must allow room for difference and creativity, whilst also consistently delivering excellent work...To keep improving, we must seek out the ways we can do our work even better, individually, as teams and organisationally. There is room to make mistakes and be curious about our failures – that's how we learn! (Freedom and Responsibility, 2021)*

While there is room for errors to learn from, difficult feelings and emotions are absent in this statement. There is a belief that things can get better, as long as everyone is 'consistently delivering excellent work'. Viewing this organisational culture through a psychodynamic lens, it could be seen to be informed by both 'persecutory anxiety' and 'survival anxiety' (Cooper, 2018). The former is generated by 'allegations or

accusations of failure, or the potential for public humiliation and scapegoating' (ibid, pp. 64-65). This feels particularly pertinent for Frontline, which has been the subject of intense and critical scrutiny by sections of the social work community. In the domain of economics, survival anxiety suppresses feelings to avoid failure and ensure the survival of the organisation, which, in the case of Frontline, is dependent on the renewing of government contracts based on meeting specific performance outcomes.

Frontline's 'Freedom and Responsibility' (2021) document, in asserting that 'constant improvement' can be achieved, reflects Frosh and Hoggett's concept of the 'liberal subject' (2015, p.439). Informed by ideas dating back to the Enlightenment, the 'liberal subject' has agency and the power to change, if they have the required motivation. Individuals are seen as autonomous and rational beings; the power structures in society that constrain and limit individual agency are not acknowledged. This organisational culture could be argued to be informed, as well, by a wider societal culture which has a distaste for dependency and struggles to accept that there will always be limits on what humans can achieve (Hoggett, 2005).

Data from Helen and Martha's interviews indicate a process of introjection of this organisational culture of high expectations and excellence, leading them to place high expectations on themselves, with feelings of failure or guilt when they fail to meet them. This compromised their ability to express vulnerability and seek support when they needed it, again reducing the opportunity to seek containment for anxiety and so reduce feelings of being overwhelmed. So, Frontline culture, at the level of the 'real', with its positive emphasis on excellence and 'change making' can contribute to feelings of failure. Perhaps this also informed the feelings of sadness and regret experienced by Lily, Katie, Danielle and Chloe when they withdrew from

the programme.

Frontline's extensive recruitment process (Maxwell et al., 2018) selects highly motivated participants with experience of academic achievement. When these participants face the realities of practice, in combination with the demands of the ASYE and master's, their belief that they can be both people that 'make a difference' and who can achieve academically can be disrupted, leading to feelings of failure, such as those expressed by Martha, as well as guilt or overwhelming emotions.

As a member of Frontline staff, I must also consider how Frontline's organisational culture may have impacted on me, as a researcher; how processes in the domain of the social setting, in this instance Frontline, impacted on the domain of my person, as a staff member and 'insider' researcher.

Analysing the second interviews, I noticed that I sometimes focussed on the programme and ways to make things better, at the expense of exploring some of the difficult emotions that participants discussed in their first interviews. I believe this tendency was informed by processes in social setting that I am part of, with its focus on constant improvement, rather than difficult feelings. This focus perhaps reflects a tension in the social work task itself between exploration and action. Social workers come into people's lives when there is a concern and change is needed, for example, to protect a child from significant harm, and/or to ensure their development is not impacted by their situation (Children Act, 1989). In contrast to therapy, where mutual exploration of a person's past and present situation is hoped to bring change over the longer-term, child and family social workers work within strict, short timescales and are required to make changes to children's situations to prevent harm (Working Together, 2023). So, in addition to processes in my social setting, I

was perhaps also influenced by the focus on action that is inherent in child and family social work.

Ruch (2007) discussing supervision, argues for the need for containment in three areas: 'emotion' (being); 'knowing' (technical, rational and experiential knowledge); and 'doing' (decision making and taking action). Hingley-Jones & Ruch (2016) argue that currently 'doing' is prioritised over 'being' and 'knowing', with less time spent in reflection and thinking about practice. The pressure to 'do something' can be argued to represent an inability to tolerate the anxiety inherent in the emotional nature of social work (Ruch, 2007b). I have argued that this emphasis on taking action (doing) to make things better also informs the culture of my organisation, reflecting the persecutory and survival anxiety outlined above. On a more personal level, I wonder if a preference for 'action' informed my choice of research methodology. I hoped that adopting a psychoanalytically informed approach to research interviews through the use of FANI would allow me to do a deeper level of exploration of the emotional experiences of participants. However, this urge to action and change, informed through the introjection of my organisation's culture, detracted somewhat from my ability to do this. So, at the level of the 'real', in the 'situated activity' of the interviews, unconscious processes of projection and introjection sometimes inhibited the discussion of difficult emotions.

As 'defended' subjects we perhaps felt 'safer' in exploring issues relating to our shared profession. Participants knew me as 'teacher' on the Year 2 programme, and latterly as a researcher of the same programme. My 'insider' status and position of power perhaps informed a reluctance on both sides of the researcher/researched relationship to explore difficult emotions in depth. There are parallels here with participants' experiences of supervision in their local authorities, where expression of

emotion was avoided or even ignored. How much of this reluctance to explore difficult feelings belonged to me and how much to the participants is impossible to discern, as our emotions were psychically 'mixed up' (Cooper,2018).

I have highlighted the presence of these processes in the situated activity of the research interviews, to demonstrate the influence of social work and organisational cultures on both myself and research participants. However, as demonstrated in my 'emblematic cases', through adopting a psycho-social lens and the VCRM method of analysis, I have been able to identify some of my own and participants possible defences in the interviews, which informed this discussion of the unseen processes enacted across different domains of reality. The analysis reveals how cultures of individual responsibility and achievement, along with a prioritisation of 'doing' over thinking and feeling, detracted from emotional containment of participants.

#### **5.2.4 The domain of culture**

The data suggests that the unseen cultural processes of gender, class and racial discrimination were operating at the level of the 'actual' and the 'empirical' for some participants. Three participants faced significant events and issues in their family lives during the programme which impacted on the time and emotional capacity they had to complete the master's, contributing to feelings of being overwhelmed.

Despite advances in the position of women in society, a dominant discourse that the realm of the family is the primary responsibility of women persists (Featherstone et al., 2010) and may be seen to be operating for these participants.

Freya and Helen, who are from racially minoritised backgrounds, spoke about the difficulties of self-reflexivity (Totsuka, 2014), a requirement of the master's programme. Helen found this difficult in her first year, but 'got it' in her second year.

For Freya, self-reflexivity could bring up painful emotions:

*Um.. and also just having to sit there and think about it again and write it all down and kind of go through it all, you know when you are going through bits in your life that you don't feel the most comfortable with and you are trying to understand them, so I think, sitting with that and writing about it is never comfortable for anyone.*

Freya did not say what areas of her life that she was not comfortable with, and I did not ask her. Reflecting after the interview, I wondered if the differences between us, in terms race, age and power impacted on Freya's capacity to share the more personal aspects of herself with me. Perhaps, in an unconscious process of projection and introjection, her anxiety of sharing difficult feelings was picked up by me, leading me to avoid those difficult feelings. She spoke of herself in the third person, perhaps in this way too, putting some distance between herself and difficult emotions. I don't know what it was in Freya's life that she was unhappy with, but I do know that she was passionate about her work with marginalised young people and so issues relating to race and racism are important to her. I am left with the idea that being from a marginalised, oppressed community and the difficult emotions this evokes, will always make self-reflexivity difficult, contributing to feelings of emotional overload.

Yazeed (2023) has critiqued the work of Brown (2015) arguing that the latter's encouragement to show vulnerability in relationships is more difficult for black women than white women. She argues that shows of emotion by black women elicit hostile responses, due to black women's position of marginalisation in cultures where whiteness is privileged. She notes that a culture of trust and safety is required

to enable sharing of the authentic self and that those conditions are not available for black women. The expectation on Frontline participants to be reflective and self-reflexive practitioners perhaps fails to account for the discrimination and oppression that makes this more difficult and challenging for racially minoritised participants.

I noticed the influence of wider cultural discourses in Chloe, Martha and Helen's interviews when they wrestled with issues of personal responsibility. They wondered how much they were to blame for their struggles with the programme and how much was informed by their context. When they blamed and shamed themselves for 'failures', Frosh and Hoggett's concept of the 'liberal subject' (2015, p.439) again felt pertinent, with its emphasis on personal agency and responsibility, rather than the power structures in society that limit individual agency.

### **5.2.5 Summary**

My analysis reveals how participants' experiences of the programme were influenced by multiple and complex factors at the level of person, their social work role, and the organisational cultures of local authorities and Frontline, as well as wider societal structures and discourses. Having discussed the impact of processes at the 'local level' I now go on to consider the relevance this discussion holds for early career social workers, beyond the Frontline programme.

### **5.3 What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme contribute to our understanding of the experiences of early career social workers?**

Some of my findings and analysis reflect the existing literature relating to emotional experiences, such as the importance of supportive managers and teams for social worker motivation and wellbeing (Johnson et al. 2022, Hussein et al., 2014, Adamson et al., 2014). However, areas of my analysis that extend knowledge and

hold relevance for the experiences of early career social workers beyond the Frontline programme are discussed below, structured by Houston's (2010) framework of a stratified society, starting with the domain of situated activity.

### **5.3.1 Domain of situated activity: seeking support and emotional containment in social work**

The important but emotionally complex nature of seeking support and emotional containment was reflected in the experiences shared by participants of this study. Existing literature, including social work's professional standards (Social Work England, 2024) focus on the importance for social workers in seeking and receiving advice and support from more experienced colleagues. However, there is little evidence relating to the challenges of seeking support for early career social workers.

In order to seek support and emotional containment, social workers need to be able to show vulnerability, to admit that they need help with something. The capacity to show vulnerability is impacted by a number of factors. This study has identified the influence of cultural discourses on the capacity to seek support. Examples include the pervasive notion that shows of emotion and vulnerability in social work are unprofessional (O' Connor, 2020), influenced by ideas dating back to the Enlightenment that privilege rationality over emotion (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). This was enacted in situated activities, such as task-focussed supervision, where emotion was subsumed in favour of 'competence' and getting work done. Introjection of these discourses informed ambivalent feelings towards help-seeking amongst some participants of this study. They wanted to reach out, but sometimes struggled to do this, worried about being judged as inadequate or feeling guilty about bothering busy managers, then blaming themselves for not seeking help. These feelings appear to

reflect social work's own ambivalence towards emotion and help-seeking (O'Connor, 2020); it is important, but at the same time must be bounded (Grant and Kinman, 2020).

The concept of the autonomous 'liberal subject' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015), who is 'rational' rather than 'emotional' and who can do their best as long as they have the motivations and skills, remains an influential and societal wide discourse. This will impact on all early career social workers' capacity to show vulnerability and seek support. In addition, as argued above, discrimination and disadvantage make it more difficult or impossible for black women to show vulnerability (Yazeed, 2023), which indicates this is likely to be the situation for other marginalised identities. This suggests that providing safe containing spaces for marginalised early career social workers is of particular importance. While a particular emphasis on high achievement and 'excellence' may be specific to Frontline, awareness of societal-wide discourses and their impact has the potential to enable social workers and those supporting them to explore their influence on each early career social worker's unique capacity for seeking and receiving support.

The shift to increased working on-line from home, that started, but has continued after the pandemic, exacerbated the difficult and complex emotional process of seeking support and containment for participants of this study, which contributed to feelings of isolation. When working on-line, unless a colleague clearly signals that they are available, social workers have no visual clues relating to a colleague or manager's emotional capacity to provide containment. In the absence of these visual clues, reaching out requires bravery and well-established relationships of trust, where ad hoc support-seeking is accepted and welcomed (Cook et al, 2020). Where this is not available, for example, due to high staff turnover, and high managerial

workloads, the capacity to show vulnerability and seek support will be compromised.

