Creating Meaningful Change: A Critical Realist Study of the Relationship Between Psychological Empowerment and Systemic Reform in the Australian Child Protection System

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Bachelor of Social Work (Honours)
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Thesis
Submitted to Flinders University
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
20 October 2022

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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the proportion of children experiencing abuse and neglect continues to rise despite ongoing systemic reforms. Without an in-depth analysis of how systems change, there is the risk that future reforms will continue to be costly, ineffective, and leave children vulnerable to maltreatment. This thesis contributes originally to the growing body of knowledge by examining the relationship between the psychological empowerment of child protection practitioners and their response to systemic reform. I argue that ultimately children are protected by people, not systems. Therefore, to transform our systems we must empower the people working to protect children.

I used a mixed-methods explanatory design to analyse the child protection system. This created three distinct phases. In phase one, I constructed a quantitative survey from two measures: the psychological empowerment instrument and a measure classifying the variable responses of staff to innovations in systems. I analysed the survey responses (n = 106) finding separate patterns for how practitioners experienced the four sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment (meaning, self-determination, competence, impact). I also looked for connections, determining how psychological empowerment related to their responses to reform. In phase two, I interviewed a nested sample of practitioners (n = 19). I then analysed the results using a critical realist framework, identifying the structure, culture, and personal agency of practitioners within the child protection systems. Finally, in phase three I integrated the data to answer the research question and explain the findings of phase one.

The results of phase one found that child protection practitioners experienced the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment differently. Competence developed steadily, with practitioners rating higher competence based on their length of experience as child protection practitioners. Their sense of impact on the child protection system remained low, only increasing when the practitioner moved into a management position. While practitioners initially felt that they had a good sense of self-determination, there was a notable decrease after their first year of practice. After this decrease, their self-determination increased as they gained further experience. Practitioners also found their work meaningful, and their sense of meaning was most predictive of their response to

systemic reform. The qualitative results explained these findings, showing that the structure and culture of the child protection systems were both chaotic and rigid. As practitioners struggled to manage the ongoing chaos and function within the rigid constraints, they found creative ways to enhance their sense of psychological empowerment. Practitioners actively sought meaningful opportunities in their work and used their values as a benchmark for how to respond to systemic reform.

Ultimately, systemic reform does not happen in a vacuum. Any changes to the child protection system occur through the people working in the system. The practitioners in this study used their personal agency to resist or embrace systemic reform, affecting the final outcomes. Future reform efforts need to be relational, mission driven, and promote the expertise of practitioners rather than viewing them as simply another 'part' of the system.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Agency: The capacity of people to use their freedom and choice to act independently.

Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC): An implementation framework and management model designed to improve governance within child protection systems.

Child protection system: A set of formal and informal organisations, brought together into a system, to serve the function of preventing and responding to the abuse, neglect, and maltreatment of children. The Australian child protection system comprises local state and territory systems under an ideologically unified framework. The terms 'local systems' or 'state and territory systems' are used to distinguish when the information refers to local jurisdictions rather than child protection at the national level.

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS): A theory recognising that systems self-organise in response to changing conditions.

Corporate agent (CA): A group within the system holding power through collective action which shapes the system.

Culture (CS): The collective ideas, beliefs, and values held by the members of the system.

Determinant: Factors classified as facilitators or barriers to successfully implementing change within a system.

Emotional abuse: Any act that leads to a child experiencing significant emotional deprivation or harm including seeing others experience violence.

Implementation science: A field of study examining the process of research findings being successfully implemented in routine practice in community settings as defined by Eccles and Mittman (2006).

Innovation: A new intervention, method, or practice developed to improve outcomes.

Investigation: The gathering of information and the interviewing of family members, children, and other significant people to determine if the children are at risk of harm.

Managerialism: An ideological management approach that uses generic knowledge and tools to improve service delivery. This has resulted in outsourcing, rigid management structures, and viewing employees as human resources for allocation.

Morphogenic/Morphostatic framework (M/M): The theoretical framework of Archer (1995) that views social systems as changing due to the relationship between structure, culture, and agency.

Neglect: The failure to adequately provide for a child's basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene, and medical attention, despite the child's caregivers having sufficient financial means.

New public management (NPM): A form of managerialism that sought to reform public services by using concepts successful in for-profit businesses. Australia has been influenced by NPM in the delivery of social services.

Non-government organisation (NGO): A community organisation that is not managed by a government department. In Australia, many non-government organisations are still funded by government grants.

Notification: In Australia, a notification is an allegation of child abuse or neglect made to statutory child protection systems.

Out of home care (OoHC): A child or young person who no longer lives with their birth parents. The child or young person may live with a relative in kinship care, with a non-relative in foster care, or in an institutional setting such as a residential centre.

Personal projects: The collection of goals and values that drive the choice and agency of people in a system.

Physical abuse: Any non-accidental act directed at a child by a person caring for the child which harms the child.

Primary agent (PA): A group of people within the system governed by self-interest that works within the system but does not collectively exert change on it.

Private organisation: An organisation that is self-funded through fee-for-service work.

Psychological empowerment (PE): An internal sense of empowerment based on the sub-dimensions of meaning, self-determination, impact, and competence as defined by Spreitzer (1995). The sub-dimensions are measured on the psychological empowerment instrument (PEI).

Reflexivity: The process of critically thinking about oneself, the system, and the available choices in order to effectively use agency to achieve personal projects.

Sexual abuse: Any act by a person that exposes the child to, or involves the child in, sexual experiences beyond accepted community norms for the child's development.

Signs of Safety (SofS): A child protection framework developed by Edward Turnell in Western Australia. Versions of the framework are used in most Australian states and territories and have been implemented in other countries.

Social actor: A person occupying a social role, shaped by their own agency and the conditions of the system. To ensure clarity and consistency, the term 'practitioner' is used in this thesis to reference the specific social actors who exist within the child protection system. Practitioners may hold any role within the system and are further delineated by their specific role, for example frontline practitioner or supervisor.

Social interaction (SI): The level of interaction where practitioners use their agency to influence the system's structure.

Socio-cultural interaction (SC): The level of interaction where practitioners use their agency to influence the system's culture.

Statutory child protection: The sector of the Australian child protection system that is part of the state or territory government.

Structure (SS): The relationships between people, and their social positions that are created to govern the distribution of power and resources.

Substantiation: When an investigation determines that a child has been, or is at significant risk of being, harmed due to abuse or neglect. The outcome is that the allegations are substantiated.

System: A set of parts interconnected in such a way that they begin to produce their own patterns of behaviour and become resilient against interference.

Systemic reform: Attempts to change the structure and culture of the system so that it is better able to achieve its function. In this study, systemic reform refers to any changes made in the broad child protection system and is comprised of cumulative smaller changes such as organisational change and individual practice change. Discussions of systemic reform therefore refer to all these levels of change.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed...

Date..........31 July 2022........................

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I started this research ten years after completing my honours degree in social work. The learning curve was steep, and I could not have succeeded without the support of the people around me.

Thank you to my Principal Supervisor, Dr Helen McLaren, for your ongoing emotional support, advocacy, and attention to detail. Thank you to my Associate Supervisor, Dr Michelle Jones, for your poignant comments and guidance.

Thank you to Dr Paul Williamson and Dr Pawel Skuza for supporting my quantitative methods and advising me.

Thank you to my parents, Mark Bromley and Deborah Pszenica. You have always believed in me and my pursuing a PhD has come at no surprise to either of you. Thank you to my 'second parents' Debbra Bromley and Yves Pszenica. You have supported me emotionally and practically through the challenging times in my life.

A special thank you to all the wonderful practitioners who participated in my research. You truly change lives and I was privileged to hear about your journeys.

Finally, a special thank you to my partner Lucas DeJong. You have loved me through three challenging years. Your constant care and nurturing have sustained me at times when success felt very far away.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Research on child maltreatment must focus on more than just children and their families. Child maltreatment and child protection interventions both occur within complex social systems. These systems greatly affect the success of child protection interventions. When a new intervention is introduced, the system itself must reform and change. If the system does not change, the intervention may not be effective despite its efficacy. Consequently, unless researchers study the process of how these systems change, future reforms may be ineffective.

Australia's history shows this cycle of ineffective reforms. Ongoing inquiries into poor practice have produced thousands of recommendations for change. In South Australia alone, there have been four independent inquiries since 2003, resulting in 349 recommendations (McDougall et al., 2016). There was also a 2016 Royal Commission resulting in a further 260 recommendations (Government of South Australia, 2016). An analysis of these inquiries shows similar themes in their findings (Mendes, 2019) demonstrating that they do not yield new information. Some inquiries have led to significant changes, such as centralised intake centres that receive reports child protection concerns from the public (Fernandez, 2014). Yet, Australia continues to see an increase in the rates of children requiring protective services and entering out-of-home care (OoHC) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). These rising rates show that reforms have not yet addressed the systemic challenges associated with effective child protection practice (Wise, 2017). The historical pattern of reforms, inquiries, and further reforms, with still increasing rates of children at risk highlights the challenges associated with changing complex systems.

These ineffective reform attempts, and associated challenges, are now well recognised amongst local and international researchers. Finan, Bromfield, Arney, and Moore (2018) from the Australian Centre for Child Protection Research recommended that future research and reform agendas focus on *how* systems implement best practice recommendations and not only the *content*. A clear example of the importance of this change in focus can be seen

in the research-driven reform by Munro et al. (2020) in the United Kingdom. Munro and colleagues implemented Signs of Safety (SofS); a comprehensive child protection framework developed by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in Australia. Despite the strategic approach used in the reform, an independent evaluation found that little has changed for either practitioners or families and children in the pilot sites (Baginsky et al., 2020). The evaluation noted that the implemented changes were rarely observed in frontline practice and some local offices showed poorer outcomes for children than before the reform (Baginsky et al., 2020). In response, Munro and colleagues highlighted numerous implementation challenges and resistance to change which weakened the effectiveness of their attempts. Clearly, even well-resourced and targeted reforms face many barriers to change.

When examining Australia's reform process, there are longstanding barriers to change. The Australian child protection system is complex and decentralised. Each state and territory has its own system of laws, policies, and practices, with various services and interventions delivered by both public and non-government organisations (NGOs). As a result, systemic reform must be a collaborative effort, spanning diverse organisations. Reform recommendations do not always align with the legislative differences across jurisdictions, leaving them partially implemented. In addition, the ability to action change is further compounded by limited resources, organisational culture, and political resistance to innovation and change (Parenting Research Centre, 2015). An analysis of these barriers shows they encompass both material and social aspects. Rather than being separate, these multi-layered barriers indicate that a reform will likely fail without understanding the 'people and the parts' comprising the system, as well as their interaction.

The effectiveness of change must also be considered. Even if systems overcome barriers to change, a reform will not be effective unless it meets the intention behind the proposed changes. Recommendations may be 'achieved' by child protection systems without any meaningful change, resulting in only superficial reform (McDougall et al., 2016). This superficial reform illustrates that complex and adaptive systems, such as child protection systems, cannot change merely through manualized processes (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002). Instead, practitioners must embody the intent behind the proposed

recommendations. Intent is often shown through the ideology attached to systemic reform. Many historical recommendations provided to the Australian child protection system have demanded an ideological shift (Fernandez & Delfabbro, 2020). For example, a recent ideological change is prioritising family support over placing children in foster care. This change requires more than simple structural adjustments to the system. Implementing ideological reform demands a change of thinking, making it reliant on how practitioners interpret and respond to new ideas. Without this deeper change, the reform may fail.

Failed attempts at systemic reform not only result in expensive and ineffectual changes but hinder the quality of evaluation. Although a given reform may promote an evidence-informed intervention, researchers cannot evaluate the outcomes unless practitioners implement with fidelity. In the example discussed earlier, Munro et al. (2020) asserted that implementation challenges affected their outcomes. They did not feel that their framework, SofS, lacked quality, but that practitioners did not use it appropriately. Because of this, the evaluation concluded that "culture trumped strategy," noting that few pilot sites adequately implemented SofS (Baginsky et al., 2020). In addition, SofS remains 'not able to be rated' on the California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (www.cebc4cw.org/program/signs-of-safety/); lacking the scientific rigour and outcomes to be classified as evidence-based or even promising by the clearinghouse. Without enough evidence, gathered from well-implemented reforms, the knowledge base of child protection interventions will stay limited.

In summary, these factors highlight the need to better understand child protection systems and their response to change. Systemic reform is influenced by both the parts of the system, such as the policies, and the people within them. Without conducting an in-depth analysis, there is a risk that reforms will continue to be costly, ineffective, and leave children unprotected.

Aims of the Research

This research aimed to understand the process of systemic reform in child protection and what role psychological empowerment played in that process. To achieve this aim, I examined the culture, structure, and personal agency of practitioners within Australia's child

protection system. This aim is in appreciation of the seminal review of child protection conducted by Eileen Munro in the United Kingdom (Munro, 2011). Munro used systems theory to study how different factors in the child protection system were interrelated. These relationships had consequences for the rest of the system. Munro's study provided a clearer picture of systemic reform and moved away from linear explanations that did not capture the complexity needed for understanding social systems.

One of the critical elements of Munro's research was the influence of ongoing reforms on the individual practitioner. Her review asserted that practitioners had lost their decision-making discretion and agency. Inherently, this link between individuals and the larger systems in which they work is an important point for research. Practitioners influence how systems function, and can alter interventions, leading to unexpected results (Lipsky, 2010). In addition, the influence of practitioners is especially important in child protection systems. These systems are complex and adaptive, creating ripple effects because of change (Munro, 2020). Munro's premise, formed around the system-individual interface, is fundamental to the aims of the current thesis.

