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

## Abstract

Whilst 50% of child protection workers across much of Europe and the affluent 'West' leave after 2 years, many stay and develop substantial professional careers. This paper discusses research in Italy, Sweden and England examining what factors explain 'remaining' for more than 3 years in this stressful job. Underpinned by a hermeneutic epistemology, qualitative interviews were undertaken and subject to an interpretative thematic analysis. The findings proved to be complex and multi-layered and this paper presents an overview of these. The theoretical framework for the project mainly drew on organizations and resilience, and the initial sections of the paper consider how formulations of resilience as contextual and relational can elucidate professional sustainability. Organisational issues are considered, including the impact of work management, of supervision and of allocation in different national contexts. The paper also focuses on the role of friendships and informal support at work. Threaded through these established themes are more, perhaps surprising, concepts: e.g. creativity, power, reflexive spaces and interpersonal relations as explanatory of remaining in child protection work.

## Introduction

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

The research into child protection burnout and turnover shows a dearth of studies capturing the voices of those who actually stay, though this is emerging (e.g. Adamson et al. 2012; Burns 2011). The question of 'what sustains …' is only beginning to be examined, and some

related issues remain unaddressed. For example, how do managers support 'remaining'?  For workers, this perspective might consider complex ethical and relational issues, e.g. is 'suffering in silence' resilient? Is friendship at work fundamental? These are some of the questions this paper will address.

The article aims to examine what factors influence the decision to remain in child protection work. Initially it reviews some of the contemporary literature relating to 'survival' at work. The notion of resilience is discussed as a core element of a broader conceptualisation of 'remaining in practice', which concerns itself with the interplay between, e.g., organisational conditions and individual workers. The paper then   substantially draws on the experiences and understanding of social workers and social work managers accessed through original primary research undertaken by the authors in Sweden, Italy and England in 2012.

  It addresses three of the themes of 'staying' that emerged most powerfully from the narratives of the interview subjects. It considers what organisational features were deemed relevant; how different forms of supervision contribute and the significance of informal relationships at work for an enduring career in child protection.

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

**Previous research and theoretical perspectives**

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

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

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

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


**Human service organizations**

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

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

In this work situation, characterized by so much uncertainty, staff resilience is increasingly becoming an important concept in order to understand why people stay in child protection.

**Resilience**

Central to much of the field of inquiry relating to who survives in child protection work is the concept of resilience itself, about which a burgeoning literature exists in relation to social work (Adamson et al, 2012; McFadden et al, 2012; Kinman and Grant, 2011). Resilience as a theoretical construct, even when limiting its consideration to only social sciences applications, draws on diverse range of psychological, and social relational underpinnings, in a variety of contexts. However, despite, and because of, its flexibility, the notion of resilience facilitates a wide cross-disciplinary approach to 'enduring'. Of the many authors applying resilience to understanding, e.g. children thriving or workers lasting, few can be found now who would accept a purely psychological model of resilience (Gilligan, 2004). Russ et al. (2009) in relation to child protection social work make the point that thinking about individual capacities can be blame-making, leading to individual workers being stereotyped as 'not coping'. They argue for a notion of resilience that can explicate coping at an individual *and* a collective level.

Rutter, whose child psychology perspective has been influential for several decades, offers just such a complex model of resilience, much cited in work on resilient social workers. For example, Horwitz (2006) appropriates Rutter's thinking for operationalising the supporting of professional resilience. Organisations, he argues, should instigate risk reduction, for example

by avoiding unnecessary exposure to traumatizing events, and, should this be unavoidable, minimise its impact. They should facilitate the development of professional esteem and encouraging an openness towards 'life opportunities'. These ideas were helpful for developing this studies' theme of the organisational context of resilience.

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

Similarly Collins' (2007) paper on resilience in social work emphasises positive emotions, but also specifically recognises the role of 'meaning, optimism and hope' in staying in the field. Russ at al (2008) in considering the same problematic of resilience in child protection, also conclude that supporting workers to remain and remain positive in this work, would involve 'an increased use of reflective practice, supervision, on-going learning, and collaborative peer support' (p331).