This study identified that high staff turnover and shortages impacted on participants' capacity to reach out for support. Knowing that managers themselves were stretched and busy, lead to feelings of guilt for adding to this pressure by asking for support.

This extends the current knowledge base, which identifies a general impact on well-being relating to difficulties with recruitment and retention (Johnson, 2022). As novices, early career social workers, are likely to require more support and guidance than experienced workers, so this finding is of particular relevance to this sector of the workforce. More experienced workers may welcome and benefit from the added flexibility that working from home offers; however, the reduced capacity to seek out and receive support that this may entail, may detract from the benefits of this way of working for early career social workers.

Irrespective of participants' capacity to reach out for support, opportunities to hear about the anxieties and difficulties experienced by their peers reduced feelings of isolation. This suggests that activities that enable the sharing of emotional experiences, such as the sharing of student narratives enacted in this study, are likely to be of benefit to early career social workers beyond the Frontline programme.

### **5.3.2 The domain of social settings: the availability of structures and roles offering containment.**

Aspects of the Frontline programme identified as enabling emotional containment provide knowledge that may have relevance beyond the programme. For example, friendships developed with unit colleagues were of particular importance to some participants of this study in providing emotional connection and release. For these participants, training together as a small group of students enabled the development of long-standing relationships that continued to offer support and emotional

containment beyond the first year of the programme. The unit structure itself, advocated by the Reclaiming Social Work model (Goodman and Trowler, 2012) and the close working relationships that it can facilitate, contrasts with the individual placement with a practice educator offered by other training routes. While the adoption of this model may not be feasible for other routes, knowledge of the role that working and learning together as a group can play in supporting emotional containment, holds relevance beyond the Frontline programme.

Existing literature, for example Cleveland et al. (2019), highlights the importance of supportive managers and team colleagues in offering containment. This study has identified additional roles and spaces in the local authority and Frontline that offered emotional containment to participants. In the local authority, the role of ASYE coordinators was recognised as an important space for reflection and containment, for some, if not all, participants. Dissertation supervisors and coaches provided by the Frontline programme, offered another containing space. For early career social workers, recognition of the importance of alternative or additional reflective, containing roles or spaces, holds the potential to enhance well-being, particularly if supervision provided through line management is task-focussed, rather than reflective (Wilkins et al., 2017).

### **5.3.3 Domain of culture**

The impact of systemic racism on outcomes for student social workers and early career social workers is well documented in the literature (What Works for Children's Social Care, 2022). In focussing on emotional experience, this study has highlighted the additional challenges of self-reflexivity for racially minoritised students and social workers, due to the painful thoughts and emotions this may evoke. Racially

minoritised early career social workers, like Freya, in addition to experiencing the difficult emotions inherent in the social work task, are also likely to experience micro and macro aggressions and injustice. The difficulties of showing vulnerability for marginalised social workers have also been highlighted (Yazeed, 2023).

While not featuring in this study, the experience of other minoritised social workers, including LGBTQ+, neurodivergent and care experienced workers, will also face these challenges. Reflexivity, which explores the influence of the social 'graces' (Burnham, 2012) and personal experience on relationships between social workers and those they work with, is recognised to be important for anti-oppressive practice (Houston and Marshall, 2020). However, this very focus is likely to be more emotionally challenging for minoritised early career social workers. This suggests that the provision of containing roles and spaces where early career social workers are safe to express vulnerability and explore difficult emotions are of particular importance to marginalised workers.

Having considered the relevance of my study for the emotional experience of early career social workers, I now go on to answer my third investigatory question, considering the capacity for practice-based research in early career social work.

#### **5.4 What can an exploration of the emotional experience of Year 2 of the Frontline programme tell us about the capacity for practice-based research and research-mindedness in early career social work?**

This study has confirmed the findings of previous studies which cite social workers' interest and motivation to engage in research, balanced against the significant challenges of completing research whilst also practising as a social worker (Pullman and Fenge, 2024). However, it has gone beyond these findings in its in-depth exploration of the emotional impact of enacting the dual roles of social worker and

practitioner researcher. In line with my discussion of my first two investigatory questions, this exploration is structured in line with Houston's (2010) framework of a stratified society, starting with the domain of the person.

#### **5.4.1 Domain of the person: the capacity to think.**

As outlined in the discussion of my first investigatory question, participants of this study sometimes found themselves stuck in the realm of emotion, feeling overwhelmed, with their capacity to think compromised (Bion, 1962). Research-mindedness requires a capacity for 'curiosity, critical reflection and...critical thinking' (Liedgren, 2022, p.88). To have this capacity, social workers require support to process and make sense of the emotions evoked in their daily work, so, rather than feeling 'stuck' or overwhelmed by emotion, they can understand their experiences, think and reflect. Emotional containment offered by a 'thinking partner' (Wolf, 2004, p.17 cited in Archard & O'Reilly, 2022) is therefore not only essential for emotional well-being, but also for the curiosity and critical thinking required for practitioner research.

The need for reflective space to enable the capacity for research-mindedness extends the existing literature relating to the challenges of completing practitioner research, which focusses primarily on the practical barriers faced by social workers completing practice-based research (Pullman & Fenge, 2024).

While practical issues, such as available time to complete research, are clearly important, this study extends this understanding, through its exploration of the impact of limited time and competing demands on emotional experience. Participants of this study highlighted how completing practitioner research reduced the amount of time they had away from 'doing' or 'thinking' about work, which contributed to feelings of

'overwhelm' and the capacity to think. This sheds light on the particular emotional demands of practitioner research which requires social workers to be both a practitioner and a researcher, with the concomitant time pressures that this is likely to entail.

#### **5.4.2 Domain of situated activity: the availability of support and containing relationships**

I have argued above that availability of containing relationships is essential for social workers completing practice-based research. Year 2 participants of the Frontline programme are offered a variety of sources of support including reflexive groups, dissertation supervision, coaching and line manager and ASYE supervision.

However, this study has shown that structures for support and containment were not always enough to prevent participants from feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of completing research and working full-time. These challenges suggest that the completion of first-person action research by over two hundred Frontline participants each year is a significant achievement. However, this study has shown the emotional toil that this achievement can entail, which goes some way to explain the relatively high levels of attrition from the Year 2 programme at Frontline.

Existing literature, such as Buck et al.'s (2022) study also identifies the high levels of practical and relational support required for social workers to successfully complete practice-based research. The challenge of providing this level of resource goes some way to explain the focus on barriers to the completing practitioner research in the literature (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011). However, the focus on emotional experience encapsulated in this study, moves beyond the consideration of structures of support, to the qualities of roles and spaces offering support to practitioner researchers and their intersection with other unseen processes across the different

domains of society (Houston, 2010).

For each participant of this study a unique combination of processes relating to their person, the situated activity of their social work practice and research, the social setting of their local authority and the Frontline programme, and social and cultural discourses, all impacted on their capacity to complete research. Analysis of the data suggests, however, that whether participants completed their research or withdrew from the programme, the availability of containing spaces and roles played an important role in how supported they felt. For early career social workers, this suggests that roles and spaces that support emotional containment are not a guarantee for the successful completion of research, however, they play a vital role.

#### **5.4.3 Domain of social settings: the challenges of completing research in a local authority context**

This study has illustrated the challenges for Year 2 participants of completing first-person action research in a local authority context. For some, the lack of support for research and intellectual activity from managers, is mirrored in the existing literature (Gleeson, 2023, Vincent and Hamilton, 2021). Performance management culture (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016) in local authority contexts was a key detractor from the emotional containment of participants in this study, with a focus on the timely completion of tasks reducing the priority given to time for reflection and emotional containment (Ruch, 2007, 2007b). This in turn reduced participants' capacity to think and enact 'research-mindedness'.

Given the pervasiveness of performance management culture in local authorities, the impact of this way of working on the capacity for research is likely to be a reality for all early career social workers practising in this context. Local authority cultures that prioritise 'action', by their very nature, will give less priority and support to activities,

such as research, that focus on 'thinking' and 'feeling'. Action research (McNiff, 2017) encompasses both 'thinking' and 'action', but despite this focus on change as well as thought, some participants of this study were not supported by their employers to complete their research. For early career social workers beyond the Frontline programme, gaining support to undertake practitioner research in performance management-based cultures is likely to be challenging.

#### **5.4.4 Domain of culture: the impact of dominant discourses on minoritised social workers**

This study has identified that conducting research is likely to be challenging for any social worker who is combining this with practice. However, the additional emotional challenges for minoritised social workers, who potentially face discrimination, marginalisation and oppression over and above the emotional challenges of the social work task, has also been highlighted. Dominant discourses at the level of the 'real' in this way directly impact on lived experience. Undertaking practitioner research, which requires critical reflection and reflexivity, therefore has the potential to be even more emotionally challenging for marginalised early career social workers, because of the potential to uncover or highlight painful emotions arising from the experience of discrimination. Balanced against this, Nash's (2011) research, identified how conducting research with migrant communities enhanced minoritised social workers' self-reflexive stance and professional identities. This suggests a 'double-edged sword' where the self-reflexivity required in practice-based research can be both challenging as well as enhancing of personal and professional development for minoritised social workers.

Discourses that continue to steer women to take lead responsibility for family issues were identified as impacting women who took part in the study, detracting from their

capacity to engage in research activity. The pervasiveness of these discourses (Featherstone et al., 2010) means that this is likely to be the case for cis-gendered and trans women social workers beyond the Frontline programme, potentially impacting on the ability to complete practitioner research in comparison to male colleagues.

#### **5.4.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided further analysis of my first investigatory question and addressed my second and third investigatory questions, exploring the relevance of my study for early career social workers. The next chapter builds on my understanding of the processes influencing participants' experience. As an action researcher, understanding processes is not an end in itself, particularly if those processes are oppressive or detrimental to experience (Houston, 2010). This leads me to the next chapter, where I discuss my emancipatory questions.

## 6 Exploration of emancipatory questions

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the influence of the research on the design and delivery of the Year 2 programme. It documents the 'action' stage of the action research cycle (McNiff, 2017). I have drawn on my reflexive journal, which I used to note down the influence of the research on my planning and/or delivery of the programme. My journal proved vital in recording my learning through the research process. The voices of my research participants, as well as literature I read, became so embedded in my thinking that it became hard to notice what I had learnt from the research and how my thinking had changed. My reflexive journal provides a record of some of this learning.

Changes I made to the programme were not large in scale. Instead, I found that the voices and stories of research participants came to my mind when I amended teaching materials and taught on-line or in person, leading me to make small-scale, incremental changes to the programme. The voices of research participants were also present in discussion of policy and procedure relating to the programme.

As agreed with research participants during their recruitment, I updated them about changes made to the programme as a result of their contributions.