I aimed to study this system-individual interface and understand the implications of interactions for systemic reform. I chose the concept of psychological empowerment to represent the agency of individual practitioners within the child protection system. Psychological empowerment reflects practitioners who are invested in their work, feel competent, and believe they have self-determination and can impact their workplace. These are important elements identified by Munro's research. Psychological empowerment also links to other critical areas, such as staff retention (Bhatnagar, 2012; Fuller et al., 1999), innovative practice (Javed et al., 2019; Messmann et al., 2017; Yildiz et al., 2017), and positive attitudes towards systemic change (Lizar et al., 2015; Malik et al., 2021; Ramin & Heshmat, 2014; Siachou & Gkorezis, 2014).

Based on this conceptualisation, the following research question guided the study:

> What is the relationship between psychological empowerment and practitioners' response to systemic reform in Australia's child protection system?

Significance of the Research

Child maltreatment is one of the most devastating social issues of contemporary Australian society. To address this issue, it is imperative that research contributes not only to knowledge, but to solutions. I designed this study to embrace rather than reduce the complexity of systemic reform. First, this study adopts the methodology of critical realism and systems analysis. To achieve this, I drew on the work of Danermark (2019), who argues that systems are understood by studying the relationship between objective social structures and intersubjective personal experiences. This methodology is better suited than positivist methods, which may be limited to simple cause-and-effect findings (Houston, 2010) and exclude important social phenomena (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). As a result, this study presents an alternative view to the dominant literature, highlighting the complexity of the change process.

Second, this study offers all professionals involved in the child protection system an increased understanding of systemic change. It provides ways professionals can integrate evidence into daily practice. Although strongly theoretical, I designed this study to be applied practically as "it would be immoral in this field to do research without a strong commitment to making that research go to work and change things for vulnerable children" (Scott, 2012). The significance of the research lies in how it can contribute to successful systemic reform in the future.

Position of the Researcher

The philosophical position of critical realism underpins this thesis. It holds that all data, methods, analysis, and findings are influenced by the researcher (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). Therefore, it is important to reflect on my position as a researcher. The idea for conducting this research began in 2013. I had been working as a child protection practitioner for a year, in the Australian state of Queensland, and became disillusioned with the system. I saw so many opportunities for creative practice, innovation, and ways to help families and children, yet these were sidelined by traditional policies and procedures. While I was working, the child protection system underwent significant reform. When the reform report was released, the potential for change excited me. The recommendations were first

implemented through training. The training felt refreshing, and I truly believed that my department would function in a new and more collaborative way. During the first staff meeting, I was shocked. My colleagues, who were great practitioners, genuinely felt that they were already using the new framework. They saw the training as "reinforcing the basics". Although they used the new documents and tools from the training, they did not believe they needed to do anything differently in the field. I was confused. To my mind, we were not practicing the way the new framework intended. Practitioners made decisions without consulting families, supervised all family visits without reflecting on why, and evaluated case plans as a checklist. I could see these failings in my practice and could not understand why they seemed invisible to everyone else.

Although I remained for several more years, ultimately, I could not survive in child protection. I loved the families, I loved the children, but everyday felt like a war against the system. I noticed in myself a desire to protect families from statutory services, knowing that once children were removed, it was nearly impossible for them to return home. While the roadmap for achieving system reform was promising, the lack of change was disappointing.

My passion for child protection has remained. I have found other ways to contribute and hold a deep desire to help systems, and practitioners, be the best that they can be. Given my history, I have continually questioned my bias and its potential influence over my research. When analysing my findings, I wondered whether I was simply seeking validation for my own experiences, desperate for voices to echo my own thoughts and feelings. I provide my efforts to mitigate this bias in different sections across the thesis. Specifically, I have included data that contradicted my own perceptions, used clearly defined deductive coding frameworks based on prior literature, and kept records of my thoughts and reflections alongside all phases of the analyses. These attempts have helped me remain reflective and critical of my own bias and influence.

Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis is formatted with extended chapters as recommended for mixed-methods designs by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). I conceptually organised the thesis using critical realist methodology. Because of this, the thesis structure illustrates the process of my

iterative research. The chapters first provide context, then breadth, then depth, and finally respond to the research question.

Chapter One provides a rationale for the research, situating the problem and explaining the importance of the study. In this chapter, I articulate the aims to provide the purpose for the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two presents the context of child protection in Australia. My intent in this chapter is to present an overview of the Australian child protection system. I discuss the contemporary structure, challenges, state of the workforce, and socio-political environment. I conclude with the significance of psychological empowerment as an area of study for child protection practitioners in Australia.

Chapter Three presents an overview of psychological empowerment and the factors influencing systemic reform in child protection systems. My intent in this chapter is to guide the reader to a specific focus. I move through what is already known about psychological empowerment and discuss its relevance to systemic reform. I then systematically review the literature on child protection reform and the theories, models, and frameworks that underpin systemic reform. I conclude with a critique of the literature, identifying gaps in knowledge where my study will contribute.

Chapter Four describes the methodology and research design. I provide an overview of critical realism, highlighting key concepts and presenting the rationale for its use. Next, I explain the theoretical framework used for the study. This critical realist framework informed my interpretations and analysis for the qualitative data in Chapters Six and Seven. Finally, I outline the sequential, explanatory, mixed-methods design and the rationale for choosing this design.

Chapter Five presents the quantitative phase of the study. In this chapter, I first present the relevant literature for the quantitative study. Next, I present methods and then the findings as a self-contained study. Then, I show the validity and reliability testing of the instruments used, the data collection methods specific to this phase, and the demographics of the sample. Finally, I show the results of the quantitative testing, locating psychological

empowerment within the sample and examining correlating factors. I also analyse how much of the variance in practitioners' self-perceived response to change can be explained by their psychological empowerment. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the theoretical implications of the findings. My intent in this chapter is to provide breadth, examining the patterns and relationships across many respondents.

Chapter Six presents the qualitative phase of the study. I start the chapter by reviewing the relevant literature for the qualitative study. Next, I describe the methods, explaining how I used the quantitative findings from the previous chapter to inform the design and collection of qualitative data. Then, I present the qualitative findings. Here, I use the theoretical framework to examine the results based on structure, culture, and agency. My intent in this chapter is to provide depth, bringing personal experience and reflection to the phenomena studied as practitioners 'bring concepts to life' in their narratives.

Chapter Seven presents the final phase of the study. In this chapter, I integrate the findings of the previous two chapters. I reframe the quantitative results from Chapter Five as research questions and use the data from Chapter Six to elucidate the findings. My intent in this chapter is to provide deeper meaning and build argument in preparation for responding to my research question in the final, subsequent chapter. I draw on theory to 'move past' what is easily visible in the data, instead exploring cause and effect within the system.

Chapter Eight contains the discussion and conclusion. In this chapter, I return to the research question and summarize the main findings. I discuss the implication of these findings for child protection practice and systemic reform. I conclude the chapter with the limitations of the research and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT OF CHILD PROTECTION IN AUSTRALIA

Introduction

This chapter presents the context of child protection in Australia. All child protection systems are embedded within cultural, historical, and social contexts. I describe the current system, identifying the boundaries and key processes that are used in Australia to protect children from maltreatment. Then, I describe the current challenges facing the system, the state of the workforce, and the socio-political environment of child protection practice. This provides the foundational knowledge necessary to understand the Australian child protection system and relevance of this study. I conclude with the relevance of psychological empowerment as a key factor in systemic reform, framing the important contribution of this study to the body of knowledge.

Defining the Australian Child Protection System

Child protection practice always exists in the context of a system. A system can be defined as "a complex of elements or components directly or indirectly related in a causal network, such that at least some of the components are related to some others in a more or less stable way at any one time" (Buckley, 1968, p. 492). In child protection, systems are made from the collection of individuals, organised into roles, governed by policy and legislation, working together to achieve the function of protecting children. To function, systems are dynamic, meaning that the system acts, receives feedback from its actions, and then adapts based on that feedback (Forrester, 1961). Because of this dynamic nature, it can be difficult to distinguish where a child protection system starts and ends.

Munro (2020) identified that it is important to decide the boundary of the system being studied prior to starting research. Boundary decisions heavily influence the research, setting limits to the investigation and its findings. Mingers (2014) states that, from a critical realist position, the boundary identifies the "domain of the empirical" to be studied, arguing that it is difficult to separate a system from its environment. To decide on the boundary for this study, both conceptual and practical aspects were considered. Conceptually, I drew on literature from notable Australian research in the field of child protection. Australia has two

major academic research institutes dedicated to child protection: the Australian Centre for Child Protection, located in the University of South Australia, and the Institute of Child Protection Studies, located in the Australian Catholic University in Victoria. Both these institutes have provided extensive research on child protection in Australia, along with international comparisons. Additionally, the Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) are governmental institutes that provide research based on population data. Based on the studies presented by these sources (Bromfield et al., 2014; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Russ et al., 2022), Australia has a nationally co-ordinated child protection system comprising separate jurisdictions and sectors. This creates a boundary, indicating that Australia has a single system with subsystems within each jurisdiction. These jurisdictions will be discussed next, explaining the legislation and processes that guide child protection practice in Australia.

Australia has six states and two territories, forming the Commonwealth of Australia. Each state or territory has its own government while also existing under a federal government. This federal government allows the jurisdictions to have diversity and local governance while maintaining centralised responses for national concerns (Appleby et al., 2018). These national concerns are identified in the Australian Constitution. Child protection matters are not classed as one of these national concerns, meaning that child protection matters are dealt with by states and territories individually. Under the Constitution, different states and territories can propose Bills at local Parliament. If this Bill passes both the Senate and House of Representatives, it then becomes an Act. Table 1 lists the principal Acts that govern the separate jurisdictions. Alongside these principal Acts however there are many others, such as those relating to domestic family violence or adoption.

Table 1

List of Principal Acts Governing Child Protection in the Australian States and Territories

Jurisdiction	Principal Act
Australian Capital Territory	*Children and Young People Act 2008* (ACT)
New South Wales	*Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW)
Northern Territory	*Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* (NT)
Queensland	*Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld)
South Australia	*Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 (SA)*
Tasmania	*Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1997* (Tas.)
Victoria	*Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic.)
Western Australia	*Children and Community Services Act 2004* (WA)

Despite these differences, there is overall similarity to how the jurisdictions practice. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2018) identifies that the different state and territory legislations are all guided by the same three principles: best interest of the child; early intervention; and the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. These principles create some coherence across the states and territories, supporting the argument that Australia can be classed as having 'a child protection system'. Additionally, there is a National Framework designed to coordinate child protection responses. Babbington (2011) notes that this legislation was significant as "it was the first time that a Commonwealth Government had explicitly stated its intention to play a major leadership role on national child protection matters" (p. 14). The first framework, entitled Protecting Children is Everyone's Business (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), was

recently reviewed and replaced with a new twelve-year framework: Safe and Supported
(Department of Social Services, 2021). This framework currently guides national child
protection practice.

The framework was a milestone to unifying the different sectors within child protection.
Australia strives towards a public health model, extending child protection across different
organisational types based on the needs of children and families. Consequently, there are
five main sectors of practice: federal government, non-government organisations (NGOs),
private organisations, statutory child protection departments, and Children's Court.
Together these sectors form the public health model, illustrated in Figure 1. Each state and
territory in Australia is currently working towards embedding this model.

Figure 1

The Public Health Model
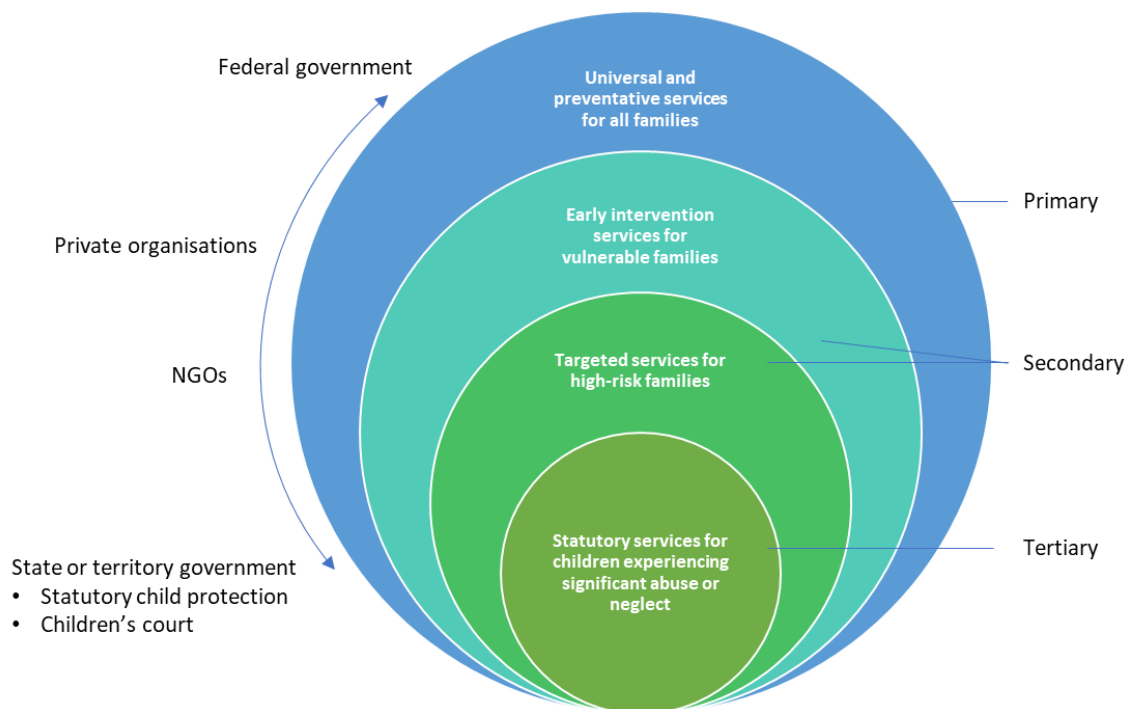
The public health model has created similarities in approach across the jurisdictions.
Bromfield and Holzer (2008) identified the common functions and processes occurring
nationally. Typically, each state and territory has a dedicated child protection department.