Resilience, then, is clearly a complex and multidimensional concept and the above identifies a section of the literature, which this project drew on to inform its ethos and methodology. Ideas about 'hope', 'meaningfulness', 'learning', 'relationships' seemed productive. The research team pondered the notion of an 'ethics of resilience' in social work and the paradoxes inherent in this: e.g., where addressing self-protection and self-care might induce

guilt and a sense of not being a 'good' worker (e.g. finishing work on time: not 'going the extra mile'). We acknowledged both the usefulness and the limitations of applying 'frameworks' of resilience themselves, in that they necessarily both include and exclude some perspectives. Ultimately we preferred to draw on those above, but incorporate in our design an open, reflective dialogue with those with longevity in child protection work, in which, without losing sight of the structure, whatever meanings and understandings workers surfaced could be explored, across a range of dimensions. The three themes which this study presents below reflect the dominant emergent strands from these interviews and the research team's thematic analysis of the data, understood, invariably, through our engagement with the subject area from the literature.

**Research design and methodology**

The data for this project was collected through in depth semi-structured interviews focused on key issues in resilience and child protection social work. Interviews with 37 informants in Italy, Sweden and England were conducted over four months, between November 2012 and February 2013. The countries chosen represent three different welfare regimes (see Esping Andersen 1996) and differences in how child protection interventions are organized. For example, in England and Italy there is a child protection orientation, whereas in Sweden more of a family service orientation (see Gilbert et al 2012). They also represent countries with established problems with retention (see previous research section). In each country, two geographic sites for collection of data were chosen for pragmatic reasons (availability and contacts within the social work practice). There are no reasons to believe (according to national statistics) that the situation in the chosen sites differs in any significant way from the situation in other parts of each country. The sample was selected to reflect two different roles: social workers in child protection, and, to introduce a further 'concerned/informed actor' dimension, managers in the same field (see table). Social workers who stay in the sector and not those who had left were the focus, particularly how people continue- a strengths perspective rather than a deficit model- and the motivations they express. Ten social service organisations were involved in two regions in Sweden, 2 cities in Italy and 1 city in England. The interviews were undertaken cross nationally in English. Each researcher was responsible for interviewing informants in another country. We acknowledge that this method introduces some limitations in shared understanding and meaning (though in reality the interviews were careful to explore confusions and differing nuances) but there were also advantages. Not only could we inject less preconception and more curiosity into the interviewing situation but could also avoid interviewing former students from our own universities. Most importantly, the inevitable process of co-producing meaning in the interview between researcher and researched, offers a counter-balance to the problems (Frost et al 2016 forthcoming; Kvale, 2008).

The details of the sample involved were thus:

**Table 1. Number of interviews made in Italy, Sweden and England.**

|  | Social Workers | Social work managers | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Italy | 12 | 4 | 16 |
| Sweden | 6 | 3 | 9 |
| England | 9 | 3 | 12 |
| Total | 27 | 10 | 37 |

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

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

Like all research, the process here contained limitations and challenges. For example, the design does not allow a relative comparison of the importance of different factors in choosing to stay in child protection. The number of participants is not large or systematically sampled enough to offer conclusions that can be reliably generalised in any of the chosen countries, or to actually compare the experiences on a national level. However the main intention was to gain a varied but in-depth picture of the experiences of the different actors involved in child protection in different welfare contexts, and to surface key themes which can be drawn on to

inform future studies. Inevitably, there are also limitations due to language and understanding of culture differences when doing cross-cultural research, the subject of a further paper from this team, in process. This paper now will go on to consider the key findings of the study: the three themes of organisational issues in general, supervision and informal work-relations.

**Organisational Issues**

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

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

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

This 'mission' is also more than working with each child and family: for some it is a way of feeling responsible and having a sense of doing something for the next generation. Another subtheme related to the task, was the sense that (to paraphrase): the work is varied, no day is ever the same, it is never boring and you never know what to expect. It includes talking to people, writing, analysing family patterns and relations, playing with children, sometimes even shopping with mothers.