## 6.2 How can fellows' stories of the emotional experience of Year 2 shape the planning and delivery of the programme?

### 6.2.1 Planning and curriculum design

I first noticed the influence of research interviews on my planning in January 2022, after I had completed four first interviews with participants. I wrote in my reflexive journal:

*As I do the interviews, the ideas and reflections are feeding into my day-to-day work with participants and the planning of teaching. For example, when I was planning teaching day 5, I included a workshop where participants meet up with others outside their LA to reflect on their experiences. This was influenced by my discussion with Martha, who said she had missed those experiences of meeting with others outside her LA when working online and how supportive sharing emotional experience with other ASYE's had been. (14.01.22)*

In June 2022 I planned the final teaching day for Year 1 participants, which introduces them to the Year 2 programme. By this time, I had finished my research interviews and the process of analysis had begun. I noted in my reflexive journal that the research data directly influenced the design of the day:

*Last year's lecture had included some of the challenges of Year 2 e.g. increased workload... I have added doing court work, working in a performance management culture and juggling the demands of ASYE, masters and case work – this is straight from the data. A 'top tips' slide, also drawing on the data, encourages them to create space and time for reflection with others; draw on the support of colleagues; keep connected with their*

*dissertation supervisor and placement and partnerships manager (PPM) and to take up the coaching offer. (16.06.22)*

In September 2022 I made amendments to the teaching day one, drawing on my research findings. In the first lecture, where I introduce participants to the programme, I added advice to talk to their team managers about the programme. This was influenced by my interview with Chloe, who said that her manager showed no interest in the programme, but also wondered if she could have spoken about it more. I also stressed the value of peer support, drawing on interviews with several of my research participants where they had spoken about the importance of relationships with unit members, colleagues, and others NQSW's. I received feedback from my co-facilitators that my delivery was inclusive and containing. I reflected in my journal that I felt the influence of my research in this feedback.

### **6.2.2 Programme delivery**

The voices of research participants also influenced my teaching on the programme. I felt this influence, for example, on teaching day four. This day includes videos of fellows speaking about their experience of completing the master's. The tone of the videos is upbeat with an emphasis on how helpful they found the research for their practice. Research participants' feelings of being overwhelmed made me worried that this upbeat, motivational message, might feel discordant for current participants:

*As I was preparing to introduce the videos, the influence of my interviewees came through again, as I spoke about the emotional labour of social work and the emotional challenges of Year 2. (19.01.22)*

### **6.2.3 Policy**

In June 2022, I met with a member of the programme management team (PMT), to discuss Katie and Lily's experience of the intercalation policy and, to see if their stories could have any impact on the delivery of this policy. This meeting helped me to understand the policy from an organisational, rather than personal perspective. With a large cohort, high numbers of participants deferring would mean running several cohorts at the same time, making it harder to track progress and provide support. The point was made, too, that participants under pressure may want to defer, but their situation in a year's time may be no better, or perhaps worse, particularly in terms of size and complexity of caseload. However, I was left with the impression that the policy was now being applied more flexibly than it had been for Katie and Lily.

The policy states that participants should *normally* intercalate from both the academic and placement aspects of the programme i.e. leave their job as well as withdraw from the master's. Katie did not want to leave her job, so she was not able to intercalate. I was told that the word *normally* indicated that in exceptional circumstances, participants could intercalate from one aspect of the programme rather than both. This left me feeling more confident that participants in similar situations to Katie would be treated more sympathetically in the future. I cannot claim this change came about as a result of the research, but rather it occurred due to a change of personnel in the PMT.

### **6.2.4 Partnerships with local authorities**

Frontline has a team of partnership and placement managers (PPMs) who act as the liaison point between the programme and local authority partners. As many of the processes detracting from participants' experience of the programme related to the

local authority context, it felt important to share my research findings with this team, to discuss how they might be used to influence our local authority partners.

Local authorities are required to identify a 'Project Manager' to oversee the Frontline programme, who meets with Frontline's PPM on a regular basis. My research data identified that participants' concerns about their local authority context were not always being communicated to the Project Manager, who potentially had some power to address them.

In Lily's second interview, for example, she suggests that Frontline and local authorities could work better together:

*I think what would really help is if there was some way of Frontline and local authorities, working together with Frontline students in their ASYE to, I suppose quality assure, and make sure that ASYE students are given the time and the protected caseload and this ongoing support.*

I presented my research findings to PPMs in August 2022, and we agreed some actions together. I put together a short video about the Year 2 programme for project managers, which PPMs could share in their meetings with them. The video gives an outline of the programme and the challenges for Year 2 participants, drawing on my research data. I also updated the training I deliver to dissertation supervisors, explaining the role they could take in escalating concerns relating to the placement to the PPM so they can share them with the Project Manager.

### **6.2.5 Increased tracking of participants and clearer deadlines**

Robert, Chloe and Danielle spoke about the lack of clear deadlines in Year 2, in comparison to Year 1, which impacted on their motivation. This concern was replicated in the wider organisation, as lack of deadlines was believed to contribute

to difficulties in tracking participant engagement with the programme. Every year relatively high numbers of participants fail to submit dissertations without withdrawing from the programme. This is a concern to our university partner due to the impact on the overall pass rate for the module.

Working with my colleagues in the PMT, a deadline for ethical approval has now been introduced, with a process for applying for exceptional circumstances (EC's) if participants cannot meet this deadline. Those who fail to submit an application or apply for EC's are then contacted to check if they want to continue on the programme.

#### **6.2.6 To what extent can fellows' stories provide a resource for learning and reflection for staff and participants engaged in the programme?**

As we co-created research participants' one-page stories, I considered how best to use them as a resource for current participants of the programme. I shared the stories (with the consent of the participants) with my line manager, and the Year 2 working group, a small group of colleagues with an interest in the Year 2 programme.

In May 2022, Helen, Beatrice, Freya and Robert's stories were shared with Year 2 participants on teaching day seven. They were used as part of an individual learning exercise (see Appendix 10.5), which had been shared with the Year 2 working group prior to the day in draft form. Feedback from the group suggested that, while the focus on the emotional experience of the programme was helpful, participants would want to know how the exercise could contribute to their research and dissertation. There is a requirement to write about the context of the research, so it was suggested that the exercise could contribute to this section of the work.

After reading the fellows' stories and reflecting on their responses, participants were asked to consider the context of their research, including the factors in their local authority and wider context which have supported or hindered their research. They were also offered the opportunity to add their own one-page stories to the 'archive'. Feedback on the day suggested that some participants had found the 'honesty' of the stories helpful, while some had been shocked to read Beatrice's story of failing the dissertation. I wonder if this shock was informed by a deviation from Frontline's organisational culture, which tends to focus on success and the achievement of positive change.

In May 2023 fellows' stories were shared again as an independent learning activity. This time I included Chloe's story as a replacement for Robert's, as I wanted to include a story of withdrawing from the programme. Stories of withdrawal had not been completed by May 2022 but could now be included in 2023. While no-one had chosen to add their story to the archive in 2022, one participant took up this offer in 2023. At the end of the day, I wrote in my reflexive journal:

*I was nervous about sharing Chloe's story, as it might feel disheartening for current participants trying to complete the programme. At the same time, as I had stories of withdrawal it felt perhaps dishonest not to share one of them.*

*I started the day by thanking participants for attending and congratulating them for having the motivation to keep going given the very challenging contexts that they were in. I gave the heads up that we would be sharing stories of struggle and difficulty that may be hard to hear, but we were sharing them because if they were struggling, we didn't want them to feel on their own. In my workshop a participant thanked me for this acknowledgement. I*

*felt the influence of my research here and how it had helped me in the delivery of the programme. I have always known how hard it is for participants, but my research has brought it to the forefront of my mind.*

*When I checked my emails, I noticed that a participant had sent me her story. I had suggested that participants could share their stories with me in the independent study task, but as no one had done this last year, I wasn't expecting it. It was so lovely that the participant had taken the time to write her own story and share it, as she said that reading the stories had helped her to process her own feelings. This is what I was hoping to achieve by sharing the stories.*

*At the end of the day de-brief with the other facilitators we discussed how the exercise and workshops had landed. Overall, the feedback was positive, with participants finding reading the stories reassuring and, in some cases, motivating. Some had spoken the benefits of naming 'the elephant in the room' – participants withdrawing, while one group had found the withdrawal story depressing. Others felt more isolated from each other in Year 2, so they found themselves developing narratives that others were doing better than them – so hearing stories that others had struggled was helpful. (01.06.23)*

One participant adding their story to the archive is perhaps a small achievement, but this voluntary act of sharing, outside the remit of my research, and the feedback given relating to the sharing of stories, felt heartening.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have reviewed some of the incremental changes I have made to the design and delivery of the Year 2 programme, drawing on the voices and

experiences of research participants. I now go on to discuss my overarching research question considering how I can apply my learning to further develop the design and delivery of the programme.

## **7 Improving the experience of Year 2 participants of the Frontline programme**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I draw on my research findings and discussion of my investigatory questions to demonstrate how I have answered my overarching research question.

### **7.2 How can we improve and learn from the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?’**

Discussion of my first investigatory question in Chapter 5 demonstrated that much of participants’ experience is influenced by the ‘social setting’ of the local authority, and the ‘situated activity’ of social work. The nature of the social work task, working with vulnerable and marginalised communities and protecting children from harm, will always be challenging. The current cost of living crisis, coming after a lengthy period of government austerity, is argued to make the work even more challenging (Ferguson et al., 2023). Our capacity as a programme to influence this wider context is limited. Similarly, while Frontline’s partnership with local authorities means that we can and should aim to influence participants’ experience in this setting, our power to influence change is somewhat circumscribed, as we work ‘with’ rather than as part of, these organisations. For this reason, my primary focus moving forward will be changing the Frontline programme, as this is where I have the most capacity to improve the participant experience. This will form the ‘evaluate and modify’ stage of the action research cycle (McNiff, 2017).

Whilst I will focus on change in the Frontline programme itself, the research has demonstrated that participants’ experience is inextricably connected to their roles and the local authority context. For this reason, any changes I make to the

programme must take account of the impact of the social work task and the local authority context on participants' experiences. For example, the tendency towards 'doing' in social work, and away from thinking described by Ruch (2007b) and discussed in Chapter 5 and Wengraf's (2004) concept of a continuum between relational and boundaried practice, outlined in Chapter 2, illustrate how local authority structures tend to predispose them towards boundaried practice, while Frontline culture and the anxiety inherent in the social work task both promote change and 'doing'. As Frontline participants straddle both these contexts, emotionally informed, relational practice and research may be harder to do and thinking may be compromised.

### **7.2.1 First and second order change**

Before considering the changes I plan to make in the future, I felt it would be helpful to evaluate the changes already made to the programme as a result of my research, by using the systemic concepts of first and second order change (Watzlawick, 1974). First order change relates to relatively superficial changes in the existing system to address an immediate problem, whereas second order change relates to the way the system itself operates (Davey et al., 2012). This binary classification of change is made for the purpose of arguing that, while first order change can be necessary, it is unlikely to bring about sustainable change. However, Marshall takes a more nuanced view of change from a systemic viewpoint, arguing that 'often "parts" cannot change unless there is some kind of shift in systemic pattern, but/and that sometimes "parts" can change and influence change in the wider "system"'. (Marshall, 2004, pp.308–9, quoted in Marshall, 2016).

Davey et al. (2012) suggest that second order change can be achieved in three ways; rule change, re-framing and recalibration. Rule change shifts the focus from changing outcomes to changing patterns of communication or how communication is done. Re-framing, alternatively, refers to a change in what the system, or part of the system, means to those within the system. Thirdly, recalibration refers to changing a characteristic of the system.

Thinking about the changes I had already made, classifying them as first or second order changes proved harder than I thought. For example, changing the advice I gave to participants on the final teaching day of Year 1, emphasising the importance of peer support and reflective supervision, could be argued to be first order, advising participants to make the best of the system as it is. Alternatively, it could lead to second order change, as it would change how communication is done within the system. Perhaps the introduction of deadlines for ethical approval could be more simply classed as a first order change, as it provided a solution to a problem in the existing system. Designing activities where participants could meet and connect with others outside their local authority could be seen as a way of altering how communication was done within the programme, or a solution within the existing system.