This department works alongside NGOs and other state departments (such as Health) within the secondary and tertiary layers of the public health model. Their roles are not the same, however. The NGO sector often provides the earliest intervention to children and their families. NGOs offer services such as parenting education, family counselling, and intensive family support (IFS). Some of these services can be accessed directly by families but others require a referral from a statutory department. This creates a continuum of services across the primary, secondary, and tertiary layers of the system. Early intervention services aim to address an associated risk factor before it results in child maltreatment, addressing issues such as homelessness or substance misuse (Valentine & Katz, 2015). Targeted services are more intrusive and offer services such as IFS which provide in-home services to prevent the family's progression into the statutory department (Healy & Darlington, 2009). These families typically have had some involvement with the statutory department, but the risk level is not high enough to warrant further investigation. Finally, NGOs also provide services to foster and kinship carers, as well as children in OoHC. These may include services such as case-management and training (Octoman & McLean, 2014). Additionally, NGO services may be supplemented by private organisations. Private organisations are usually contracted directly by the statutory department to provide services. These may be to assess parents for reunification, to locate and assess suitable kinship or foster carers, or to provide therapeutic services to the family. Despite this broad service delivery, NGOs and private organisations do not carry decision-making authority.

All decisions about a child's safety within the home must be made through the statutory department. In Australia, some form of mandatory reporting exists for all jurisdictions, requiring professionals to notify the statutory department of significant abuse or neglect (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020). The jurisdictions differ, however, regarding the ages of children for which reporting is mandated, who is considered a mandated notifier, and the types of abuse that are reportable. The point at which this decision making is determined is usually classified as a risk threshold and marks where family engagement is no longer voluntary. The threshold is determined by the legislation of the state or territory and identifies the child as "in need of protection" (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005). Because of this responsibility, statutory departments sit in a leadership role, providing case management and coordinating the services of other organisations. This also means that

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statutory departments carry the greatest level of responsibility for children's safety and wellbeing. However, they are not the final authority for decision-making.

As discussed earlier, each department exists under legislation making it subject to the Children's Court for that state. When families consent to work with child protection practitioners, or are referred to a family support service, court orders are rarely needed. However, if a child is removed from the care of their family, an application must be made to the Children's Court (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019). The success of this application is not guaranteed, and family members may access legal representation and argue for the child to remain in their care. As can be seen from this description, the sectors form a hierarchy. NGOs and the private sector carry the least risk and provide support or assessment services. Next, statutory departments carry higher risk, and direct NGOs, but do not have full authority. Finally, the Children's court grants orders deciding on where children should live, and other matters related to their wellbeing. Both NGOs and statutory departments must comply with these orders. Table 2 provides an overview of these sectors.

Table 2

Australian Sectors in the Secondary and Tertiary Tier of the Public Health Model

Sector	Elements	Description
Non-government	Secular and faith based not-for-profit organisations.	Organisations that compete for tenders from government departments to deliver specific services. Primarily responsible for prevention, early intervention, reunification, and foster care services.
Private	Independent contractors, and specialist services.	Individuals or organisations that deliver discrete services. These services are usually paid for by the statutory department on a fee-for-service arrangement. Services are usually assessments or specialized therapeutic support.
Statutory child protection departments	Six states and two territories with jurisdiction over child protection.	State funded institutions primarily responsible for the screening of notifications, forensic investigations, and case management of children in OOHC.

Sector	Elements	Description
Court	Children's Court	Each state and territory has a Children's Court and is governed by its own child protection legislation.
	Family Court	State courts sometimes intersect with the federal Family Court which handles custody, guardianship, and the wellbeing of children during family disputes. In matters of child protection, the Children's Court orders override Family Court orders. Western Australia does not fall under the Family Court.

These four sectors work together to address any concerns about a child's welfare. Concerns are usually called "notifications" and can be raised by lay members of the public, professionals or people legislated as Mandatory Notifiers by occupation. When first received, notifications go to an intake office within the statutory sector (Bromfield & Holzer, 2008). This office is usually phone based but many now accept written notifications submitted through a web service. Notifications are then screened using a risk assessment tool. Based on their level of risk, the child and family are broadly provided either no response, family support services, or a child protection investigation (Bromfield et al., 2014). Investigations only occur if the risk assessment is high enough to warrant this type of intrusion into the family. In an investigation, one or more practitioners will visit the family home. They speak to the child, caregivers, and other services (such as the school) to assess whether the child is at risk of significant harm. When a child is determined to be at risk, the case is termed "substantiated" (Bromfield et al., 2014). Substantiated cases are managed by the statutory child protection system (Bromfield et al., 2014) and the family may receive statutory services, NGO services, private services, or a combination. In contrast, unsubstantiated cases may be closed or referred to family support services. Family support services are usually in the NGO sector. This service delivery process is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Service Delivery in the Australian Child Protection System
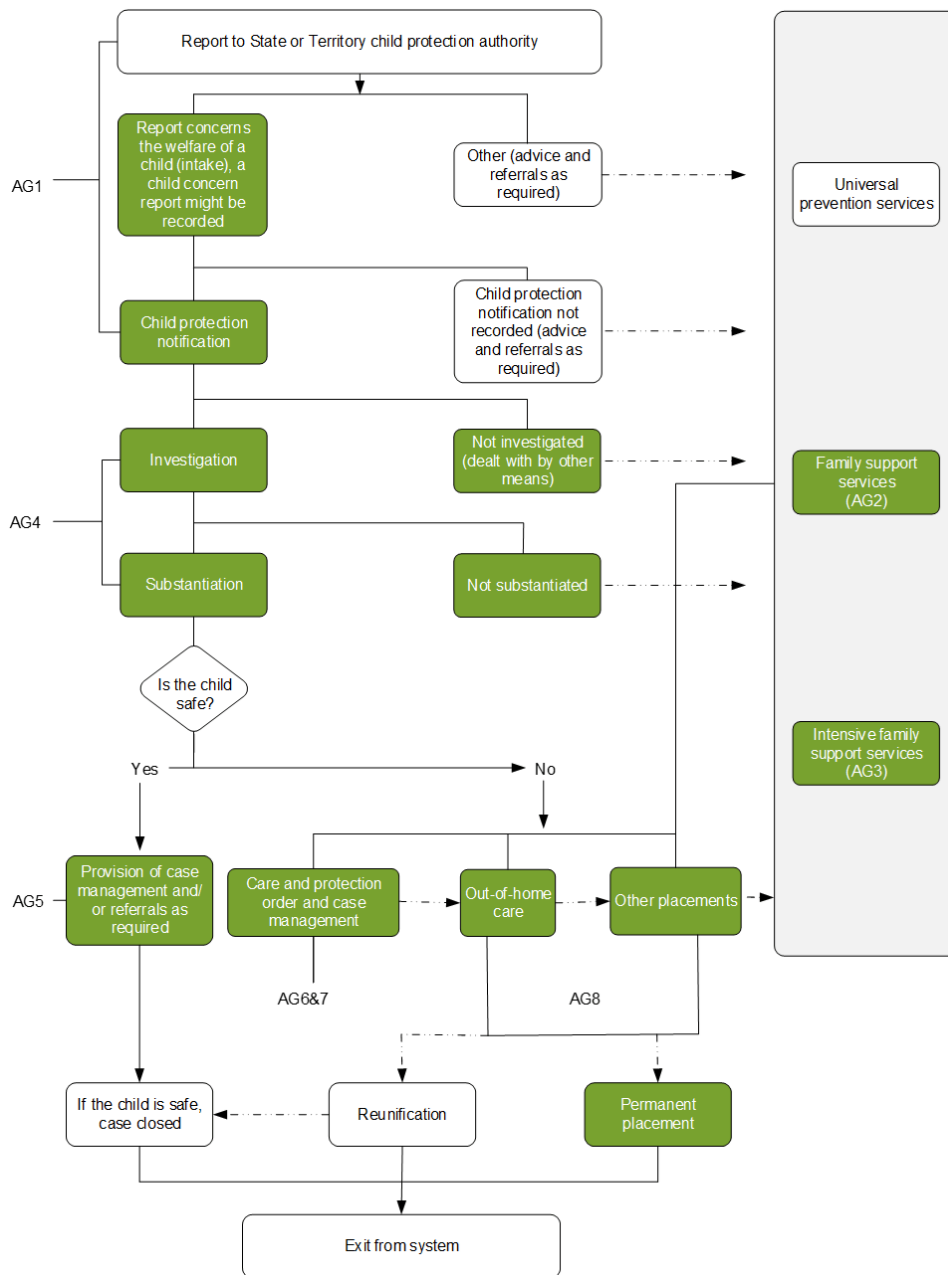
Note: From *Report on Government Services 2022,* by the Productivity Commission, 2022. (https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2022/community-services/child-protection). CC by 4.0. A Dashed lines indicate that clients may or may not receive these services, depending on need, service availability, and client willingness to participate in voluntary services. Support services include family preservation and reunification services provided by government and other agencies. Green shading indicates data are reported. AG = Activity Group.

Overall, the components and processes for protecting children in Australia are stratified but coherent to underlying principles. The decision-making structure and service referrals are similar across different jurisdictions. Additionally, there are national attempts to create further unity and develop a clear approach to addressing child protection on a national level. These factors indicate that there is a sense of a structure to Australian child protection that can be delineated as a system for study.

Challenges in the Child Protection System

Within the public health model just described, the number of children receiving statutory child protection services is expected to gradually decrease. While there will always be some need for these services, as more support is provided to families earlier in their lives, there should be less requirement for statutory intervention. The current data does not support this notion. Over the last five years, child protection notifications, investigations, and subsequent removals have continued to increase. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) summary report contains the most recent population data about child protection. The report shows that approximately 3% of children in Australia received statutory child protection services each year. Although there has been some variation, generally this rate is increasing. The trend is especially noticeable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who were significantly over-represented on all statistics and showed in increasing trend for being placed in OoHC (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is of particular importance in the Australian child protection system. Between 1910 and 1970, colonial policies forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, severing connections to their family, culture, country, and heritage (Renes, 2011). Children experienced terror, grief and loss, and disconnection from their culture. The impacts of this intergenerational trauma have been devastating and long lasting. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience twice the mortality rate of non-Aboriginal children and only 66% complete high school (Australian Government, 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are also at a higher risk of suicide, with few culturally responsive interventions implemented that offer

community support (Westerman & Sheridan, 2020). Despite these challenges, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to show resilience. Kennedy (2019) defines the resilience of Aboriginal peoples as expressed through cultural narratives and inclusion in the community (p. 124). These communities draw on their 'historical intimacy' with the land and their culture to heal. The child protection system has been slow to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resilience and to use culturally responsive models of family support. Instead, Westernised assessments and interventions are often mandated, with court orders more likely to be used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). In addition, Aboriginal practitioners have questioned the application of the 'best interests of the child' principle, arguing that it is inherently ethnocentric (Long & Sephton, 2011). The lack of cultural understanding may influence decision-making and underestimate the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Harnett & Featherstone, 2020). Together, these factors contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.

These data clearly show that the goals of the public health model are not being realised in practice. When reviewing the previous twelve years of implementation of the National Framework 2009-2020, the Department of Social Services (2020) states there have been ongoing challenges. The evaluation notes that despite the public health model requiring a shift of attention to secondary and primary tier services, the focus has remained on the tertiary tier. The current budget for child protection services further highlights this disparity. When examining expenditure for 2020-2021, more than half (60%) of annual funding goes towards providing OoHC services for children, accounting for $4.5 billion (Productivity Commission, 2022). In contrast, the total expenditure on IFS within the same period was only $521 million (Productivity Commission, 2022). The difference in funding demonstrates an important issue for systemic reform. During any transition, it may be some time before results are seen, demanding funding for both the current and future system components simultaneously.

One way of more quickly measuring whether change is occurring is by evaluating recurrence. Recurrence refers to repeat involvement of children and families with child

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protection services. Recurrence may signal the failure of services to create lasting change for families, or that cumulative harm is not being recognised for children. Jenkins et al. (2018) examined the factors associated with recurrence in a sample of 9,608 children in Australia. The authors show that 39.9% of all children received a second notification within a year of their first notification. Additionally, even after being investigated, 8.6% of children received a new notification within a year. Recurrence was highest for children under the age of five, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and for notifications alleging neglect. Together, these factors show that a child's engagement with the child protection system does not necessarily improve their outcomes. Another way to measure recurrence is to assess lifetime involvement with statutory child protection services. Segal et al. (2019) analysed administrative data for all children born in South Australia between 1986 and 2017. The data show that more children are involved with child protection services, and that involvement is occurring at younger ages, than in previous years. Additionally, children were staying on OoHC for longer periods. As with the national data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were significantly over-represented. In fact, the data showed that 12% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in South Australia will at some point in their lives be placed in OoHC. These numbers are staggeringly high and indicate that current systems are not moving towards the anticipated outcomes of the public health model. The overburdened statutory system has been a long-term driver of systemic reform (Fernandez & Delfabbro, 2020; Hood et al., 2016).

Australia is not the only country struggling to achieve improved outcomes for children. Gilbert et al. (2012) found that child protection systems across six different countries did not show any significant impact on child abuse and neglect. The authors conducted a secondary analysis of a range of child wellbeing indicators from government data. They examined rates of notifications, investigations, placement in OoHC and child deaths. Their results showed no clear evidence for the policies in any country reducing child maltreatment. In fact, involvement with child protection may be related to worse outcomes for families. In the USA, Fuller and Nieto (2014) used propensity score matching to compare families who were matched in likelihood of receiving child protection services and then compared their notifications over a two-year period. They found that families receiving child protection

services were more likely to be re-reported for child maltreatment than families who did not receive services. This occurred despite controlling for risk factors amongst the families.

Recurrence is a common in systems classified as having a 'child protection orientation' where services are generally forensic rather than focused on early family support. Higgins et al. (2019) describes several common criticisms of these systems including:

- unsustainable growth in the tertiary tier of the system,
- the behaviour of practitioners being driven by legislation,
- the reactive nature of systemic reform,
- poor morale and burnout of practitioners,
- and little focus on structural drivers of inequality associated with child maltreatment.