*I just loved that … it's the adrenaline …. You know I liked the fast business. I've got a low boredom threshold and I like that nothing's the same. SWM ENG*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Supervision**

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

A social worker expressed the feeling that internal supervision was

*really good, because we know each other's clients, and we also know how to deal with different things the next time they happen. SW SWE*

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

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

*The internal version is good, because that is where you get your freedom of action. SW ENG*

Comparing the two opportunities of having internal or external supervision, one Swedish social worker remarked:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Managers also recognized the importance of supervision:

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

*It is like a sacred cow, ... I think every social service here in Sweden have it any other week... And you can't take that away. SWM SWE*

Supervision is part of processes of education, knowledge, experience and support. It may build on these. For example, some Italian managers suggested that supervision can fulfil its function only if social workers have acquired methodological skills and a sound professional identity. However, Italian workers' views also suggested some ambivalence around supervision.

Acknowledging a reluctance to be supervised individually, one worker said:

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

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

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

**Friends, peers and significant work relationships**

Research that demonstrates that friendships at work are important for well-being is available in a very wide range of work contexts including social work. For example, in statutory social work colleagues were seen as the major source of support for most workers, with friends and family mentioned in some but not all studies, and supervisors and managers often seen as either unimportant or of limited value (Collins, 2008).

The findings from the participants of the authors' study demonstrated that 'staying' connected to the relationships they had with others. This is articulated as simply 'that the relationship in itself is a positive force' but also discussed by some in terms of the complex range of dimensions that work relationships provided: e.g. recognition, esteem, support, caring:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, the importance of the work friendship was oft repeated, and, again as an understanding of resilience might lead one to expect, friendship in itself counted for a great deal. As a social worker in child protection of nearly 20 years' experience expressed…

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

**Conclusions**

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

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

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

Supervision is a good example of creating formal spaces for reflection, and the examples from this study pin point the rich potential for support within the supervisory situation. However 'management supervision': for ensuring work standards, offering guidance and advice etc. may need to underpin 'supportive supervision'.

The research team used two existing theoretical frameworks to consider why workers might endure in these difficult areas of practice. From these, Rutter's 'remaining open to life opportunities' and Venistendael's 'Casita' s attic room 'for new experiences', both link to the interviewees valuing unpredictable and stimulating work opportunities. Rutter's 'risk reduction' very much relates to sound management, organisational clarity and support. 'Development of self-esteem' are found in both Rutter's and Venstendael's formulations of resilience, and certainly resonate with workers we interviewed.  Relationships with others, the very 'foundations' in the 'house' model, were patently valued in our sample e.g. as a form of recognition (Frost, 2013). From HSO research, it is evident that the values underpinning the activities also are reasons for people to enter the field of child protection. Motivational aspects are for instance the relational content of work, where you deal with important moral questions of life (Johansson et al 2015).

Overall, our findings mostly reflect the contemporary trends in other studies: those organizational and relational matters play an important role. Creating resilience is a complex issue, drawing on both collective and individual features. Respondents stressed collective factors above individual. Stressing social worker's personalities may obscure organizational and professional responsibilities for changing the status quo, an example of our understanding

that resilience is by no means a neutral concept, and an 'ethics of resilience', as discussed above, needs to inform theory and practice.

The complexity of social workers' decisions to stay in or leave child protection is crystallised when studying it from different national contexts, impacted by individual or collective strategies at the workplace within the context of country specific developments in policy and professionalization. Further research might profitably address a whole range of unexamined factors, national and more universal, e.g. what difference might gender make; what difference status? Over the last years new professional trajectories have developed, where social workers may look for jobs with more specialization, professional discretion and individual autonomy, taking them away from statutory social services all together (Dellgran and Höjer 2005, Kullberg 2011, Evans & Harris 2004. A final thought, then, for examination in a future study perhaps, is that whether there are alternatives, and how attractive they look, may also play a role in deciding to stay in child protection work.

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