As outlined in Chapter 6, my research led me to place a greater emphasis on the emotional challenges of the year when I delivered the programme. This perhaps most clearly represents second order change, as I re-framed previous content, which was more focussed on the benefits of the programme. By openly acknowledging the emotional challenges of Year 2 I *re-framed* or changed the meaning of the programme, the system that I and the participants were part of, from purely positive to both positive and emotionally challenging (Davey et al.2012).

### 7.2.2 Planning for the future

When considering how I could build on the changes I had already made to the programme, it felt important to go back to the data and remind myself of the processes in the Frontline programme that detracted from participants' experience of the programme, which emerged in my thematic analysis. This allowed me to review the actions I had already taken in relation to themes and which themes required further action. Returning to the themes that required action, I identified that they all had something in common, notably, participants' emotional responses to their situation, in terms of academic work and their local authority context.

Drawing on my learning from literature and the analysis of my data, I realised I needed to continue to re-frame and *change the meaning* of the experience of difficult emotions. My growing awareness of the impact of unseen processes at the level of the person, situated activity, social settings and dominant discourses (Houston, 2010) on the emotional experiences of participants, would enable me to include more discussion of the emotional impact of the combined roles of early career social worker and researcher when I designed and delivered of the programme. In this way I hoped to re-frame or change the meaning of the experience of difficult emotions from individualised and problematic, to shared and 'normal' (Alterio & McDury, 2004).

#### Table 5

##### Actions already taken

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Actions taken</b>
Lack of deadlines	Deadlines introduced
No choice of methodology	Introduction of option of literature review in 2024
Intercalation policy	No further action
Action research unfamiliar.	Introduction of option of literature review in 2024

### Outstanding themes and proposed action

<b>Outstanding Themes</b>	<b>Action</b>
Worry over academic work	Re-frame or change the meaning of difficult emotions evoked by the programme from individualised and problematic, to shared and 'normal'
Reflection brings up difficult emotions	
Not prepared for the reality of social work	
Less contact with dissertation supervisor	
Frontline culture	
Dissertation closely linked with practice	
Dissertation always in the background	

### **7.2.3 Changing the meaning of the experience of difficult emotions**

Re-framing and changing the meaning of emotional responses to the challenges of the Year 2 programme is underpinned by subtle differences between systemic and psychoanalytical thinking in relation to emotion. I will now outline what is currently taught on the programme in order to consider how teaching might be designed and delivered in the future to incorporate the re-framing I hope to achieve.

### **7.2.4 Systemic practice, reflexivity and the social graces**

Systemic teaching is foundational to the Frontline programme, while psychoanalytic approaches are not. For example, in Year 1 of the programme, as part of systemic teaching, participants learn about the importance of self-reflexivity. Participants are taught to 'observe ... listen to ... question ... the effects of their practice, then use their responses to their observation/listening to decide 'how to go on' (Burnham, quoted in Bingle & Middleton, 2019, p. 389). They learn how their social positioning, for example, in terms of race, gender, age and class, impact on how they perceive and respond to families and how families respond to them.

Self-reflexivity is taught with reference to Burnham's concept of 'Social Graces' (2012). The social graces mnemonic supports participants' understanding of how socially constructed aspects of identity, such as class, race and sexuality influence positioning in families, social relationships and wider society. This model helps participants recognise and think reflexively about aspects of their own identity and the identities of families that they work with. Through this exploration, issues of sameness and difference and their influence on relationships and power can be explored.

Hedges (2010), a systemic therapist, speaks of the importance of noticing and interpreting one's own emotions as part of self-reflexive practice. This allows the practitioner to be aware of when they might be influenced by their own cultural biases or discourses relating to gender or class for example. She describes how emotions are bodily felt and defines emotion as communication, which can be interpreted and named based on our own cultural stories. This perhaps suggests that, by giving ourselves time and space to interpret how we feel, we can name and understand our emotions. However, a psychoanalytically informed approach would argue that, at times of great stress or anxiety, emotions can feel overwhelming because we cannot name or understand them. When thinking is not possible feelings may be 'embodied, enacted or projected' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015, p.439).

Flaskas (2009) notes that systemic approaches tend to privilege meaning making through language, rather than unconscious processes. She argues that drawing on both systemic and psychoanalytic traditions allow for the development of 'richer' narratives and 'ways of thinking about unconscious processes and about the struggle to know and name realities outside our (language) conscious knowledge' (ibid, p.34). I agree that awareness of unconscious as well as conscious processes

has the potential to develop deeper and richer understanding of our own and other's emotions. For this reason I believe that Frontline participants would benefit from teaching that introduces them to key psychoanalytic concepts. In the next section I discuss the psychoanalytic ideas that may help to address the processes that detracted from participants' experience of the Year 2 programme.

### **7.2.5 The 'post-liberal subject' and social suffering**

In Chapter 5, the influence of the concept of the 'liberal subject' on Frontline and wider culture was discussed. I believe that teaching the concept of the 'post-liberal subject' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015) could enhance our current teaching relating to self-reflexivity. The 'post-liberal subject' is 'psycho-social'; the autonomy of the 'liberal subject' is replaced with relationality and rationality with subjectivity. They are 'ambivalent and emotionally driven...a social subject in a world of power relations' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015, p.440). The focus on the impact of societal structures, discourses and power on experience and agency parallels Burnham's concept of the social 'graces' (2012). However, in comparison to Burnham's social constructionist model, the concept of the 'post-liberal subject' brings a more explicit focus on the 'psycho'; the emotions and behaviours induced by unequal power relationships which cause 'social suffering' (Bourdieu, 1999, cited in Frosh & Hoggett, p.440).

For the post-liberal subject, power relations bring about social suffering, not only in terms of the unequal distribution of resources, but also in lived experience.

Oppression and marginalisation can induce feelings such as shame, anger, discontent or hopelessness and individual agency may be focussed on survival and coping. When existing systems of power appear legitimate or 'natural', negative

feelings are disconnected from systems of power and can be individualised and pathologised.

Participants on our programme experience social suffering in a 'secondary' way, through their work with children and families. Many experience social suffering at first-hand too, through their own experience of racism, discrimination or marginalisation. Freya, for example, found that reflexivity elicited painful feelings relating to her own life. I guessed, although I cannot be sure, that these feelings connected to her identity as a racially minoritised woman. The focus on the feelings evoked by social suffering implicit in the concept of the post-liberal subject has the potential to deepen participants' self-reflexivity and understanding of their emotional responses to the families they work with.

Frontline's focus on high expectations and individual achievement could be seen to be in contradiction with the social constructionist and systemic teaching of the programme with its focus on the impact of societal positioning on individuals and groups (Burnham, 2012). This was articulated by Martha:

*Like there's one side which is like corporate machine and the other side of it is like social work values to the core and ...there's just a bit of a split between that.*

For Helen and Beatrice, Frontline's culture of high expectations left them with the feeling that they 'should' be working on their research projects, when they felt that they needed a break. The dichotomy between what they felt they should be doing and what they wanted to do, led to feelings of stress and overwhelm. Introducing the 'post-liberal' subject, as described above, could provide a way of critiquing the

prioritisation of individual high achievement over consideration of context, which detrimentally impacted on well-being and the capacity to reach out for support.

### **7.2.6 Double suffering and defence against the primary task**

Frosh and Hoggett (2015) identify 'double suffering' when experiences cannot be 'digested' or given meaning, because there is a lack of societal recognition or discourse through which experiences can be understood. I wonder if the feelings of being overwhelmed, cited in my research interviews, fall within this category. A complex combination of the introjection of painful experiences of children and families, combined with the anxieties and lack of agency associated with novice status as workers and researchers, may have brought forth feelings that could not be processed.

The concept of 'double suffering' provides a way of understanding experiences when thinking and understanding ourselves and others is compromised or when our own or other's behaviour is confusing, contradictory or self-sabotaging. It adds another layer to self-reflexivity, which I believe could help Year 2 participants when they find themselves in situations of acute anxiety or stress. In such situations, when experience cannot be thought about, it may be expressed through unreflexive action. Danielle's defensive avoidance of contact with her dissertation supervisor might be an example of this. Alternatively, experience may be felt through the body. I wonder if the 'bit of a breakdown' that Lily went through provides an example of this.

While Frontline participants feel more prepared for child and family social work than those trained via other routes (Johnson et al, 2022), Helen and Danielle both spoke of a lack of preparedness they felt for the reality of their roles in Year 2. Helen spoke of her discomfort at the risk adverse practice in her local authority, which she felt

detracted from her ability to work in a systemically informed way. Teaching is planned for the 2023-4 curriculum which introduces participants to the psychoanalytic concepts of organisational defences and defences against the primary task (Cooper, 2018). It is hoped this will help participants to understand and prepare for the risk averse and process driven practice which is ubiquitous in statutory social work (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016) .

### **7.2.7 Countertransference and projective identification**

Martha, when researching her own practice and working on her dissertation in her own time, felt as if she was never getting a break from work. I am reminded of Adamson et al's (2014) research relating to resilience, where workers who identified as resilient were able to make a clear separation between their work and personal lives. Researching one's own practice for a master's programme does not allow for this.

The psychoanalytic concept of countertransference, as discussed previously, has personal and diagnostic components (Casement, 1985). The personal component describes the worker's reactions which are informed by their own emotional experiences (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). Frontline's teaching on self-reflexivity brings awareness of the influence of participants' own histories to their responses to children and families. For this reason the personal aspect of countertransference may feel relatively familiar for participants. The diagnostic element, however, relates to the reactions elicited in the worker by the 'client's' unconscious projections. A worker who is sensitive to these projections may be able to 'diagnose' them (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). The idea of being subject to the projections of families is likely to feel less familiar to Frontline participants, but I believe it could

provide additional insight into the strong emotions that can be elicited by both work and research.

The concept of projective identification has similarities to countertransference. However, with projective identification, it is the hated or 'bad' parts of the self that are split off and projected into the other, who may experience them or identify with them (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). The intensity of the emotions experienced by participants in receipt of such projections from those they work with necessitate taking 'psychic breaks'. Knowledge of these unconscious processes might go some way towards helping participants understand why difficulties with thinking, and feelings of overwhelm are inevitably experienced at times in social work practice and research.

### **7.2.8 Containment**

Frontline teaches about the importance of reflective spaces and supervision and builds these into the programme structure with unit meetings in Year 1 and reflexive groups in Year 2. Interviews with my research participants demonstrated that they were aware of the importance of safe spaces to share powerful feelings about the work and have these returned in a more manageable and understandable form, and they took advantage of these opportunities when they arose. Bion's concept of 'containment' in relation to supervision (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997) is seen as a process of meaning-making with a 'thinking partner' (Wolf, 2004, p.17 cited in Archard & O'Reilly, 2022), where anxiety can be processed and thinking can emerge. While research participants found dissertation supervision helpful and some wanted more time with supervisors, unfortunately, limitations of staff capacity mean that this resource is unlikely to be increased in frequency. Despite this, the research has taught me that emphasising the importance of accessing containing

relationships to process emotions and thinking, either with dissertation supervisors, team managers, ASYE coordinators, coaches or colleagues, is essential in Year 2 of the programme.

### **7.2.9 The emotional aspects of learning and research**

Both Year 1 and Year 2 participants study whilst working full-time, which brings challenges and stress in completing academic work. Chloe, Freya and Katie spoke of the challenges academic work brought for them and the worry this caused them in Year 2. In the current curriculum the challenges of learning are discussed in relation to the science of learning. Drawing on psychoanalytic ideas relating to the emotional aspects of learning, such as those of Salzberger-Wittenberg (1999), referenced in Chapter 2, could enrich this teaching, helping participants to make connections to their early experiences of learning and education and their social positioning. This might help to mitigate Frontline's emphasis on personal responsibility and individual excellence that negatively impacted on some participants.