Ultimately, these common criticisms highlight the need for improved practice. While child abuse and neglect are now more easily recognised, the system has not evolved to provide effective interventions.

The Current State of the Workforce

In addition to the challenges experienced in service delivery, the Australian child protection system is filled with concerns relating to the workforce. McArthur and Thompson (2012) conducted a national analysis of trends within the statutory child protection workforce. The authors were commissioned to answer three questions:

- What are the national trends that impact on recruitment and retention in the statutory child protection workforce?
- What successful strategies are employed or will be employed by state and territory governments to recruit, retrain and support the statutory child protection workforce?
- What priorities at jurisdictional and national levels could be considered to further develop the capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce? (p. 5)

To answer these questions, the authors analysed a range of national reports, initiatives, and data related to all jurisdictions. Additionally, they consulted with key stakeholders involved in recruitment, training, and management. When analysing trends, the authors found four main factors influencing the workforce nationally: increasing demand for services resulting in high workloads for staff; the media sensationalising child maltreatment; a lack of organisational support; and an inadequate supply of suitably qualified professionals. The authors concluded that these trends placed tremendous pressure on child protection practitioners. Accommodations by the system were also evident in the workforce report. For example, in Queensland, statutory child protection practitioners no longer required a social work degree and instead could come from education, nursing, policing and law, criminal justice, social sciences, social work, applied social sciences, psychology, human services, behavioural science, or community welfare backgrounds. While this accommodated the increasing demand for staff, it meant a loss of specialisation within the child protection workforce.

Another workforce study was conducted by Lewig and McLean (2016). Although smaller in scope, with only 660 participants in two Australian states, the authors drew conclusions about practitioners working in child protection. The main finding was that the psychosocial work environment was the most important factor affecting practitioners' wellbeing. Here, the authors noted that discrete factors, such as receiving supervision, were less important than the overall organisational climate. They discussed psychological empowerment as a related construct, identifying that increased hope and optimism were crucial for practitioners to remain engaged with their work. The authors advocated for changes such as increased practitioner autonomy, role clarity, more training, and embedding transformational leadership in child protection organisations. One proposed method was through using the Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC) model (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018) which advocates for organisational change through improved management strategies targeted at the organisational climate.

This emphasis on organisational climates and cultures was echoed across the literature. Lonne et al. (2013) noted that child protection systems in Australia have typically been characterised by toxic work environments and demoralised practitioners. Oates (2019)

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further studied this toxicity in a sample of thirteen practitioners in Queensland. The practitioners in the study identified that the organisational culture was a barrier to them disclosing the impact of stress and vicarious trauma on their wellbeing. They highlighted that practitioners who did not appear to be "coping" with the workload might be labelled as incompetent or ill-suited to child protection practice. This lack of support is also evident in other jurisdictions. McArthur et al. (2011) surveyed 859 practitioners in varying roles, sectors, and states across Australia. Only 57% felt valued by their organisation and 53% felt supported when they experienced challenges. The survey also showed that many practitioners (40%) experienced high degrees of stress with a substantial number (31%) indicating they would leave child protection practice within two years. Clearly when practitioners do not feel supported there are critical consequences for the workforce.

The most recent study of workforce trends in child protection was conducted by Russ et al. (2022). Although occurring a decade later, their report highlighted many similar issues to that of McArthur and Thompson. The report identified that the number of practitioners working in child protection has been growing with strong growth predicted to continue across the next five years. As of 2021, there were approximately 18,000 statutory child protection frontline practitioners employed in Australia, almost doubling the 2009 workforce. Despite this increase, practitioners working in the tertiary tier continued to report high levels of stress. This stress has led to a trend of practitioner migration from organisations in the tertiary tier to the secondary tier. The combination of increased recruitment and high turnover has resulted in the workforce in the tertiary tier being relatively younger than that in the secondary and primary tiers. The authors also noted that the workforce was not appropriately qualified for the complexity of child protection practice. This finding sits starkly against the previous decision made in some jurisdictions to broaden the scope of qualifications for eligibility into child protection work.

One final area of consideration is the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. Oates (2020) studied the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners working in child protection, Australia. Oates highlighted systemic racism and discrimination faced by practitioners. At times, this discrimination was directed towards clients, while in other instances it was aimed directly at practitioners. Both resulted in

psychological distress as practitioners were forced to engage daily in a system without cultural safety. Another challenge identified by Oates was the use of cultural tokenism. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners were used as sources of cultural advice but these recommendations were never actioned. Practitioners felt exhausted by the constant demand for their cultural expertise, often occurring outside of their job description and with no remuneration or recognition. While studies such as this consistently show systemic racism, it remains politically denied. A clear example can be see regarding the release of the Cultural Competency Audit of Child Protection Staff and Foster Care and Adoption by Tracy Westerman (2017). Westerman is a Nyamal woman from the Pilbara region of Western Australia (WA). As a clinical psychologist, Westerman founded Indigenous Psychological Services, created a range of psychological measures suitable for Aboriginal peoples, and has been an expert consultant for a number of inquiries and commissions into Australian government services. Westerman's report on the child protection system in WA identified systemic racism for staff and clients and provided a set of recommendations to improve cultural safety. The report was not publicly released until 2022 when a whistle blower leaked it to the media. Subsequently, an Aboriginal employee was reported to have been raided at 6 a.m. by police, due to her leaking the documents (Knowles, 2022). Despite these events, WA minister for Community Services, Simone McGurk, denied any racism within the Community Services department. In an opinion piece for NITV, Westerman (2022) commented on the situation stating, "Whistleblowers exist only in systems in crisis – and make no mistake, this is a system in crisis" (paragraph 20). She continued to call for a commitment from the Australian child protection system to work towards cultural safety rather than denying racism. These events demonstrate the additional challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. While it is out of the scope of this thesis to explore these issues, it is important that they be acknowledged. Any factors impacting the psychological empowerment of child protection staff is likely exacerbated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners who also face daily systemic racism.

Ultimately, these workforce issues demonstrate that systemic reform will only be possible if the practitioners in the system are adequately supported and understood. Despite a national plan for systemic reform (Department of Social Services, 2021), there are no formal

mechanisms presented that address the workforce issues (Russ et al., 2022). Currently, there are predictions that the demand for child protection practitioners will outpace supply, further straining the system. Practitioners already accommodate this discrepancy, with 20% identifying as working more than five unpaid hours per week (Martin & Healy, 2010). Practitioners also work in organisational climates characterised as punitive and unsupportive of practitioners' wellbeing. In these settings, further demands are likely to only increase the high rates of turnover, contributing to a chaotic system ill equipped to respond to change. These factors point to the importance of empowering and supporting practitioners as the foundation of successful systemic reform.

The Socio-Political Environment of Child Protection Practice

The service delivery and workforce challenges just described are well known and have been revealed through numerous public inquiries. Australia uses public inquiries by independent bodies to investigate matters of public importance, often highlighting challenges and making recommendations for improvement. The Australian Law Reform Commission (2009) lists the types of inquiries and their functions. A Royal Commission is the largest type of inquiry and exists through legislation. The Royal Commission has a broad mandate for investigation and is initiated by the Governor-General on the advice of Parliamentary Ministers. This makes the Royal Commission a federal inquiry that expands across the Commonwealth. In addition, each state and territory also has legislation that can appoint a Royal Commission or other commission of inquiry. These smaller inquiries focus on the child protection system within the jurisdiction. Finally, each jurisdiction also has a Child Death Review Committee which maintains a register of all child deaths. The Committees review the circumstances of child deaths to make recommendations to prevent future deaths occurring. Together, these inquiries and reviews frequently evaluate the child protection system, often making hundreds of recommendations for change.

There are some significant challenges with public inquiries. The Australian Law Reform Commission (2009) investigated the process of public inquiries and noted that inquiries take longer than expected and come at significant financial cost. The Australian Law Reform Commission also highlighted the limitations of inquiries, stating that while

recommendations can be made, inquiry bodies are not designed to implement those recommendations. This leaves the burden of reform on the child protection system, with the inquiry merely identifying avenues for change. A third challenge is that although inquiries are undertaken by independent parties, this does not make them neutral. In fact, Prasser (2006) argues that inquiries typically have a set of secondary functions: appearing to take action on a controversial issue, justifying a change in policy from a previous government, or obtaining an independent analysis of an already preferred solution by the government. These secondary functions serve political aims but have little impact on improving systems.

These challenges can also be seen when examining the outcomes of systemic reform efforts. The Parenting Research Centre (2015) examined the implementation of recommendations that had previously arisen out of 61 past inquiries into child protection in Australia. While the report focused only on those recommendations relevant to institutional sexual abuse, it still covered a range of implementation challenges. The authors assessed recommendations across all Australian jurisdictions, concluding that only 48% of the 288 recommendations were fully implemented. Of these unimplemented recommendations, the category with the least progress was that of child protection training. The report also included reasons why some of the recommendations were rejected by different jurisdictions. At times the recommendations were noted to be too resource intensive (such as broadening the definition of child maltreatment) or because they were 'superfluous' given there were already practices in place addressing the recommendation. These reasons call into question the practicality of the inquiry recommendations. Particularly when disconnected from daily practice, recommendations may exacerbate the structural challenges underpinning system failures rather than resolve them.

The unintended consequences of past reforms demonstrate that implementing recommendations is not sufficient for change. Instead, implementation efforts must understand the intent behind a recommendation rather than simply altering the system. The importance of intent was clearly shown in the recent community consultations held to evaluate the National Framework 2009-2020 (Families Australia, 2020). During a consultation, one participant stated,

Success will be reached when there is the ability to draw a line from the policy intent, the programs and initiatives included in the successor plan directly to outcomes as experienced by our children. The current intent is barely recognisable to us and not evidenced in the experiences of our children. (p. 110)

The strong statement points to the need to evaluate outcomes for children and not just measure the implementation of recommendations. In fact, recommendations and associated implementation challenges across inquiries are remarkably similar.

The Australian child protection system underwent numerous reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, when there were several highly publicised inquiries into child deaths. Fernandez (2014) specifically identified the influential deaths of ten-year-old Paul Montcalm due to a house fire, two-year-old Danial Valerio due to physical assault by his mother's boyfriend, and four-month-old Jordan Dwyer who was left in a parked car. These inquiries brought systemic issues to the attention of the public, calling for 'strengthening' of the child protection response. Additionally, the media became very involved in these inquiries, generating public outrage and negativity towards child protection systems. An example can be seen in a media article about Jordon Dwyer entitled "Inside the Department of Disorganisation" (Wynhausen, 1988). Reporter Wynhausen described challenges in the New South Wales (NSW) statutory child protection department such as high workloads, limited training, and young, underqualified staff. Wynhausen concluded with a paragraph on the futility of systemic reform stating:

The endless, fruitless tinkering with the department continues. One person who works in head office says that the latest restructure plans won't be implemented for months--raising the very real prospect that the changes will again be brought in about time the political flux prompts the demise of another director-general and provokes another restructure. (paragraph 46)

Despite the article having been written in 1988, the themes are consistent with contemporary literature. The 'endless tinkering' Wynhausen described can be seen in more recent reforms.

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The recommendations across the last two decades are highly similar. Wyles (2007) thematically analysed the recommendations of child protection inquiries in three different Australian jurisdictions. The inquiries largely recommended reduced workloads, increased training, and more supervision or consultation with senior staff. More recent literature shows similar findings. Churchill and Fawcett (2016) conducted a review of reforms in NSW since 2000. While finding that positive changes had occurred, they also identified many implementation challenges. The central issues were the need for improved professional training, working conditions for practitioners, supervision, and support. Similarly, Zuchowski (2019) interviewed practitioners in Queensland, five-years after the Carmody Inquiry (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013) recommended large-scale reform. The practitioners noted some changes but overall felt that the child protection system's practice remained "adversarial, deficit-focused and adult-centric" (p. 150). They said that cultural change was difficult because of the high turnover in staff, unmanageable caseloads, and limited funding. These studies demonstrate that despite the many recommendations provided by inquiries, the Australian child protection system faces the same implementation challenges, decade after decade.

The pace of these inquiries has not abated. In fact, there have been more than 31 inquiries and reviews conducted on aspects of the Australian child protection system since 2012 (Appendix A). Wise (2017) notes that these reactive reforms were merely 'quick fixes' designed to alleviate publicised shortcomings. This reactivity has led to business models applied to child protection systems to improve efficiency through neo-liberal principles and new-public management (NPM). Lonne et al. (2013) traced this process, highlighting how inquiry recommendations have consistently focused on "bureaucratic rather than human factors" leading to technocratic procedures and surveillance (p. 1635). One of the clearest examples is the use of structured decision-making tools (SDM). These tools utilise actuarial principles to assist with decision making at critical points in the child protection system. The tools work by assigning a level of risk that shows what outcome should be taken (e.g. removal). However, SDM tools have been criticised for targeting specific socio-economic and ethnic groups for child removal (Feely & Bosk, 2021; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010) and lacking a holistic approach to conceptualising practice (Healy, 2009). Further, practitioners are not always supported to use these tools (Gillingham &

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Humphreys, 2010) and may fail to develop the appropriate expertise needed for more nuanced decision-making (Gillingham, 2011). Together, these concerns show that increased technology is not a cure-all to child maltreatment.

The desire to use actuarial tools, either to supplement or supplant practitioner decision-making, also illustrates an ideological shift in best practice. Gillingham and Humphreys (2010) identify two concepts embedded within this ideology. Firstly, that people are prone to error and the use of 'neutral' tools reduces this error. Secondly, that child maltreatment can be predicted and prevented. These concepts in turn imply that if a child is harmed, then someone is to blame. Devlieghere et al. (2022) have furthered this debate by examining 'dataism' as a paradigm. Dataism holds that large amounts of data make decisions more accurate. The authors argue that there are inherent flaws in this thinking, leading to practice implications. First, dataism assumes that all factors can be known and therefore analysed to predict an outcome. This is not possible with the complexity of child protection practice. Second, dataism can become a tool for social control where frontline practice is constantly under surveillance. Both factors can undermine practitioners' professional status. While it is undoubtably important to accurately and transparently record practice, the danger occurs when tools replace rather than support professional practice.