### **7.2.10 Re-framing emotions and resilience**

As identified in studies cited in Chapter 2 (O'Connor, 2020, Glumbikova & Mikulec, 2021, Rajan-Rankin, 2014) the expression of emotion can be viewed as negative or 'unprofessional' in social work. Similarly, Grant and Kinman's (2020) work suggests that workers' empathy and emotions must be 'boundaried' in order for them to remain resilient. This discourse, which views emotion in a negative light, represents the pervasive influence of Enlightenment thinking and the 'liberal subject' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015) where 'rational' thought is privileged. Psychoanalytic ideas, in contrast, focus on the unconscious emotional processes that are influenced by relationships in early life and are intrinsic to all human interactions (Waddell, 1998).

From a psychoanalytically informed position, the sub-conscious processes of countertransference and projective identification, outlined above, form an inevitable component of social work experience (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990), resulting in powerful emotions which the worker may be able to process or have contained, or may remain unprocessed or defended against (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015).

Teaching that incorporates these key psychoanalytic ideas may help prepare participants for times, as experienced by participants in this study, when they feel overwhelmed. At these times the eight components of resilience, including critical thinking and 'bounded empathy' (Grant & Kinman, 2020) are hard to enact, as the processes of thinking are compromised.

#### **7.2.11 Next steps**

As mentioned above, the 2023-24 cohort will be introduced to ideas relating to organisational anxiety and defences at the start of their training. I now need to consider how the psychoanalytical concepts outlined above can be further integrated into the programme.

My findings suggest that dissertation supervisors are a key source of support for Year 2 participants. One of the responsibilities of my role is to provide training to new and existing supervisors, so they have the skills and knowledge needed to support and advise their supervisees. Training familiarises supervisors with first-person action research methodology and the ethical, practical and academic support required for participants to successfully complete their research. Extending this training will be an opportunity to share my research findings and learning. Together we can explore how supervisors might draw on psychoanalytical concepts if their supervisees appear to be overwhelmed, as a way to help them understand and

process these feelings. In addition, I plan to spend time with my own team and the Year 2 working group to consider how teaching relating to the emotional impact of the work and the extension of self-reflexivity through psychoanalytical concepts can be further integrated in to the programme.

In May 2023, Frontline learnt that it had won the government contract to deliver fast-track training from 2024. Payment will be based on results, particularly in relation to retention of participants on the programme. This focus, with significant financial consequences, suggests that helping participants understand and deal with their emotional responses to the work will become even more pertinent. The new programme will be over three years; participants will complete a literature review in the third year to gain a master's qualification, leaving only two more cohorts with the option to complete action research. While I understand this decision relates to levels of attrition from the current programme, I am disappointed that an innovative, self-reflexive approach to social work research will be lost. However, I believe the learning this research has afforded in relation to the challenges of completing research while working full-time as a social worker will remain relevant to this and other programmes.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I returned to the thematic analysis of research interviews which allowed me to identify themes that required action and a consideration of what actions I could take. The action of re-framing the programme as challenging and changing the meaning of strong emotional reactions through the introduction of psychoanalytic concepts has been identified as a key future action to address many of the themes. My closing chapter offers some final reflections on the research

process, considering the learning I can take forward into my work and any research I may undertake in the future.

## **8 Final reflections on the research process**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I offer some final reflections on the process of undertaking the research. I consider its strengths and limitations, what has been achieved and what I might do differently when conducting research in the future. Finally, I revisit the overarching aim of the research and consider its relevance for the wider social work community.

#### **8.1.1 Sample**

My research was small-scale and qualitative by design, drawing on the experience of nine fellows of the programme. Participants were volunteers, which, to some degree, limited my capacity to diversify the sample. However, reflecting on the recruitment process, I wonder if I missed opportunities to create a more inclusive sample. While it is not possible to represent the full diversity of a student body in a small sample, it is notable that populations facing discrimination in relation to social work training, for example, black, disabled and LGBTQIA+ students (Bernard, 2014) and other marginalised groups, such as neurodivergent and care-experienced participants, are not, as far as I am aware, represented in this research. Some of these characteristics are 'invisible' (Burnham, 2012), so may have been present, but unspoken of.

Potential participants will have known me as a teacher on the programme, with the power associated with that role. This position of power, intersecting with aspects of my identity which bring privilege, such as my class and race, may have inhibited participants, particularly those from marginalised communities, from participating,

leaving their experiences unrepresented. I wonder, too, if my social positioning influenced how I unconsciously privileged some aspects of diversity over others, for example seeking out fellows from both the north and south, rather than neurodivergent or black fellows. Reflecting back on this, I realise that taking a proactive approach to the recruitment of minoritised participants, actively reaching out and encouraging participation, would have been a more inclusive approach to participant recruitment, with the potential for more marginalised voices to be represented in the research.

Those who did volunteer to take part will have brought their own ideas and agendas, which may have aligned with the focus of the research, notably the improvement of the programme. For this reason, those with more positive experience of the programme may also be under-represented in this research. If I complete further research in the future, I will aim to hold diversity and inclusion at the forefront of my mind when recruiting potential participants.

### **8.1.2 Participation and collaboration in the research**

Action research is a collaborative methodology which encourages the active participation of research participants as co-researchers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In adopting some of the methods of co-research (Epston, 1999) I aimed to introduce elements of collaboration with my research participants, but this was limited. Whilst I shared my reflections and analyses of first interviews, with the aim of enabling participants to share their own reflections, analysis of second interviews and thematic analysis of the data was not carried out collaboratively. Further inclusion of participant perspectives would have altered and potentially enriched the process of

data analysis but was not possible within the timescales and scope of this research project.

### **8.1.3 Evaluate and modify stages**

Completing small-scale research to bring about change for large cohorts of participants brings challenges for the evaluate and modify stages of the research. Frontline's large-scale evaluations of Year 2 participants' experiences will continue to be carried out through bi-annual surveys. Survey questions are not designed to collect feedback on the changes to the programme I have introduced, so it will not be possible to fully understand the impact of these changes across the programme. In addition, the changes I have introduced will form only one small part of the overall participant experience which, as we learnt in Chapter 5, is significantly influenced by the 'social setting' of the participants' local authority and the social work task. With the complexity of issues impacting on the participant experience, making a causal link between changes to the programme and changes in participants' satisfaction with the programme will not be possible.

However, smaller scale evaluation of the impact of changes are possible, although they are beyond the scope of this piece of work. I can collect feedback from both supervisors and participants on the inclusion of one-page stories in teaching, to adapt and build on the use of these stories through the programme. Similarly, feedback can be sought on new content designed in collaboration with my colleagues from the curriculum team, which can be used to evaluate and modify this material. So, in these smaller ways the action research cycle will continue, with participants' voices and experiences continuing to shape the design and delivery of the programme.

## 8.2 Conclusion

I undertook this research to address a personal dilemma in my work role; my belief in the usefulness of first-person action research, alongside my knowledge of the challenges Year 2 participants face when completing research in their first year of practice. Like Kurt Lewin (1946) I wanted my research to bring about change and my choice of action research methodology reflected my aim to 'do good' through the research process. By drawing on the voices of my research participants I believe I have made improvements to the design and delivery of the programme. We have created and shared 'archival knowledge' (Epston, 1999), through participants' one-page stories and seen some growth in this archive beyond the life of the research. Stories of completion, withdrawal, success, failure and the struggle of completing research while working full-time have enabled Year 2 participants to connect with the experiences of others. 'Treading water and trying to keep your head afloat' (Helen, first interview) can be felt as a shared, rather than individual experience (Alterio & McDury, 2004). In these ways I believe I have achieved my emancipatory aims of improving the experience of Year 2 participants. However, the action research cycle does not end, and I will continue to use the knowledge I have gained through the research process in the development and delivery of the programme.

As well as enhancing 'local knowledge' (Perlesz & Brown, 2005), this research makes a contribution to the wider social work knowledge base. Applying a psycho-social and critical realist lens to the analysis of my data revealed the influence of processes at the level of the person, situated activity, social settings, culture and economy (Houston, 2010) which impacted on participants' experience of the programme and the research process. Many of these have relevance beyond the Frontline programme. For example, the organisational and cultural prioritisation of

'action' over 'feeling' and 'thinking', evident in participants' accounts of their experiences and in the research process, is mirrored in the wider social work knowledge base (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016, O'Connor, 2020). These wider societal discourses have significant implications for the emotional experiences of early career social workers and the capacity to complete practice-based research.

Findings from this study emphasise the importance of spaces and roles that offer emotional containment, not only for the general well-being of social workers, but for the capacity for research-mindedness and the completion of practice-based research. In addition, the pervasive impact of cultural discourses informed by Enlightenment thinking and the 'liberal subject' (Frosh & Hoggett, 2015) has highlighted how the capacity to be vulnerable, required for sharing and exploring difficult emotions, is likely to be compromised in social work organisations, so impacting on the experience of early career social workers and those completing practice-based research beyond the Frontline programme.

Awareness of the influence of these discourses can enable social workers and social work educators to explore their influence. The prioritisation of 'action' over 'thinking' and 'feeling' and the subsumption of emotion can be re-balanced by highlighting and exploring the emotional impact of the social work task and social work research.

I have argued that the teaching of key psychoanalytic ideas, in combination with systemic approaches that support self-reflexivity and understanding of the influence of the social 'graces' (Burnham, 2012) in social work, has the capacity to deepen understanding of emotional responses to the work. The process of integrating psychoanalytic thinking with systemic approaches has begun at Frontline and it is hoped this will help participants to better understand the difficult emotions that are elicited in the dual roles of social worker and practice-based researcher.

The achievement of my emancipatory aims suggests that drawing on students' emotional experiences when designing and delivering programmes and creating and sharing 'archival knowledge' (Epston, 1999), can highlight the emotional challenges inherent in social work training and research, spotlighting and re-prioritising 'feeling' and 'thinking'. This holds the potential to improve the emotional experiences of social work students and early career social workers beyond the Frontline programme.

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## 10 Appendices

### 10.1 List of Tables and Figures

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### 10.2 Nivo data

Numerical count of references

#### Main themes/nodes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Local authority detract	17	71
Frontline and local authority detract	16	74
Frontline detract	17	71
Frontline support	15	62
LA support	13	45
Dominant discourses	5	12
Social structures	2	2
Motivation for joining Frontline	4	5
Motivation for social work	9	25

#### LA detractors sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
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Increasing caseload	9	20
Performance management culture	8	21
Court work	6	10
Staff turnover and sickness	6	10
Doing things for the first time	2	2
Managers stressed and busy	1	2
Not wanting to lean on others who are busy	5	9
LA not supporting the dissertation	5	13

### Frontline and LA detractors sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Feeling overwhelmed	12	31
Feeling isolated	9	13
Working on-line	7	13
Personal and family issues	5	8
Struggling to reach out for support	3	7
Timing	2	2

### Frontline detractors sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Worry over academic work	5	10
Less contact with dissertation supervisor	5	7
Frontline culture	4	14
Action research is unfamiliar	4	4
Dissertation always in the background	3	3
Dissertation closely linked to casework	2	3
Intercalation policy	4	14
No choice of methodology	2	2
Not having deadlines to work to	3	4
Not prepared for the reality of social work	3	3
Reflection brings up difficult emotions	3	7

### Frontline support sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
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Wanting to change practice and make a difference	10	13
Support from dissertation supervisor	9	16
Dissertation gives space to reflect	3	4
Learning influences knowledge of self	3	4
Support from Year 2's and fellows	4	7
The support of the unit	5	7
The value of coaching	4	6
Wanting to change practice and make a difference	10	13
Year 1 prepares you for ASYE	4	5

### LA support sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Supportive team manager	9	19
Supportive ASYE coordinator	5	11
Supportive team	6	9
Space to reflect	5	8
Maternal figures	2	2
Support from other ASYE's	2	4

### Dominant discourses sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Frontline an elitist programme	3	4
The importance of individual achievement	3	8

### Social structures sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Class privilege	1	1
Structural disadvantage of mothers	1	1

### Motivation for joining Frontline sub-themes

Descriptor	Files	Number of references
Alignment with Frontline values	1	1
CSW support	1	1
Master's qualification	2	2
Practice-based learning	1	1

### Motivation to become a social worker sub-themes

<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Files</b>	<b>Number of references</b>
Frustrated with poor social work practice	2	2
Own childhood experiences	4	4
Passion for working with children	3	5
Social justice values	6	8
To alleviate the impact of childhood trauma in adult life	1	1
To gain a tertiary qualification	3	3
To understand others	1	1
To understand self	1	1

## 10.3 Information and consent forms

### 10.3.1 Fellow information form



<b>Project Title</b>	How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?
<b>Project Sponsor</b>	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
<b>Researcher</b>	Tessa Godfrey <a href="mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk">tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk</a> Tel: 07384 235571
<b>Research Supervisors</b>	Tanya Moore and Andrew Cooper <a href="mailto:tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk">tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk</a> <a href="mailto:ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk">ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk</a>
<b>Ethical Approval</b>	The research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock and Portman Research Ethics Committee and Frontline

#### **Consent to participate in a research study**

The purpose of this information pack is to provide you with the information that you need when considering whether to participate in this study.

#### **Introduction**

I am completing a professional doctorate in advanced social work practice and research. As part of my studies I will be completing research into Frontline fellows' experience of the Year 2 programme. It is my intention to carry out 'insider' action research, in my role as curriculum lead for Year 2 of the programme. I want to gain a better understanding of fellows' emotional experience of Year 2 of the programme in order to improve this experience for future participants.

The focus of my research is informed by a professional and personal dilemma relating to my role. I believe in the value of completing action research for participants and their practice, but I am also aware that the programme can be emotionally and academically challenging when combined with the demands for newly qualified social workers in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

#### **What does taking part in this research involve?**

I plan to complete interviews with a small sample of fellows to gather in depth information about the experience of completing, or partially completing the Year 2 programme. If you agree to take part I will ask you to complete two interviews with me. I will ask for your permission to record both interviews. Interviews can take place at your workplace or on-line. This will be agreed with you in-line with government guidance relating to Covid 19, taking in to account your need for confidentiality and safety.

In the first interview I will ask you about your experience of the Year 2 programme. After the interview I will spend time thinking about what you have said. I will ask for your permission to discuss aspects of the interview, in an anonymised form, with Frontline and research colleagues. In the second interview I will share my thoughts on the first interview with you. We will then explore ideas that emerged in the first interview in more depth and consider your thoughts on my interpretations. My aim will be to co-create the 'story' of your experience that you are happy to share for the benefit of future Year 2 participants.

After both interviews I will ask if there are any aspects you do not want to be shared and if so, I will remove this from the data. In creating a 'story' you will be able to specify how this is shared and for what purpose. So for example, you may agree for it to be shared with staff, but not students or only to be used for planning purposes. You will be the co-creator of the story in a process of collaboration and negotiation over a period of time. Stories can be co-authored, or solely authored by you or me.

### **My theoretical approach**

I will be drawing on a combination of theoretical approaches. The first is the 'free association narrative interpretive method' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In this approach, both researcher and research participant are seen to be 'defended' subjects, who may not fully know or understand why they experience things as they do, or may even disguise the meaning of some of their feelings or actions. Defences, as defined by this method, are a powerful, but often unconscious mechanism to protect the self from uncomfortable or painful feelings and experiences. Drawing on this method I will be considering inconsistencies and contradictions in our thinking and accounts that may indicate defences against difficult emotions.

I will also draw on Epston's (1999) 'co-research' method, which positions research participants as a source of local knowledge and wisdom which can benefit the community (in this case, Year 2 participants). Critical realism (Houston, 2010), which considers how the processes at play in different 'domains' of society will also inform my thinking. I have included the literature referred to here in a reference list at the end of the form. If you would like to access the literature, this can be facilitated and I will also be happy to discuss the approaches I am using with you.

### **Support available to you as a research participant**

I hope that the opportunity to speak about your experiences of the Year 2 and contribute to the development of the programme will be beneficial for you. However, discussing experiences, particularly of stressful times can be emotionally difficult. When I share my

thoughts on your experiences this may also be upsetting. Before starting interviews I will check that you are happy to proceed and throughout you will be able to pause, take a break or end the interview. A de-brief at the end of interview will be offered and you can be signposted to external sources of support if you feel this would be helpful. These could include, but are not restricted to:

Adult IAPT services which can be accessed via your GP or the NHS website

<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Psychological%20therapies%20%28IAPT%29/LocationSearch/10008>

Shout 85258 offers free confidential support to social care workers via an initial text

<https://giveusashout.org/get-help/our-frontline-you-support-us-we-support-you/>

<https://www.samaritans.org/> also offers 24 hour confidential telephone support

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Confidentiality and anonymity will be respected throughout the research process. Your name and any identifying details will not be included in the research. Together we can agree changes to identifying details to protect your anonymity, for example, change of gender or geographical location.

Confidentiality would only be breached in cases of imminent harm to yourself or others.

### **Safe Storage of Data**

All data generated in the process of this research project will be retained in accordance with the Tavistock and Portman Trust's Data Protection and Handling policies. Research data will be stored on the University of Essex OneDrive system and will be password protected. Any data gathered via my password protected laptop or mobile device will be transferred to the secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity. Electronic data will be disposed of using file shredder software which permanently erases files. Hard copy data, such as paper notes will be disposed of through secure shredding facility at the Frontline office.

In line with the Research Council UK guidance data will be kept for no longer than 10 years.

### **Your involvement**

You are not obliged to take part in this research. If you do consent to take part I will ask you to sign two identical consent forms, one of which will be uploaded to the Essex OneDrive system as outlined above. The second form will be for your own records. If you initially consent to take part, you can withdraw at any time, up to 30th April 2023. This is six months prior to the planned submission of my thesis, which would give me time to amend my work. On request all previously collected data will be removed from the study. Should you choose to withdraw from the research this will not lead to any disadvantage to you. You can withdraw without any obligation to give a reason.

### **How the results of my research will be shared**

As described above, you will determine how the 'story' of your experience of the Year 2 programme is shared. You will have the choice of whether it is shared in full or part with future Year 2 participants and whether it is used to inform the planning and development of the programme. This could involve sharing your story, in an anonymized form, with members of the curriculum and teaching teams at Frontline.

Your story will be included, in full or in part in my final thesis, in an anonymized form. This will be read by my dissertation supervisors and an external examiner. I may go on to draw on aspects of my thesis to write articles for peer reviewed journals and media publications. I will ensure that no aspect of your story is identifiable to you both within my organization and in external publications.

### **If you have a concern or complaint**

If you have any queries, concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer [pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

### **References**

If you would like to have access to the references, please get in touch with Tessa

Epston, D. (1999). Co-research: The making of alternative knowledge. In *Narrative Therapy and Community Work: A Conference Collection*. Adelaide: The Dulwich Centre.

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: free association, narrative and interview method*. London: Sage.

Houston, S. (2010). Prising Open the Black Box: Critical Realism, Action Research and Social Work. *Qualitative Social Work*, 73-91.

### 10.3.2 Staff information form

The Tavistock and Portman 

NHS Foundation Trust

<b>Project Title</b>	How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?
<b>Project Sponsor</b>	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
<b>Researcher</b>	Tessa Godfrey <a href="mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk">tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk</a> Tel: 07384 235571
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<b>Ethical Approval</b>	The research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock and Portman Research Ethics Committee and Frontline

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#### Introduction

I am completing a professional doctorate in advanced social work practice and research. As part of my studies I will be completing research into Frontline fellows' experience of the Year 2 programme. It is my intention to carry out 'insider' action research, in my role as curriculum lead for Year 2 of the programme. I want to gain a better understanding of fellows' emotional experience of Year 2 of the programme in order to improve this experience for future participants.

The focus of my research is informed by a professional and personal dilemma relating to my role. I believe in the value of completing action research for participants and their practice, but I am also aware that the programme can be emotionally and academically challenging when combined with the demands for newly qualified social workers in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

#### What does taking part in this research involve?

I plan to complete interviews with a small sample of fellows to gather in depth information about the experience of completing, or partially completing the Year 2 programme. Through the interview process my aim is to co-create 'stories' of participant's experience that they are happy to share for the benefit of future Year 2 participants. If you agree to

take part in this research I will share aspects of interviews with you, in an anonymised form, so we can consider how these stories may be used to shape the programme and support future participants. This will be as part of our work together as Frontline colleagues, so will occur during the work hours, either in person or on-line, according to government restrictions relating to Covid 19.

### **My theoretical approach**

For interviews I will be drawing on a combination of theoretical approaches. The first is the 'free association narrative interpretive method' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In this approach, both researcher and research participant are seen to be 'defended' subjects, who may not fully know or understand why they experience things as they do, or may even disguise the meaning of some of their feelings or actions. Defences, as defined by this method, are a powerful, but often unconscious mechanism to protect the self from uncomfortable or painful feelings and experiences. Drawing on this method I will be considering inconsistencies and contradictions in our thinking and accounts that may indicate defences against difficult emotions.

I will also draw on Epston's (1999) 'co-research' method, which positions research participants as a source of local knowledge and wisdom which can benefit the community (in this case, Year 2 participants). Critical realism (Houston, 2010), which considers how the processes at play in different 'domains' of society will also inform my thinking.

### **Support available to you as a research participant**

I hope that the opportunity to hear about participant's experiences of the Year 2 programme will be interesting and enriching. However, it may be that criticism or painful experiences will be difficult or upsetting to discuss. In my role as researcher I will be mindful of the potential impact of our discussions and can direct you to Frontline's confidential Employee Support Service, or external support organisations where appropriate.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Confidentiality and anonymity will be respected throughout the research process. Your name and any identifying details will not be included in the research. Together we can agree changes to identifying details to protect your anonymity, for example, change of job role or geographical location.

Confidentiality would only be breached in cases of imminent harm to yourself or others.

### **Safe Storage of Data**

All data generated in the process of this research project will be retained in accordance with the Tavistock and Portman Trust's Data Protection and Handling policies. Research data will be stored on the University of Essex OneDrive system and will be password protected. Any data gathered via my password protected laptop or mobile device will be transferred to the secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity. Electronic data will be disposed

of using file shredder software which permanently erases files. Hard copy data, such as paper notes will be disposed of through secure shredding facility at the Frontline office.

In line with the Research Council UK guidance data will be kept for no longer than 10 years.

### **Your involvement**

If you agree to take part in my research I will ask you to sign two identical consent forms to verify your consent. One will be uploaded to the Essex University One Drive, as outlined above. The second form will be for your own records. However, you are not obliged to take part in this research. If you initially consent to take part you can withdraw at any time, up to 30th April 2023. This is six months prior to the planned submission of my thesis, which would give me time to amend my work. On request all previously collected data relating to you will be removed from the study. Should you choose to withdraw from the research this will not lead to any disadvantage to you. You can withdraw without any obligation to give a reason.