These ideologies have implications for child protection systems beyond just decision making. Healy (2009) outlines a number of concerns including a forensic reorientation in child protection practice and the de-professionalization of the workforce. Thomson (2016) also highlights the negative effects on families, stating that NPM has resulted in a punitive and blame-oriented system that is acutely aware of the personal failings of parents but blind to broader social issues. Ultimately, reform is not simply a process of changing the structure of systems or the practice of practitioners. Instead, the underlying ideology and culture of the system is a critical part of change.

Psychological Empowerment as a key Ingredient for Reform

The history of reform in Australian child protection clearly shows a different approach is required. The ongoing inquiries, often politically driven, have done little except to compound the chaos of under-resourced systems. With the rise of NPM, these inquiries

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have shaped practice ideology, becoming rigid and procedural. Lonne and Thomson (2005) describe the impact stating, "Rather than practising real accountability, workers have been expected to 'manage' the perception of accountability" (p. 96). This powerful shift has changed the power sits within the child protection system. Practitioners are no longer professionals whose expertise is valued and instead decisions are made through a series of algorithms. The approach has effectively disempowered practitioners in their roles. Furthermore, these managerialism practices are not adequate to engage with the complex, nuanced, and relational work required in child protection. Instead, the system requires transformation.

Academics have argued for a transformative systemic reform based on new ideology and not just new a structure (Bromfield et al., 2014; Gillingham, 2014; Lonne et al., 2020). However, changing ideology requires going beyond the superficial reorganisation of child protection systems to focus on the practitioners embodying the change. Walsh (2019) argues that practitioners need to rethink their identities as professionals to truly engage with a public health approach. Additionally, studies have shown that the attitudes, beliefs, and values of practitioners tremendously influence their actions and outcomes (Hameed, 2018). Therefore, any successful reform will need to understand how practitioners engage with change.

The key role of practitioners has also been highlighted in the most recent evaluations of the National Framework 2009-2020 (Families Australia, 2020). The evaluations identified the four greatest barriers to systemic reform as: practical constraints, such as resources; resistant organisational cultures; structural constraints, such as no national centralised authority; and prescriptive prior recommendations that focus on activities rather than outcomes. Specifically, the evaluation described the culture of the Australian child protection system as "resistant to scrutiny and change", that practitioners had "reform fatigue", and that their morale was low because of constant media criticism (p. 125). These barriers clearly indicate the need to explore practitioners' sense of psychological empowerment relative to systemic reform.

A final important reason for considering psychological empowerment is the very nature of child protection practice itself. The high turnover rates and staffing challenges which negatively impact systemic reform are linked to vicarious trauma and burnout. Chan et al. (2021) examined how Australian child protection practitioners navigate the intense demands they face daily. The authors noted factors contributing to burnout, such as high caseloads and low levels of supervision. Many of these factors mirror the implementation barriers commonly identified. Additionally, the negative effects of burnout go beyond practitioners to also influence children and families. Gibbs (2009) highlights that the self-protective mechanisms of practitioners may contribute to managerialism in practice. Examples are practitioners focusing on "surface 'doing' activities" which help them avoid their emotions (p. 293). Gibbs further argues that this way of coping has become culturally embedded in child protection systems. Change therefore requires the conscious cultivation of collaborative and empowered environments.

Overall, the literature strongly points to the importance of psychological empowerment for child protection reform. Ongoing implementation barriers, such as staff turnover and 'resistant' organisational cultures, intersect with factors influencing burnout. This places practitioners in the difficult position of caring for themselves, protecting children, navigating complex environments, and engaging in systemic reform simultaneously. It is at this juncture that my study contributes by closely examining how practitioners engage with reform while protecting their psychological empowerment.

Conclusion

This chapter provided the context of the Australian child protection system. I described the current system, outlining the basic processes and organisations involved. Then, I presented the current challenges faced by the system, the state of the workforce, and the socio-political environment surrounding the system. I concluded with a rationale for psychological empowerment to be studied as a critical factor for both systemic reform and the wellbeing of the child protection workforce. The literature shows the importance of studying the intersection of psychological empowerment and systemic reform more closely.

CHAPTER THREE: OVERVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter I analyse the extant literature relevant to this study. First, I examine the concept of psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is a widely researched topic with meta-analyses and literature reviews readily available. Here, I consolidate the literature and highlight its importance to systemic reform.

In the second section, I examine the literature about child protection reform. The study of systems and how they change has long been of interest to society. The topic is broad and covers a range of perspectives, such as personal change theories, organisational change management, and sociological change. The breadth of knowledge makes systemic reform a formidable topic to review. I begin by reviewing studies that applied a systems approach to their research of child protection reform. I highlight the relevant theories and present the gaps in the knowledge base. Then, I summarise the literature of four notable authors: Eileen Munro, Sandra Bloom, Michael Lipsky, and Margaret Archer. Each offer important contributions to the study of systemic reform in child protection.

In the third section, I summarize the main theories and frameworks that have developed from the field of implementation science. I present a bibliometric overview of the development of implementation science followed by the findings of a systematic search of the literature. I conduct a secondary analysis, presenting the findings relevant to child protection reform in a causal loop diagram.

Finally, I conclude this chapter by identifying limitations, gaps and challenges found in the literature, highlighting the need for my research. These gaps are then revisited in Chapter Eight where I discuss the original contribution made by my findings.

Psychological Empowerment and its Influence on Systemic Reform

Chapter Two presented the context of child protection in Australia. The chapter highlighted how entrenched managerialism has influenced practitioners, arguing that psychological empowerment (PE) is critical to consider in child protection reform. In this section, I

enhance my argument. I draw on the well-established literature about PE, demonstrating how it links to job satisfaction and readiness for change. I then identify the conditions needed to develop PE within an organisation before concluding with the relevance of PE to systemic reform.

Definition and Sub-Dimensions

The concept of psychological empowerment developed from Bandura's self-efficacy theory, and attempted to describe how much control employees perceived over their work role and conditions (Spreitzer, 1995). Rather than being an innate trait, or an organisational intervention, PE is a fluid cognitive state. While there were a few initial models for measuring and theorising about this concept, the most used measurement is the Psychological Empowerment Instrument (PEI) by Spreitzer (1995). Spreitzer's measure views PE as having four sub-dimensions that contribute to a single perception of power within the workplace. The validity and reliability of the measure has been tested in many studies (Sagnak et al., 2015; Spreitzer, 1995; Yildiz et al., 2017) and found to show good differentiation amongst the sub-dimensions while also measuring a single construct (Seibert et al., 2011).

The four sub-dimensions of the PEI are meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact. Meaning is the sense of purpose, passion, and caring a practitioner has for their work role. Wagner et al. (2010) conducted a mixed-method systematic review of the relationship between structural empowerment and psychological empowerment for nurses. They found that practitioners' sense of meaning was closely related to their values and beliefs. When practitioners' work aligned closely with their values, their sense of meaning increased. Additionally, high levels of meaning have been linked to practitioners' commitment to their work and their organisation (Abel & Hand, 2018). The second sub-dimension is self-determination. Self-determination is the feeling of autonomy and decision making the practitioner has over their work role. Practitioners who are self-determined feel that they have responsibility for their work and can make choices that are best for them and their clients. When self-determination is high, practitioners are more resilient, flexible, and creative in their work (Abel & Hand, 2018). The third sub-dimension is competence. Competence is identified as the practitioner's perception of their capability to perform their

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work role. When practitioners feel competent, they believe they have the skills to produce quality work (Maynard et al., 2012). Competence also represents a sense of self-efficacy where the practitioner believes they have the power to influence the outcomes of their work (Abel & Hand, 2018). Finally, impact refers to the degree of change the practitioner believes they have over their work environment, specifically their department or organisation. Practitioners who perceive themselves to have an impact believe that they are valued by their organisation and their voice will be heard (Çelık & Atık, 2020). Together, these sub-dimensions represent the overall PE of individual practitioners. When combined, however, individual scores can also represent the PE of a team or organisation. Seibert et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis on quantitative studies examining the antecedents and consequences of PE. Overall, he found that PE was generalizable across individuals, teams, and organisations, meaning that the construct was able to be measured at any level of the organisation. This has important implications as collective PE amongst individual practitioners impacts the global sense of PE within the organisation. It is vital, however, not to equate PE with having actual power in an organisation.

Psychological empowerment has been differentiated from structural empowerment, which refers to the actual distribution of power and responsibility within an organisation (Maynard et al., 2012). In contrast, PE is the personal feeling of empowerment a practitioner holds based on their perceptions. The greater the sense of empowerment, the more a practitioner believes they have control over their work, even if that is not objectively true. This makes psychological empowerment fluid and shaped by the work environment and the cognitions of the individual practitioner (Spreitzer, 1995). The same practitioner may feel empowered in one environment, but not in another. As a result, PE is most influenced by the transaction or relationship between the practitioner and their work context (Abel & Hand, 2018). When PE is enhanced by the work environment, there are many positive impacts on practitioners.

Overview of the Literature

PE is a well-researched concept. There were two existing reviews of the literature that summarised several decades of studies. Seibert et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis examining the influence of contextual variables on PE and whether PE as an individual

construct influences PE on the team and organisational level. The authors included 142 articles in the final analysis. They found that the antecedents of PE were high-performance managerial practices, social-political support, leadership, work design, positive self-evaluation, gender, education, job level, tenure, and age. The consequences of PE were job satisfaction, organisational commitment, reduced strain, reduced turnover, improved task performance, improved organisational citizenship behaviour, and innovation at work.   They concluded that PE is connected to a wide range of contextual factors which subsequently influence empowerment at the team and organisational level.

Maynard et al. (2012) built on the meta-analysis of Siebert and colleagues by conducting a multi-level review of PE. The authors stated that any comprehensive review of all studies relevant to PE would be "unwieldy" and instead summarised exemplar studies (p. 1237). The review showed that PE was most often measured at the individual level (n = 29), followed by team levels (n = 16), organisational levels (n = 9), and finally multiple levels (n = 8). The USA was most strongly represented in studies on individual PE (n = 16), with only one study located in Australia. Further, almost all of the studies assessed PE at a single point in time (n = 23).

A search of more recent literature showed that PE is still a widely studied topic. Searches in Scopus, Science Direct, and Web of Science collectively located 1950 studies after duplicates were removed. An analysis in Scopus shows that most of the studies were based in the USA (n = 265) followed by China (n = 177). Additionally, the literature was concentrated in management and business journals. The distribution across subject area is shown in Figure 3. The literature within the social sciences subject area was most relevant for this study.

The social science literature identified that PE was an important concept for both clients and staff. As discussed in Chapter Two, the child protection workforce in Australia is struggling with burnout, high turnover, and stress. The nature of the work often means managing crises, working long hours, and balancing competing priorities. Recent studies have shown that PE is beneficial for staff in social service professions. For example, a study by Pathak and Srivastava (2020) examined the PE of social workers in India. The authors found that PE was important for helping practitioners remain passionate and engaged in their work. They

highlighted that it is critical that the organisation help meet the psychological needs of staff to generate positive work outcomes. This passion also translated into greater work ethic. Islam and Irfan (2022) collected data on nurses in the public and private sector to determine whether they would 'go the extra mile' in their work. The authors found that all sub-dimensions of PE contributed to discretionary work behaviours but in different ways. The sub-dimensions of impact and meaning were the best contributors to discretionary behaviour for the organisation.

Figure 3

Distribution of the PE Literature by Subject Area
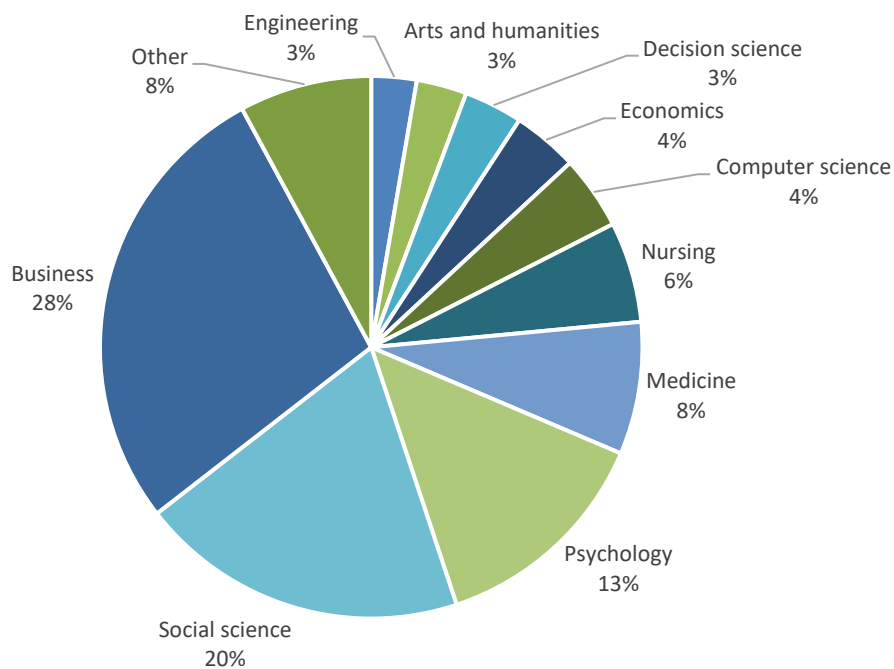
Note: Search conducted June 2022.

Overall, the literature identified two key areas relevant to this study. The first was the impact of PE on job satisfaction. PE improves the perceptions practitioners have of their work and their tolerance of stress. This key area addresses the impact of PE on practitioners. The second key area was change related behaviours. PE frequently acts as a mediator to improve the performance of staff. This key area addresses the impact of PE on the organisation. These two key areas will be discussed in more detail next.