### **How the results of my research will be shared**

Our discussions relating to participant stories and how they are used to shape and develop the programme will be included, in full or in part in my final thesis, in an anonymized form. This will be read by my dissertation supervisors and an external examiner. I may go on to draw on aspects of my thesis to write articles for peer reviewed journals and media publications. I will ensure that no aspect of our work together can be identified to you in external publications.

### **If you have a concern or complaint**

If you have any queries, concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer [pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

### **References**

- Epston, D. (1999). Co-research: The making of alternative knowledge. In *Narrative Therapy and Community Work: A Conference Collection*. Adelaide: The Dulwich Centre.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: free association, narrative and interview method*. London: Sage.
- Houston, S. (2010). Prising Open the Black Box: Critical Realism, Action Research and Social Work. *Qualitative Social Work*, 73-91.

### 10.3.3 Fellow consent form



#### Consent to Participate in Research

<b>Project Title</b>	How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?
<b>Project Sponsor</b>	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
<b>Researcher</b>	Tessa Godfrey <a href="mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk">tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk</a> Tel: 07384 235571
<b>Research Supervisors</b>	Tanya Moore and Andrew Cooper <a href="mailto:tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk">tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk</a> <a href="mailto:ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk">ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk</a>

I understand that this research is being completed to contribute to the researcher's professional doctorate in advanced social work practice and research. I have read the information form relating to the above research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research has been completed. I understand that confidentiality will only be breached if there is imminent harm to myself or others.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time up to 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023 without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

1. I consent that interviews with me can be audio recorded	Yes	No
2. I consent that interviews with me can be recorded via teams/zoom	Yes	No
3. I consent to recordings of interviews being stored on University of Essex One Drive for no longer than 10 years	Yes	No
4. I consent that aspects of interviews with me can be shared with research peers at the Tavistock and Portman Trust in an anonymized form	Yes	No
5. I consent that aspects of interviews with me can be shared with Frontline Year 2 participants in an anonymized form.	Yes	No
6. I consent that aspects of interviews with me can be shared with Frontline staff in an anonymized form	Yes	No
7. I consent that aspects of interviews with me may be shared in an anonymized form in the researcher's final dissertation	Yes	No

8. I consent that aspects of interviews with me may be shared in an anonymized form in journal articles or other media publications.	Yes	No
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Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's Signature

.....

Date: .....

### 10.3.4 Staff consent form



#### Consent to Participate in Research

<b>Project Title</b>	How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?
<b>Project Sponsor</b>	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
<b>Researcher</b>	Tessa Godfrey <a href="mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk">tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk</a> Tel: 07384 235571
<b>Research Supervisors</b>	Tanya Moore and Andrew Cooper <a href="mailto:tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk">tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk</a> <a href="mailto:ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk">ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk</a>

I understand that this research is being completed to contribute to the researcher's professional doctorate in advanced social work practice and research. I have read the information form relating to the above research in which I have been asked to participate and I have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research has been completed. I understand that confidentiality will only be breached if there is imminent harm to myself or others.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time up to 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023 without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

1. I consent that discussions with me of anonymized data can be audio recorded	Yes	No
2. I consent that discussions with me of anonymized data can be recorded via teams/zoom	Yes	No
3. I consent to recordings of discussions being stored on University of Essex One Drive for no longer than 10 years	Yes	No
4. I consent that aspects of discussions with me can be shared with research peers at the Tavistock and Portman Trust in an anonymized form	Yes	No
5. I consent that aspects of discussion with me can be used to shape and develop the Frontline Year 2 curriculum	Yes	No
6. I consent that aspects of discussions with me may be shared in an anonymized form in the researcher's final dissertation	Yes	No

7. I consent that aspects of discussion with me may be shared in an anonymized form in journal articles or other media publications.	Yes	No
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Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Researcher's Signature

.....

Date: .....

### 10.3.5 Fellows consent to share story



#### Consent to Share your 'story'

<b>Project Title</b>	How can we improve the experience of participants, as action researchers, on Year 2 of the Frontline Programme?
<b>Project Sponsor</b>	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
<b>Researcher</b>	Tessa Godfrey <a href="mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk">tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk</a> Tel: 07384 235571
<b>Research Supervisors</b>	Tanya Moore and Andrew Cooper <a href="mailto:tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk">tanya.moore@hertfordshire.gov.uk</a> <a href="mailto:ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk">ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk</a>

Having co-created your story, please specify how you consent to it being used. You have the right to change your mind and/or withdraw from the research up to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2023, without the need to give any reason.

1. I consent to my story being shared in full with participants of the Frontline Year 2 programme	Yes	No
2. I consent to parts of my story, agreed by me, to be shared with participants of the Frontline Year 2 programme	Yes	No
3. I consent to my story in full being used to shape and develop the Frontline Year 2 programme	Yes	No
4. I consent to my story in parts, agreed by me, being used to shape and develop the Frontline Year 2 programme	Yes	No

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Researcher's Signature

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Date: .....

## 10.4 Fellows One-page stories

### 10.4.1 Beatrice's story

I started working as a newly qualified social worker in September 2020. I was in a new team in a new sector of my Local Authority and was now separate from my unit and my consultant social worker. It was like being in a dream where I was somehow now qualified to work with vulnerable families.

My saving grace was my first manager. She was the embodiment of attentive, encouraging, supportive. She saw my efforts and pointed these out in emails to me which I tucked away in an outlook folder titled 'Wins'. I felt bolstered, valued and most importantly, more and more competent, and able to trust myself – if she could see all this potential in me, then it must be there!

Ironically, I never met my manager in person. We had online supervisions, emailed a lot, and had check-in calls. Working from my spare room in my flat became tolerable with the knowledge that she would respond to my multitude of emails/Teams messages/Skype calls. This was also coupled with the reassuring pings on multiple Whatsapp groups: my unit, the wider frontline cohort, and the other ASYE colleagues going through similar bouts of uncertainty. I felt comforted in the fact that we all had each other's back. There was strength in the virtual comradery where we all could reach someone with a work question or needing to vent.

My first manager left suddenly in February 2021. I had a good cry when I heard the news. I subsequently moved teams and had a new manager. My new manager did not have the time to ask me how I was feeling, to reassure me, or to send me encouraging messages. In that same week, one of the families I worked with moved into court proceedings and I was again, feeling unsure of myself and not knowing where I stood with my new manager. I floundered.

Throughout, there was always the dissertation. This dissertation came to feel more and more like a thundercloud on the horizon. It felt somehow intangible, yet I was writing...something. I had sections filled in with words, that seemed to make some sense, but as the year went on, this thundercloud became a whole storm. I never felt fully focused; it felt like I was battling an invisible enemy which I would call procrastination but felt too large to tackle. My heart just wasn't in it. I submitted, and my only goal was to pass, a 50%. Just to get it over the line. I got 45%.

I left social work at the end of my ASYE year to be closer to my family. I found it very hard to say goodbye to the families I worked with. They wished me well and I felt humbled by their gracious words. It helped me reconcile that what I had produced on paper in my dissertation was not a reflection of my work. It reinforced

the message in me: 'just because you are not achieving everything with flying colors, does not mean that you are failing'.

I resubmitted my dissertation a few months later. During this period I felt connected and proud of what I wrote; I had the time, headspace and focus to spend on it. I am unsure if I could have achieved this while I was working given several circumstances, but I know that other colleagues did. All I know is this time, I felt proud of it and even if I don't pass, I put all that I could into it and that is all I can ask of myself.

#### 10.4.2 Helen's story

Before I started Year 2, I thought it was going to be less intense than Year 1. We only had one big piece of academic work to complete, and I thought I would be more confident in my role. That didn't turn out to be the case. We were in the height of the pandemic, and I still felt really new to the job. I was learning how to do social work away from the office and working from home was difficult. I like having other people around to bounce ideas off. It's so much easier to turn round to ask someone a question, rather than having to send a message. So, at the start of the year, I felt quite isolated. I missed having the recall days in person and seeing people outside my unit. There had been an assurance and a feeling of togetherness when we came together as a wider collective, knowing we were all going through the same thing.

I am lucky to have a line manager who is systemically trained and a lovely close-knit team but working from home I felt disconnected and unsupported by the wider organisation, as I never had the chance to get to know people. A lot of people left my team during the year and the local authority were struggling to recruit. As my caseload increased in number and complexity, I often felt overwhelmed. There was so much information to take in and a lot of emotional things to process, without the time or mental space to process them. It felt like treading water and trying to keep my head afloat. There were times when I felt forced to practice in a way that didn't align with teaching in Year 1. I didn't feel prepared for the disconnect between Frontline's vision of social work and practice in my local authority, which is increasingly data driven. My manager encouraged us to reach out if we needed support, but I struggled. I didn't feel I had a relationship with anyone at Frontline to say 'I am really struggling'. However, I did find the coaching sessions incredibly valuable and a massive influence on my dissertation.

In terms of my dissertation, although it felt hard at the time, I am glad I did it and I have a sense of pride in what I achieved. I think writing a dissertation on yourself is easier than writing on a research topic. Initially I found reflection and reflexivity

difficult, but towards the end of Year 1 something clicked. What I really liked about the dissertation is that it forces you to stop, reflect, understand and unpick. I have learnt a lot more about who I am as a person, and this has really added to my practice. My dissertation was very personal; it felt scary asking my mum to proofread it, despite her knowing me more than anyone else in the world.

For my project I planned and carried out some sessions where I changed my practice, but since completing my project, other pressures and priorities have taken over. Once the dissertation was over, I was at full pelt again, with no time to stop and reflect. I fell into the trap of thinking the problem was me and that I was a terrible social worker. I thought I needed to 'fix' things for people and so if I couldn't, I was failing. This was the very dilemma I had explored in my dissertation, going in to 'rescuer' mode, rather than empowering families. It has been important for my own well-being to remind myself that my role is not to 'fix' or 'save'. My colleagues, too, have reminded me that often the difference we make we will never see, it will be when the child grows up. Sometimes the changes are small, but significant; we have to celebrate the small wins.

#### 10.4.3 Freya's story

Dear my younger self,

It has been a few years on since your ASYE/Frontline Year 2 year. I am writing this letter to reflect over that year and perhaps say the things I wish someone told me before getting into this. There are so many positives being in Y2, you feel more independent, you know pretty much everyone you work with. You know the processes and systems – this is a huge advantage, as many social workers who change boroughs or join in find it difficult to get their head around a new system! However, I know it also feels a bit scary as you can now do CP visits on your own, hold all meetings by yourself, and attend conferences. People are looking at you as if you are a social worker now, but it is natural to feel very far away from that.

#### **Make your own team**

I spent a lot of time struggling in the new team I was placed in. I was extremely comfortable in my unit, we had a great time and always had eventful lunch breaks. So being placed in a new team was extremely nerve-wracking especially as there were many rumours and a high turnover of staff. I remember feeling alone and quite lost with this all. My manager's style was nothing like mine and I struggled as this did not feel very frontline. Someone had told me in year 1, to never be afraid of getting a second opinion, so that is what I did. I started to build my own team of people I could go to and get advice from. I went to the psychology team, my practice tutor, my CSW, other managers in the service and fellowship frontline members. This gave me

a huge confidence in what I was doing, it helped me to feel autonomous and not afraid to advocate for my families even if this meant challenging superiors. Any discussions I had with managers was then backed up by using the shared knowledge around me. I also found a way to practice in a style that was important to me and with Frontline values too.

Note to myself; never feel afraid to go and check what someone says with another person. I have had to call other managers aside to discuss what their opinion is. Find people you feel comfortable talking to. Build your own resources and network. Sometimes there may be sudden changes to your service like what happened to me. I had changed teams around 2/3 times during my ASYE year, managers left, colleagues left – so being resilient and putting your needs first is necessary, and will help you to keep going. Also your unit are still there to support you – we still went for lunch breaks in Year 2, they may have been less often but put the time and effort in for these! Get a cup of tea before you start the day – self-care is essential!