Job Satisfaction and Burnout

Many studies show that PE increases job satisfaction and protects practitioners from burnout (Ahmed Mohammed Sayed, 2017; Carless, 2004; Lee et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Messmann et al., 2017; Nikpour, 2018; O'Brien, 2011; Pelit et al., 2011; Spreitzer et al., 1997). Further, these findings are consistently strong across studies in different sectors, yielding a range of evidence showing positive associations (Luth & May, 2012). In the meta-analysis by Seibert et al. (2011) described in the previous section, analyses demonstrated that PE is strongly correlated to both job satisfaction (r = .64) and commitment to the organisation (r = .63). These effects may be context dependent however. For example, a review of PE in Chinese nurses by Li et al. (2018) found a lower the correlation (r = .35) than the study by Seibert and colleagues. Further, the way the sub-dimensions of PE influenced job satisfaction was also unclear, with conflicting results about which sub-dimensions were most strongly associated with job satisfaction. The authors concluded that different sub-dimensions may reflect cultural or context differences across the studies reviewed. Culture therefore may be a mediating factor. In a similar example, Fock et al. (2011) compared hospitality staff in Canada and China, finding that collectivist oriented cultures elevated the effects of self-determination on job satisfaction. Despite these differences, statistical analyses consistently show that higher PE is correlated with higher job satisfaction regardless of the sub-dimension. These findings have been recently corroborated in a meta-analysis by Mathew and Nair (2021). The authors analysed the relationship between PE and job satisfaction across 50 studies in various cultural and organisational settings. They found that PE explained as much as 32% of the variance of job satisfaction. This finding remained strong across many different sectors.

A similarly large body of literature shows the relationship between PE and burnout. Although structural empowerment may still have the greatest impact on burnout (O'Brien, 2011), it is mitigated by individual belief. When staff perceive they have control over stressors at work, it reduces strain on them even if nothing else in their environment changes (Spreitzer et al., 1997). This perspective helps staff with high PE to remain functioning even when their workloads increase. Further, it allows them to feel moderately less strain (r = -.37) than staff with low PE in the same circumstances (Seibert et al., 2011).

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PE not only influences these perceptions but also the behaviour of staff. High PE has been associated with reduced staff turnover in stressful work environments (Lee et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019) showing a moderate effect size (r = -.36) in meta-analysis (Seibert et al., 2011).

Only one study was found examining the PE of staff within child protection. Lee et al. (2011) examined PE in a statutory child protection system in the USA. The study explored PE as a mediator between the work environment, practitioners' emotional exhaustion, and their intention to leave practice. Emotional exhaustion is a sub-dimension of burnout that relates to the affective experience of staff (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). As staff feel their emotional resources become depleted, they are less able to 'give of themselves' psychologically. The study highlighted the role of PE as the mechanism through which the work environment influenced practitioner attitudes and behaviours. PE buffered against emotional exhaustion and supported practitioners to remain in the organisation.

In contrast with the findings on job satisfaction, there is some agreement about which sub-dimensions are most closely correlated with burnout. Both competence and meaning show the greatest predictive effects (Boudrias et al., 2012; Hochwälder & Brucefors, 2005; Schermuly et al., 2011). Ahmed Mohammed Sayed (2017) further found that the sub-dimension of competence may be especially important in building practitioners' resilience. High perceived competence can turn a stressful task into one that is viewed as an opportunity for growth. This is likely because practitioners with high PE feel safe enough to disclose errors or talk through decisions (Yilmaz & Duygulu, 2021). Practitioners with high PE are also committed to quality outcomes and quickly participate in organisational improvement initiatives (Tsai et al., 2021). Because empowered practitioners feel that they have autonomy and responsibility for outcomes, they address potential risks and seek feedback for their own practice (Tsai et al., 2021). Together these factors create a sense of mutual commitment between practitioners and their organisation.

Readiness and Commitment for Change

PE has been linked to how ready practitioners feel to engage with change. This individual readiness for change is thought to be a key factor in systemic reform (Bouckenooghe et al., 2009; Weiner, 2020). The concept of 'being ready' is an internal attitude based on

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cognitive, emotional, and intentional decision making (Bouckenooghe et al., 2009). PE supports this process as the more empowered practitioners feel, the more likely they are to view change as an enjoyable challenge. This connection has been shown in quantitative studies. In a regression analysis, PE explained up to 32% of the total variance for cognitive readiness for change for teachers in a Turkish school (Çelık & Atık, 2020). This effect may lessen when examining organisational change, however. For example, PE contributed to explaining only 2.7% of the variance in organisational change for hotel staff in Egypt (Nassar, 2018). While small, this statistically significant finding still demonstrated that PE had a direct positive effect on change initiatives. Along with being a direct influence on readiness for change, PE may also act as a mediator.

Choi (2007) studied a Fortune Global 500 company in Korea using longitudinal data on a change initiative. The study showed that PE enhanced change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Here, staff reported increased agreement with items such as "I often change the way I work to improve efficiency" when their PE was high. This longitudinal data shows that PE may have benefits beyond just initial readiness for change. Creon and Schermuly (2022) noted similar findings for German employees in public administration. They focused on training as a component of change initiatives. PE was again found to be a mediator, explaining how transformational trainers supported practitioners to learn. The two most significant sub-dimensions were meaning and competence. Based on these studies, PE prepares practitioners to make changes by contributing to their readiness prior to change. Additional literature also shows that PE sustains change initiatives over time.

Systemic reform can be a gruelling task that takes years to complete. In these contexts, PE may prepare practitioners to cope with the stress of future change initiatives (Boudrias et al., 2012). Cunningham et al. (2002) describes this characteristic as 'hardiness' and locates it as one of the key contributors to organisational change. Through this hardiness, PE helps practitioners 'bring life' to the changes that have been introduced and to remain committed to the organisation and its vision of change. Staff with high PE can better tolerate the discomfort of increased administration common to systemic reform (García-Juan et al., 2018) and show less resistance to change (Goksoy, 2017; Nassar, 2018). For example,

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Rafferty and Griffin (2006) studied a project implementation in a large Australian governmental organisation. The study focused on how change was *perceived* rather than the outcomes. The authors identified that change affected the psychological wellbeing of staff as it created uncertainty in the workplace. This uncertainty was specifically linked to change being perceived as unplanned, having a high impact on work activities, and frequent. The authors also found that higher uncertainty predicted greater turnover amongst staff. These factors may be especially significant for child protection practitioners. While trying to implement new initiatives, practitioners must continue to navigate complex and high-risk situations that might result in a child being harmed or killed. Additional uncertainty in these environments is likely to cause stress. In these settings, leaders are critical in supporting practitioners.

Supportive leaders facilitate PE and generate the motivation for change. Morin et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study with hospital staff in Canada. Their study examined staff beliefs towards change and their level of PE. The findings showed that PE developed from leaders' support for change and seemed to enhance the change capacity of staff. In this way, PE increased the hardiness needed to perform under the strain of a systemic reform. Other studies also show similar findings, indicating that readiness for change is associated with empowering leadership (Muafi et al., 2019). In fact, PE may be an underlying mechanism by which leaders support practitioners to embrace systemic reform (Gentles-Gibbs & Kim, 2019; Muafi et al., 2019; Pradhan et al., 2017; Spreitzer et al., 1999). Ultimately, as the organisation supports staff, the PE of the entire organisation increases, enhancing its capacity to respond to the demands of change initiatives.

Conditions Necessary for Psychological Empowerment to Develop

Because PE exists in the relationship between a practitioner and their work environment, there are some specific factors that have been found to influence PE. Both the length of employment ($r = .11$) and a practitioner's role within the organisation ($r = .19$) were positively correlated with PE, although only with a small effect size (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). As a practitioner stays within an organisation, they become confident in their skills and their ability to impact their organisation. Consequently, their PE increases. The status of a practitioner's role is also important and higher status roles have been

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correlated to greater levels of PE (Maynard et al., 2012). These factors together have been called human capital and refer to the power a practitioner holds because of their gender, education, tenure, or role (Seibert et al., 2011). Greater human capital leads to greater PE because practitioners who are awarded higher status feel they are in a better position to negotiate with their organisation. Leaders are important in this process as they create a bridge between practitioners and the organisation.

Transformational leadership is a style of leadership strongly associated with improving PE (Afsar & Badir, 2016; Fuller et al., 1999; Javed et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Morin et al., 2016; Pradhan et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2000; Sagnak et al., 2015). Transformational leaders motivate practitioners to generate and implement new ideas and encourage them to engage with emerging issues in the work-place (Javed et al., 2019). This clear communication and involvement communicates the rationale for new practices, opens up constructive dialogue to problem solve, and gives feedback on skills (Javed et al., 2019). When practitioners have a transformational leader who creates a sense of psychological empowerment, they feel more supported to face new challenges and demands (Morin et al., 2016). Additionally, they develop a trusting relationship with the leader (Ergeneli et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2012). This trusting relationship helps the practitioner feel valued within their organisation and that management care about their wellbeing (Seibert et al., 2011). Overall, the effects of leadership on PE are notable, with a meta-analysis revealing a large effect size ($r = .53$) (Seibert et al., 2011). It is important that these effects extend past individual leaders, however.

PE is moderately correlated with management practices across the organisation ($r = .48$) (Seibert et al., 2011). When the organisation has clear communication, extensive training, decentralised power structures, and participative decision-making processes, PE has been shown to improve (Seibert et al., 2011). These practices affect the sub-dimensions of PE simultaneously rather than just enhancing one aspect (Spreitzer, 1995). Overall, the organisation needs to provide certain opportunities to practitioners, such as training, while also seeking feedback and thus improving practitioners' sense of impact. This reciprocal relationship woven throughout management practices is what leads to enhanced PE.

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A final important factor influencing PE is the nature of work performed. In fact, the nature or design of a practitioner's work had the largest impact on PE (r = .58) out of any other factors (Seibert et al., 2011). Practitioners who feel challenged, but not overwhelmed, gain satisfaction from their work which improves their perceived competence and meaning (Luth, 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). This notion of 'fit' between the work role and the individual sustains a sense of PE (Laschinger et al., 2006). Overall, while individual characteristics showed some influence on PE, the contextual factors of the organisation were much more influential.

Relationship to Systemic Reform

The preceding sections show that PE is related to many factors that on face-value appear beneficial for systemic reform. A summary of these factors is shown in Table 3. While some direct effects were identified, PE more often acted as a mediating or moderating variable, influencing multiple levels of an organisation. The literature demonstrates that PE is not a 'thing you do to' people but rather an approach that permeates a system. This approach influences the people within systems, shifting their attitudes and behaviour. Herold et al. (2007) identify that this empowerment approach is needed to avoid change resistant responses such as "cynicism, burnout, change du jour, and flavour of the month" (p. 942). These resistant responses are common to systems undergoing change and not inherently negative (Del Val & Fuentes, 2003). When practitioners are psychologically empowered, they are better able to engage with change and have the psychological resources needed to adjust their practice. This commitment is critical for change in child protection systems.

As identified in Chapter Two, the Australian child protection system is struggling to retain a resilient workforce. When considering the benefits of PE for burnout and turnover, it is easy to see why it is a useful concept for child protection practitioners. Many work-related factors within the child protection system are difficult to influence, such as high caseloads. Yet PE shows a buffering effect even in organisations with high levels of stress, ongoing change, and large workloads (Bhatnagar, 2012; Carless, 2004; Liu et al., 2019; Scales & Brown, 2020; Shier et al., 2012). Further, as job satisfaction increases, child protection practitioners feel more ready to respond to change (Claiborne et al., 2013).

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Table 3

Antecedents and Consequences of PE with Statistical Effect Sizes

Factor	Statistical association	Effect size	Influence	Author (year)
Readiness to change	$R^2 = .32$	Large	Practitioners with high PE are more open to change and committed throughout the change process	Çelık and Atık (2020)
Commitment to change	$R^2 = .34$			
Job satisfaction	$r = .64$	Large	PE leaves practitioners more invested in their work and their organization	Seibert et al. (2011)
Organisational commitment	$r = .63$			
Nature of the work	$r = .58$	Large	Work that is challenging but not overwhelming enhances PE	
Leadership	$r = .53$	Large	Transformational leadership characterized by trust enhances PE	
Managerial practices	$r = .48$	Moderate	Transparent, decentralized, training oriented, and participatory styles of management enhance PE	
Strain	$r = -.37$	Moderate	Practitioners with high PE are less likely to feel strain and leave the organization.	
Turnover	$r = -.36$			
Performance	$r = .36$	Moderate	PE increases task performance and capability	
Innovative practice	$r = .33$	Moderate	PE increases innovative and creative practice	
Work role	$r = .17$	Small	Employees in higher status positions and who have been in the organization longer have higher PE	
Length of employment	$r = .10$			

In summary, this section shows that PE is woven throughout the literature alongside systemic reform. However, no studies were identified that addressed the relationship between PE and systemic reform in child protection. In the next section, I examine the literature on systemic reform in child protection, highlighting the need for an empowerment approach.

Literature Examining Systemic Reform in Child Protection

Systemic reform is difficult to achieve because of the nature of systems. Rather than examining a single factor, systems change requires the study of the interactions between multiple factors. In this section I review systems-oriented theories and examine their application to studies in child protection systems. Further, the voices of influential authors in the field of child protection are included. These authors have shaped child protection practice in Australia and are therefore relevant for understanding the contemporary themes being addressed by systemic reform. I conclude with the work of Margaret Archer and its application to child protection. Although less influential in child protection than the other authors, Archer's Morphogenetic theory of systemic change underpins this study. I therefore offer a comparison with other theories and demonstrate the need for a sociological approach.

Systems-Oriented Theories Applied in Child Protection

Systems approaches have long been used in the social sciences. In 1928, Von Bertalanffy wrote about the nature of biological organisms, noting that they had a "coordination of processes and parts" (Von Bertalanffy, 1972, p. 64). He later developed General Systems Theory which attempted to define principles of systems across multiple disciplines (Von Bertalanffy, 1973). Some of these key principles were: the parts of a system cannot be considered in isolation; systems exist in an environment; systems have feedback loops that convey information; the system produces outputs from inputs; and systems attempt to maintain equilibrium. Many of these principles continue to influence systems approaches.

Building on the foundation of General Systems Theory, other approaches emerged. Chaos theory evolved through the parallel work of several scholars across different disciplines. Hudson (2000) traced the history of chaos theory identifying links across astrophysics,

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biology, and mathematics. Experimental researchers, such as Gleick (1988) studied system's 'chaos' and found recognizable patterns in the data. Eventually, the term 'chaos' became popularised by mathematician Robert May (2004) who described seemingly chaotic systems using simple mathematics to show the underlying patterns and relationships. As technology improved, the study of chaos and complexity increased even further.

Computer simulations can now extrapolate how systems evolve to adapt to their circumstances. This has led to the recognition that some systems are complex and adaptive (Holland, 1992). Dooley (1996) created a definition of a complex adaptive system stating that it is made up of agents who evolve over time using mental templates, called schema, that interpret reality. Agents adapt either their observations of the system or their schema to create a better fit between the two. Agents then interact with each other in non-linear ways, using their schema. Alternatively, Siegel (2012) offers a shorter and more practicable definition stating that complex adaptive systems are those which are influenced by factors outside of themselves, have nonlinear relationships between their entities, and can enter chaotic states. The theoretical explanation for how these systems function is referred to as Complexity Theory (Byrne, 1998). Where these complex systems differ from typical systems, is that they are unpredictable and not prone to equilibrium. Together, systems, chaos, and complexity theories represent 'systems thinking' which, as defined by Richmond (1993), is a paradigm for interpreting behaviour by understanding underlying structures.

Surprisingly, the academic literature applying a systems approach to child protection is limited. Devaney et al. (2021) note that only a few studies have used systems-oriented theories and that most of the available data is in grey literature. Cullin (2022) recently advocated for a systems approach to be more thoroughly applied to child protection reform. Cullin notes that although the words 'systemic' frequently accompany child protection inquiries or program evaluations, there is rarely the application of theory to the topic discussed. These same challenges were found when reviewing the literature for this study.

First, it was difficult to locate literature that focused on systemic reform. Rather, studies that used systems theory analysed the complex problems experienced by children and

families. Theory was applied, but not to child protection systems or practitioners. Second, even when studies on child protection reform were located, they did not typically apply any theory. The authors used terms such as 'systems thinking' or its alternatives, but only in a descriptive way. In these studies, systems thinking largely referred to the recognition of child protection practice occurring in broader systems. Despite this trend, there were some clear examples of systems thinking applied to child protection reform.

A number of non-empirical papers were located which addressed child protection issues using systems thinking. These papers theoretically redescribed child protection phenomena using systems language and called for greater use of systems thinking. As early as 1989, Vosler highlighted the value of systems thinking for child protection practice. However, the first major shift towards systems thinking occurred in 2010 when UNICEF conducted a review of global academic and practice literature. In defining the purpose of the review, Wulczyn et al. (2010) stated, "A systems approach in child protection is new and unfamiliar to many policy-makers and practitioners. Such systems have traditionally been neither the particular focus of child protection discourse nor that of child protection 'practice' or action" (preface). In attempting to resolve the lack of systems thinking, the review identified nine key concepts for child protection that cut across the reviewed literature:

- Systems involve a collection of parts that work together to achieve a purpose.
- All systems are nested within other systems and are affected by them. Children exist in families, embedded in communities, embedded in society.
- The components of systems interact with each other and reverberate throughout the whole system.
- Systems have a function that they work to achieve, a structure that organises how the components are connected, and capacity which is dependent on the available resources.
- Systems are embedded in certain contexts and adapt in ways that promote their success.
- Successful systems require collaboration between the components. The people in the system are termed 'actors' and work together to achieve the system's function.

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- Child protection systems require a clear process of care that upholds children's rights.
- Systems need to be accountable to their outcomes, both in material resources and in a moral capacity that enhances public trust.
- Systems need effective governance to remain flexible and functional during times of uncertainty and change.

While the review provided a shared language and knowledge for the field of child protection, few practical ideas were offered. The identified goal was simply to "encourage a robust and transparent conversation" about how systems thinking could influence child protection (p. 2). Just one year later, World Vision released a discussion paper advocating for a systems approach in child protection (Forbes et al., 2011). The focus of the paper was similar to that of UNICEF where it defined elements of systems thinking in child protection. Where it differed, was in the call for systems thinking to be applied in practice and not just discussion. For example, the paper concluded with guidance on how to adopt systems thinking in programmatic planning.

More recently, Hengelbrok et al. (2019) applied a systems approach to conducting child death reviews in the USA. The authors described the process of child death reviews in Los Angeles and offered comments on how a systems approach could be applied to improve them. In Australia, Cullin (2022) reviewed the redundancy of reform efforts and argued for cybernetic theories and models to be used in future research. Cybernetics deals with the way systems are structured and either change or remain stable (Wiener, 1954). Cullin emphasised that child protection systems are 'ultra-complex' because of the intergenerational nature of child maltreatment and how easily maltreatment is influenced by social factors. The paper concluded by highlighting that, from a cybernetics perspective, any systemic reform must have a clear purpose, start with frontline practice, and focus on increasing requisite variety to meet the complex needs of children and families (p. 90). Together these papers show that systems thinking has high relevance for systemic reform but is not yet a commonly used approach in practice.

In addition to these non-empirical papers, several studies were found that applied systems thinking in research. Two studies in the USA used systems thinking analysis to examine how research evidence was used by policy makers (Mackie et al., 2015) and practitioners (Metz & Bartley, 2015). These studies did not focus on systemic reform, but did highlight the importance of interactions between people in the system for diffusing knowledge. The authors demonstrated that relationships between people aid the flow of information. A similar approach was used by Staggs et al. (2007) who aimed to improve knowledge of child exposure to violence. To achieve this, they targeted multiple systems (such as juvenile justice and child protection) in a single city in the USA. The study drew on organisational change theory by Dunphy (1996) which encourages contingent change instead of 'one size fits all'. Rather than focusing on sweeping reform efforts, the study embedded change agents as 'incubators' to slowly change practitioners' perspectives about child exposure to violence. The findings of the study supported the need to focus on people, as both the greatest successes and challenges occurred when people acted as gatekeepers in the system. The authors also noted that systems with high-turnover may not be well suited to the 'incubator' approach as there is not time for relationships to develop. And without relationships, there is no opportunity for influence and change. Consequently, the authors defined their approach as 'evolutionary' rather than 'revolutionary', arguing that slow continuous change is more likely to be sustained.

In contrast with evolutionary approach, Canavan, Devaney, et al. (2021) conducted a rapid four year implementation project in statutory child protection. Based in Tulsa, Ireland, the authors implemented and evaluated the Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support programme. The goal was to create an ideological and cultural shift in practice by strengthening the system's focus on prevention and support. The well-funded project established a partnership between the Health Services Executive which delivered child protection services and the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. The study began with a literature review to establish a conceptual and methodological framework. The team drew on systems thinking literature, studies on organisational culture and climate, and implementation science. The final framework used the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainability (EPIS) framework (Aarons et al., 2011), the Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC) model of organisational leadership (Glisson &

Schoenwald, 2005), and highlighted key factors related to systems change, such as integration across the system. The study used mixed-methods conducting 629 interviews with practitioners, families, and children; 30 focus groups; 3,430 completed questionnaires from programme stakeholders; 2,000 completed questionnaires from the population; and 437 questionnaires completed on funded services. From this extensive data, the authors identified some lessons learned. First, they highlighted the need to have focused on the system level earlier rather than individual components. Their narrow focus undermined wider systems change. Another limitation was the overreliance on psychological and individual theories of leadership rather than broader sociological theories. The authors considered drawing on theories that identified power and resistance in future implementation efforts. These theories could have helped recognize aspects of implementation that may have been threatening to staff. Despite these limitations, the implementation was largely successful. The study identified the factors that facilitated systemic reform, listing funding, strong governance, a dedicated implementation team, the creation of new structures and roles within the system, and most importantly supportive leadership.

Finally, one study was found that was located in Australia. Wise (2021) examined child protection recurrence in the Australian states of Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales. Wise used several theories and frameworks from a literature review to classify potential factors related to recurrence, and specifically mothers who had multiple children removed. Next, Wise searched for causal factors based on a systems thinking approach by Monat and Gannon (2015). Two workshops with stakeholders guided the construction of a causal loop diagram. Ultimately, the diagram identified both concrete factors, such as high frequency births, and implicit factors, such as grief and loss, driving the problem of recurrence. Based on the framework by Kania et al. (2018), Wise focused on the factors that would offer the greatest leverage for systemic reform. The model was then used to generate new strategies for reducing recurrence, for example increasing advocacy and support for mothers after their child has been removed. While the study did not use systems thinking to study the reform process, it demonstrated using systems thinking to strategically prepare for reform. Without properly understanding the current system, and factors that contribute to recurrence, any change efforts may be unsuccessful.

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Overall, the literature on systems thinking in child protection shows that while commonly discussed, systems thinking is rarely applied. There is a broad recognition that child protection is a complex system embedded in other systems, but little theoretical analysis of the challenges. The studies that have embraced systems thinking show that there are complex interactions amongst components of the child protection system and broader social factors. Additionally, not all factors are concrete, and the ideology and mental models driving the system are significant for influencing outcomes.

Munro's Review of England's Child Protection System

Eileen Munro's review of England's child protection system (2011) is one of the clearest examples of applying systems thinking. What makes Munro's review significant enough to warrant a separate discussion is its influence on the child protection sector. The final report has over 2,000 citations (as measured by Google Scholar) and offered the first large-scale evidence of the effects of managerialism on practice. Munro's review has also significantly influenced child protection practice in Australia. The challenges of Australian child protection practice have been likened to those found by Munro (Lonne et al., 2013). Furthermore, Munro and Australian child protection practitioner Andrew Turnell joined with Terry Murphy to form Munro, Turnell, and Murphy Child Protection Consulting. The consulting group now work to disseminate the Australian Signs of Safety Framework globally. Versions of this framework are now found in most Australian child protection jurisdictions.

In the English review, Munro adopted a blended systems approach. The approach is described in Lane et al. (2016) and includes a range of theories already discussed in the previous section. The blended theories were then used to analyse a broad range of factors in the English child protection system and explore how they interacted. The aim was to explain what had happened in the English child protection system since prior reforms. Although the review offered many important insights, one of the main conclusions was the effects of compliance culture on the workforce. Compliance culture develops from managerialism ideology, seeking to reduce anxiety stemming from the complex nature of child protection work (Lees et al., 2013). Munro (2011) concluded that managerialism practices "have come together to create a defensive system that puts so much emphasis on

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procedures and recording that insufficient attention is given to developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families" (p. 6). Based on this conclusion, the next steps were identified for reform.

The review provided fifteen recommendations, grouped across five main categories: valuing professional expertise; clarifying accountability and improving learning; sharing responsibility for early intervention and prevention; developing social worker expertise; and supporting effective social work practice (p. 10-13). An examination of these recommendations shows that supporting frontline practitioners is a central goal. The recommendations ranged from advocating for practitioner discretion (valuing professional expertise) through to creating an organisational context that supports practitioners (supporting effective practice). The recommendations also highlighted the importance of recognizing that child protection work is essentially a human process, and that bureaucracy should support not diminish relationships. This orientation resonated with practitioners. As a practicing child protection practitioner during the release of the final report, I can still recall the overwhelmingly positive response from Australian practitioners and international colleagues.

Although Munro's review was galvanising, the English child protection system continues to struggle. Soon after the final report, Parton (2012) expressed concerns about the challenges which would face implementing any of the report's recommendations. He argued that the political environment surrounding managerialism spanned three decades and could not easily be solved. These challenges have been seen in Munro's recent work, where she has partnered with Edward Turnell and Terry Murphy. The team have worked to implement the Signs of Safety (SofS) framework in ten county level child protection systems in England (Munro et al., 2020). Each local jurisdiction was evaluated according to the Ofsted rating, which involves a non-ministerial department regularly inspecting a range of institutions to assess their adequacy in service delivery. Ratings are ranked as inadequate, requires improvement, good, or outstanding. The final report of the SofS implementation showed varied responses from the ten different jurisdictions (Munro et al., 2020). Five showed an overall improvement by at least one rank on the Ofsted scale. Three remained at 'requires improvement', and two decreased from 'requires improvement' to 'inadequate'. The

authors acknowledged the variation stating, "Making a major change in a system leads to numerous interactions with other parts of the system so there is no standard way that systems will respond to an equivalent input" (p. 91). When evaluating the specific reasons that so much variation occurred, the authors identified that the "comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the implementation" made a difference to outcomes (p. 82). Implementation was facilitated when leaders were committed and visible to all staff and actively worked against change fatigue. In contrast, implementation was hindered by the high turnover of leaders, who provided no sustainability for change efforts. For example, one of the jurisdictions had five different directors of children's services and three different assistant directors during the implementation (Baginsky et al., 2020, p. 29). Another barrier was when SofS did not align with other policies, processes, or procedures already within the system. The high levels of bureaucratisation forced practitioners to duplicate many aspects of their work, making them to choose between implementing SofS or other completing administrative tasks (Munro et al., 2020, p. 26).