I'm a big believer in everything happens for a reason. I mean some of the terrible stuff in life – perhaps not so much but sometimes they have given me some sort of skills that able me to function in a way that I believe adds to your strength and resilience. So even with the shaky y2, you did manage to pull through and to then working in quite an epic team. I have also been organising team events – some in my team, some in the wider team and in the whole of safeguarding. What I or you are about to go through in y2 will be okay at some point because that time will eventually pass. It does not last forever. Now, you are in a place where you are contributing to the team spirit and making it a safe space for everyone – you are checking in with other frontline students like how they did for you. Get through Y2 and then you can be somewhere that feels right and more comfortable. I finally feel like I can be myself – the sarcastic, moaning, sometimes grumpy but also energetic and bit too enthusiastic individual. I don't need to hide anymore and I've even started to share some of the load you can carry in this job. There are great managers and teams out there. Sometimes you are part of them and sometimes you create them. Keep on fighting, because you deserve to be here and quite frankly no one else can tell you otherwise. And when you do make it, because you will, be proud of the epic journey it took to get here. And any of those doubtful people, well they aren't part of my team anymore.

#### 10.4.4 Robert's story

Year 2 was a difficult year for me. I had great plans for starting early with my dissertation, but with the day job time went by so quickly, it felt like quite a crush at the end to complete it. I got Covid, which knocked me back a bit, so I had to get a

short extension to get it submitted. In my local authority they take quite a rigorous approach to the ASYE, which meant I had to complete the paperwork for each review by set deadlines. So with the day job, the ASYE and the dissertation it was a lot of work. Attending the teaching days and having a bit of time away from work kept me motivated. After those days I would think, right, I'm going to get cracking again, which helped me get a bit of momentum, but then the day job would kick in and it would dip a bit, until the next day.

I was lucky to have a very supportive manager who gradually built up my caseload and took an interest in my research project. I know that others weren't so lucky and had high caseloads from the start, so I felt privileged to have been given more space to focus on my research and ASYE. Although she wasn't familiar with Frontline, my manager is systemically trained, so during supervision I could share my thoughts about my research and we could talk about theory, which I found very helpful.

Only myself and one other person completed the research project in my local authority. We supported each other and joined with participants in another local authority for our reflexive group. While it was helpful, it didn't feel as supportive as working with my unit in the first year, where we all knew each other's cases.

For my research project I chose to focus on working with fathers. I found the Lancaster library to be a fantastic resource and I quite enjoyed searching for literature. I found what I read started to influence my practice before I started my research and I actively changed my practice during the research. Some of it was quite simple things, like putting a calendar entry in on a Friday morning; 'Fathers on Friday' was my strapline. I would go through all my cases where I hadn't been good enough at keeping in touch with fathers. While I don't do that anymore, I feel I am more conscious of including fathers in my work through doing my project. So overall there wasn't just a net cost from doing the project; it made me think about ways to approach certain situations, so there was a bit of benefit with my day job.

Doing the programme and becoming a social worker has changed who I am, in a positive way. It's been a real growth experience for me. I have always been drawn to social constructionism and the way we as people create narratives is fascinating to me. Rather than looking at what someone is saying to me, I think about why they are saying it and what might have led them to hold their views and beliefs. That's spilled over into my non-work life as well and has changed how I look at the world, not just how I do my job.

Overall, I did have to put in a lot of extra time to complete my dissertation, but I got there. I came out the other side feeling quite good. I'm glad it's finished; it was hard, but it was definitely worth it.

#### 10.4.5 Lily's story

In the first year of the programme, I thought I did not want to do the master's. I only needed the social work qualification to get where I needed to go, and I thought doing the master's would be too much strain on me and my family. I changed my mind when I thought about how far I had come, beyond my own and other's expectations, so doing the master's became important to me. I would have liked to have been given more choice about what I could study. I would have liked to have developed my knowledge in an area of social work practice, rather than solely focus on my own practice.

At the start of Year 2 my caseload increased rapidly and by the time it got to December I felt completely overwhelmed and I wasn't coping. The manager and advanced practitioner in my team had a style of working that I found intimidating and bullying. Nobody in the team spoke about how they were feeling, so I felt very isolated. Another team member handed in their notice and they started to share little pieces of information about their experiences with me. I realised I was not the only one feeling as I did. I decided to raise my concerns, but nothing changed until a change of senior management finally took my concerns on board.

Whilst all this was going on I was trying to do the master's, but it wasn't easy, as my manager showed no interest and put tasks in my calendar on teaching days, which made it difficult for me to attend. I felt I didn't have the time or the mental space to engage with the reading or teaching, so I had to reach out to my Year 2 colleagues for advice on how to complete the ethics form. It felt incredibly difficult to complete the ethics form when I didn't understand what was required of me. I asked my dissertation supervisor if I could defer the masters for a year, but was told that it was unlikely this would be agreed, so to try to keep going.

By the time it came round to July I knew that I was not going to be able to submit. After the deadline I received an email from the university, giving me another six months, but explaining that I would receive a capped mark. I wish I had known I would have this opportunity, as I think it might have helped me to submit something. But by the time the email arrived I felt six months was not enough time to catch up on all the teaching I had missed, complete my research and submit a dissertation.

I feel very disappointed and sad that I did not complete the masters. Having said that, I feel that the experiences I went through in Year 2 have left me a much stronger person and social worker. I gained valuable experiences that I would not have had if I had had a protected caseload and I now know how and when to stand up for myself at work.

#### 10.4.6 Danielle's story

My second year on the programme was an absolute rollercoaster. At the start of the year, a lot of permanent social work staff left at the same time. We also had some workers on long-term sick. Then my manager left just before Christmas. This couldn't have come at a worse time for me; I was removing a child for the first time, so I needed a lot of support. I questioned what I was doing and even if I should stay in social work. Fortunately, we got a new manager in January and straight away we felt like a great weight had been lifted off us. New staff arrived and I felt much more supported. My ASYE practice educator was very supportive too, regularly checking in with me, which felt helpful when I was feeling stressed and anxious. My coach was a great support as well. I always found those sessions incredibly helpful. By the end of my ASYE I felt I'd experienced so much in the year. I finally felt more prepared and resilient.

Initially I felt quite excited to give the master's a go. I have a lot of interest in gender constructs and was frustrated that I was falling in to practice that didn't reflect the values I am passionate about. I did my ethics form and had to make a few amendments, but I found myself putting off doing them. I avoided contact with my dissertation supervisor. I work best with clear deadlines, so without one I let things drift. My workload was increasing and I had a big family celebration to organise as well. I knew I had to do the ASYE and my job, but I didn't have to do the master's. I was working long hours and so appreciated my weekends. I didn't want to do a bad piece of work or fail, so I decided I needed to look after myself a bit more and prioritise the things in my life that had to be done.

Looking back now, I do feel a bit sad about not completing the master's. When I joined Frontline I thought the opportunity to do a free master's was amazing, as I would never be able to afford to do one myself. While I know that it was a decision that I had to make at the time, another part of me wishes I had taken more responsibility and been a bit stronger. But I love social work, I have got through the stress of the last year and I have a lot of amazing stuff going on in my life.

#### 10.4.7 Chloe's story

When I think back to Year 2 of the programme, I remember feeling stressed and overwhelmed a lot of the time. It feels sad to say that, as I have a lot of pride at what I've achieved, and I love my job. The problem for me was that the three components of the year, the work, the ASYE and the master's did not support each other. Each on their own was manageable but combining them together just didn't work for me. Neither my manager nor the ASYE coordinator took any interest in my master's.

At the start of the year, even though I felt a bit daunted by doing more academic work, I was motivated to do the master's. I could see the value in shaping my own practice and potentially influencing other people's practice. I'm quite an organised person and so I got on with my ASYE, completing my observations early, as well as

getting my ethics form in. The stress really mounted for me as the year went on as my caseload increased and I had over half my work in proceedings. The volume of work was huge, and I was working long hours in the evenings and at weekends to keep up. I was doing many tasks for the first time, which meant additional stress and pressure. By the time I had this complex caseload, I still hadn't finished my ASYE, so I had that added pressure as well. I cried on the phone to my manager and in ASYE supervision, but no-one acknowledged the stress I was under. As long as I was completing what I was meant to do, they seemed happy.

So, in the end it came down to timing. I tried to keep going with my master's right until the end. I had my research in place and asked for an extension. But ultimately, the amount of court work I had at the time meant I couldn't complete it. My family and friends were worried about me and encouraged me to withdraw. My dissertation supervisor was really supportive and encouraged me to carry on as she knew ultimately that's what I wanted. But she wasn't able to influence my situation in the local authority.

I regret that I didn't complete it and wish that my local authority had taken more account of the master's to enable me to do it. To this day I don't think my manager knows that I withdrew from the master's and that indifference to something that was so important to me hurts. I sometimes question myself about whether I could have spoken up more than I did. Now, though, I think my situation could have been improved by better communication and working together. With families we build a team around the child and meet regularly to plan and coordinate our support. I wonder if the three elements of the year could have worked better for me if we had sometimes met together.

## 10.5 Individual study task drawing on fellow's stories

### Year 2 Teaching Day 7

Independent Study Task – Reading Fellows' stories and creating your own story.

Welcome to Day 7's Independent Study Activity. You have an hour to complete the task before you go into the afternoon workshop.

This activity focusses on the whole experience of Year 2. We are very aware that completing action research is only one component of Year 2, where you also are juggling the demands of being a newly qualified worker and completing the ASYE programme. This is aside from commitments outside work including family and friends. At Frontline we believe in the value of researching your own practice but recognise too that the programme places huge demands on you. The emotional labour of social work, combined with these multiple demands can feel overwhelming.

As you will be aware, fellows make a significant contribution to teaching of the Year 2 programme. We believe it is beneficial for you to hear from those who have gone before you about their experience of completing action research. Fellows are now contributing to doctoral research, being completed by Tessa, which aims draw on their experiences and stories to improve and develop the programme. Below are four fellows' stories of their experience of Year 2 which they have kindly agreed to share with current and future cohorts.

This independent study task will prepare you for the activities in Workshop 1.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this activity you will have:

- compared your experience of Year 2 with others who have completed the programme
- used a self-reflexive lens to examine your responses
- explored the influence of the wider context on your social work and researcher roles. You may want to draw on these ideas in the 'Context of your Research' section of your dissertation
- created your own 'story' of Year 2 to share with colleagues

Please take time to read the stories. There are four stories in total. Read as many as feels comfortable for you. As you read, make a note of your responses to what you read.

- What resonates for you?
- Do the fellows' experiences feel similar or different to yours?
- In what ways are they similar or different?

- Make a note of your emotional responses
- Do you feel empathy, antipathy, sympathy?
- Other emotions?
- How might your social 'graces' and experiences be influencing your responses?
- Do you notice any themes emerging from the different stories?

#### Your own story

Once you have finished reading and reflecting think about your own story. What is the story of your experience so far? In the first workshop you are going to be working with participants outside your reflexive group. What experiences are you happy to share?

Put together a document that represents your story so far. This can be in the form of picture, a mind map, or some text – something that you will be comfortable to share with colleagues.

You may want to consider:

- Factors in your local authority context that have supported or hindered your research.
- Factors in your wider context that have supported or hindered your research
- Your relationship to academic work and how your social graces and experience inform this
- Your developing identity as a social worker and a researcher. Which aspects of your identity feel more or less comfortable and what informs this?

If you would like to share your story with future participants, please contact [tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk](mailto:tessa.godfrey@thefrontline.org.uk)