An independent evaluation was also performed by Baginsky et al. (2020) to determine if SofS had an impact on children's outcomes. The overall finding was that children's wellbeing had not improved on any of the measured outcomes and, in fact, children were less likely to be placed with kin. When examining the implementation of SofS, there were many indications of resistance from the jurisdictions. For example, most jurisdictions did not want to change their data management systems to align with SofS, arguing that their current systems were adequate (p. 26). The evaluators also noted that jurisdictions did not seem committed to changing their systems. For example, when asked for implementation plans and progress, only three of the nine jurisdictions evaluated could provide up-to-date plans. There was also considerable variability in the extent that SofS methods were used in daily practice. In some jurisdictions, primary tools, such as appreciative inquiry, were only used in 53% of cases (p. 27). Observational data showed further evidence of poor implementation. Evaluators observed a discrepancy between what practitioners did in their home visits and what they recorded. As stated in the evaluation, "There were many visits when not a single identified element of SofS was used in their interaction with families, yet social workers still recorded under SofS headings, however minimally, because the system led them to do so" (p. 28). Finally, many jurisdictions complained about SofS being 'too

prescriptive' leading them to adopt other forms of supervision, tools, and forms of record keeping which fit better with their local culture. Ultimately, the evaluation found that in the jurisdictions 'culture trumped strategy' and traditional ways of practicing remained strong (p. 64).

The review of England's child protection system and subsequent reform efforts offer valuable data. Again, the importance of people is highlighted, with their perceptions and decisions radically influencing implementation and outcomes. The lessons learnt show that cultural change is a vital component of reform and cannot be achieved by only changing work tasks.

Trauma and Human-Service Systems

The literature on PE showed that the nature of the work performed affected practitioners' sense of empowerment. The same is true of systemic reform. Child protection practitioners are faced daily with experiences of abuse and neglect, impacting their own emotional wellbeing. American psychiatrist, Sandra Bloom, has written extensively about the influence of trauma on human service systems. Based on clinical experience in hospitals, Bloom, with colleagues Foderaro and Ryan, began developing the Sanctuary Model in the 1980's. The full theoretical framework was refined and later published by Esaki et al. (2013). The goal of this framework was to change organisational culture to encourage trauma-informed practice. When successful, the model lists a range of outcomes for staff. The changed organisational culture encourages improved self-reflection by practitioners, collaborative decision-making, and decreased rates of staff turnover. To achieve these outcomes, the Sanctuary Model draws on a range of theories to generate change: constructivist self-development theory, systems theory, burnout theory, and valuation theory of organisational change (Esaki et al., 2013).

Despite a strong theoretical framework, there is little academic evidence supporting the implementation of the model. For example, Bailey et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review on three OoHC models (including the Sanctuary Model). They found only weak evidence of change with a high risk of bias in the three included studies examining the Sanctuary Model (Bloom et al., 2003; Kramer, 2016; Rivard et al., 2004). Further, all studies

were qualitative, often interviewing participants in many different roles in organisations. This made it difficult to analyse the data as there was no coherency in data collection. For example, Bloom et al. (2003) provided the personal accounts of five change agents in different organisations. This study provided only brief descriptions of sample and research methodology, reading more as a personal narrative. Rivard et al. (2004) also conducted interviews, finding that multiple factors that affected implementation. The study listed fifteen facilitators and four barriers. Some of the facilitators were creating structured time to discuss implementation, keeping staff motivated, and training. The barriers were insufficient time, lack of resources, constraints imposed by the pilot project, and not all staff receiving the training. Unfortunately, the study did not clearly outline the impact of the factors, and only listed them. The final study by Kramer (2016) provided more specific data. The study used focus groups, document analysis, interviews, and group observations, linking change factors to evidence. Kramer found that practitioners' commitment to change, particularly cultural change, was most important in reforming the system.

Two additional studies were located in child protection settings. One in the USA (Esaki et al., 2014) and one in Australia (Galvin et al., 2021). In the USA study, the responses of practitioners to the model were tested using the Organizational Change Recipients' Belief Scale created by Armenakis et al. (2007). This tool measured the practitioners' receptiveness to change, finding that relationships within the organisation were critical. The higher perceived support from colleagues, the more commitment practitioners showed for the new model. The Australian implementation study conducted nine semi-structured interviews. The participants were the Chief Executive Officer, the Human Resources Manager, and seven directors. The results were categorised into facilitators, barriers, successes, and challenges to implementing the Sanctuary Model. The facilitators were listed as shared knowledge and understanding, strong leaders, implementation structures, and the flexibility of the model. Barriers were maintaining fidelity, highly theoretical training, and few resources. Some of the successes noted by participants were the use of self-reflection, principled nature of the Sanctuary Model aligning with staff, and the use of the framework to start challenging conversations. The main challenge was 'cynical staff' who did not see the change as immediately relevant to their work. Both studies show that the

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organisation culture, particularly cynicism, were important for change. Bloom addresses these typically resistant responses in her later work, linking them to trauma.

The Sanctuary model states that trauma not only affects clients but also practitioners. Although there has been little academic research on the topic, Bloom has written extensively on how trauma influences systems. Her first book, Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies (Bloom, 1997), presented her trauma informed model focusing on client outcomes. Subsequent books (Bloom & Farragher, 2010; Bloom & Farragher, 2013) turned to the systems and experiences of practitioners. In these books, Bloom and Farragher draw on a collection of research, theory and clinical practice to describe 'trauma-organised systems'. The term was originally coined by Bentovim (1995) who described how a trauma experience can cause systems to organise around the experience. The key element in these systems is the parallel process, where the fear and helplessness of clients is also experienced by practitioners. Consequently, the system responds, guided by this implicit feeling of threat. The ongoing threat then creates toxic stress, where practitioners work in under-resourced organisations while being consistently exposed to trauma. To provide further evidence, Bloom also highlights the biology of how people respond to stress and fear, linking this to the responses of practitioners in human service organisations. Unless addressed, the result is burnout, especially in the absence of organisational support (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015). To counteract these negative effects, systems need to become trauma informed.

Many systems have attempted to introduce models of trauma-informed care (TIC). As a result of the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (Felitti et al., 1998), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (https://www.nctsn.org/) was established in the USA. The network's goal is implementing TIC in child protection systems. Bunting et al. (2019) conducted a rapid review of TIC interventions, identifying multiple initiatives across the USA. While these initiatives are showing progress, there are considerable gaps. Bunting noted that although care for practitioner wellbeing was a common feature of TIC, this was often the lowest rated or unevaluated category of implementation. Furthermore, the implementation strategies most used were 'top down', essentially going against the

collaborative principles of TIC. Overall, child protection systems typically remain trauma organised rather than trauma informed.

Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy

Michael Lipsky developed his theory of street-level bureaucracy in the 1970s. His work focused on frontline practitioners in the human services, and covered roles such as social workers, teachers, and police (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). Lipsky argued that effectively public policy does not exist until it is enacted by public servants. This places frontline practitioners in a role of authority and power. They have high levels of discretion about *how* they implement policy, which can significantly alter the outcomes. Further, this discretion is necessary to the work of frontline practitioners. Evans and Harris (2004) state that social workers face situations that are "too complex to reduce to prescribed responses" (p. 878). To cope with the complexity and diversity of their work, practitioners must use their discretion. Given the emphasis on complexity and practitioner discretion, street-level bureaucracy has been readily applied to studies in child protection.

Discretion is easily influenced by outside factors. Yelderman et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of children entering and exiting foster care in the USA. They analysed the entry and exit numbers alongside media reports related to child deaths and child protection involvement. The authors found a positive relationship between entry into foster care and the quantity of media about child deaths. They theorised that practitioners were emotionally influenced by the stories which altered their discretion when assessing the safety of children. Although the same tools were used for risk assessment, practitioners were hesitant to leave children in an environment that could be perceived as high risk after a child death.

The use of discretion has also been recognised as having positive attributes. Rather than practitioners flaunting the rules, their discretionary power is used in pro-social ways. Morrison (2006) identifies that pro-social rule breaking is when practitioners "do what he or she believes is needed to perform the job in an effective, responsible, and responsive manner" (p. 8). Fleming (2020) examined this type of pro-social rule breaking amongst child welfare workers in the USA. Fleming found that practitioners were most likely to violate

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policy when they were trying to improve the quality of service to clients or increase their own efficiency. Additionally, the most common way in which practitioners violated policy was by not adhering to requirements for administrative documentation. This covered aspects such as maintaining records, deadlines and formats for documents, and the process of disclosing information to other stakeholders. A study by Shdaimah and McGarry (2018) also viewed frontline discretion positively. The authors conducted a case study of a child protection practitioner in the USA. The practitioner advocated for housing for a client experiencing domestic and family violence. Without appropriate housing, her children would have been removed, yet the system did not find the client eligible for any of the priority houses available. The practitioner was "morally outraged" that a family would be penalised for poverty and so argued her way around "agency mandates and resource limitations" to find the client a house (p. 27). Here, the practitioner's use of street-level bureaucracy enhanced outcomes for her client. Although these presented studies show clear applicability to systemic reform, there were few studies located that addressed reform directly.

One study, set in Belgium, examined how practitioners used a newly implemented information communication system, named Charlotte. De Witte et al. (2016) interviewed practitioners about their use of Charlotte. They noticed wide variability in practice, however, all practitioners identified prioritising the clients' interests over administrative work. Rather than using the system to structure their interviews, practitioners worked narratively and 'fit' the information into Charlotte as needed. Charlotte also did not fit with many practitioner tasks, for example, requiring internet access which was not available during home visits. Ultimately, most practitioners used their paper files as a primary record and the implementation of Charlotte was a secondary source of information. This not only reduced the effectiveness of the reform but also increased the workload for practitioners. The theoretical design of Charlotte did not meet the needs of practitioners, resulting in high levels of discretion. The authors concluded that the use of street-level discretionary strategies by practitioners also reduced the quality of information gathered.

A second study located was by Wastell et al. (2010). Set in the UK, the authors reported on an ethnographic study of child protection practitioners' use of discretion and resistance.

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They documented many forms of resistance, such as 'taming technology'. In this form of resistance, practitioners adjusted dates, invented new categories of assessments, and found workarounds to the rigid key performance indicators of the system. The practitioners who were interviewed thought that their actions supported best practice in the face of absurd restrictions. As a result, however, the data recorded was inaccurate. For example, practitioners recorded an assessment as complete on the day they first saw a child rather than when they submitted their assessment. This ensured they were always within the seven-day deadline required by policy. Ultimately, the authors concluded that top-down and compliance driven reforms were ineffective. No amount of compliance controlled practice and rather just encouraged more creative ways that practitioners could use their discretion.

In summary, street-level bureaucracy is an approach that is highly relevant for systemic reform in child protection. Street-level bureaucracy views the practitioner as the bridge between the reform and the client, examining how they use discretion. This behaviour is based on the individual practitioner, but also the characteristics of the system, as any measurement of systemic reform is conveying implicit messages about practice. As described by Lipsky (1980), "In turn, the behaviour of workers comes to reflect the incentives and sanctions implicit in those measurements" (p. 48–51). The more reform is controlled through top-down processes, the more discretion may be implemented and significantly alter the outcomes.

Archer's Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach

Margaret Archer has published extensively on society and how people move through social systems. As a sociologist, Archer explores social systems and their evolution over time. She approaches her study of society from a critical realist perspective, arguing that many social theories suffered from central conflation between parts. Building on the work of Lockwood (1964), Archer (1988) reasoned that culture, structure, and human agency can be analytically separated to study change. This analytical dualism allows for the interplay between structure, culture, and agency to be examined. Within this interplay, Archer has been primarily concerned with *how* structure and culture influence and shape human agency. Using this approach, Archer addresses how large systems change over time.

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Archer's early work focused on a comparison of the French and English educational systems (Archer, 1970). She became interested in the ontological debates addressing modern social theories and began writing about culture and agency (Archer, 1988). Later, she formed her Realist Social Theory of systems change, termed the Morphogenetic Approach (Archer, 1995). As her work evolved, Archer began to focus intently on people and their role in social change. She published widely on human agency and the concept of human reflexivity (Archer, 2000, 2007, 2010a, 2010c, 2013). Archer's latest work examines the development of the educational system in Norway, exploring structure, culture, agency, and the ways students and staff used reflexivity (Archer et al., 2022). While her work on education systems is extensive, it has been rarely applied to child protection systems. Only four child protection studies were located that used Archer's theories. Typically, these studies either focused on Archer's use of reflexivity (Cavener, 2017; Hung & Appleton, 2015) or the morphogenetic approach (Kessler et al., 2006), although one study examined both (Duncan, 2018). Additionally, only the study by Kessler et al. (2006) examined change within a system, despite systemic reform being the focus of Archer's Morphogenetic Approach.

Archer's concept of reflexivity was most frequently used across the located studies. Archer (2003) theorised that people use 'internal conversations' to navigate their social context. She classified the characteristics of these internal conversations by identifying four categories of reflexivity. The different categories had implications for the behaviour of people in systems. For example, Cavener (2017) used Archer's ideas of reflexivity to examine how child protection practitioners make sense of their work. Cavener studied fifteen practitioners in a child protection organisation in England using both interviews and observations. Cavener identified that practitioners draw meaning out of their every-day experiences using their personal biographies, knowledge, experiences, values, beliefs, concerns and their professional practice contexts, approaches and relationships (p. 284). The study noted that practitioners face considerable fear and anxiety in their work, which at times can impact their ability to be reflexive. As a result, Cavener's work advocated for supervision that accounts for different types of reflexivity used by practitioners and recognises how they manage the complexity of child protection contexts.

Hung and Appleton (2015) also drew on Archer's work on reflexivity. Rather than focusing on practitioners, however, the authors interviewed nine young people in London who received services after leaving care. Using Archer's interview guide on social mobility (Archer, 2007) the authors examined how care-leavers planned for the future. They found that many young people showed fractured reflexivity, one of Archer's reflexivity categories associated with trauma and internal distress. Additionally, the participants rarely planned for the future and were sceptical about their success.

Taking a broader perspective, Duncan (2018) examined children's participation in child protection processes in England. Duncan conducted three in-depth interviews with children and analysed the typology of their participation by examining their agency, culture, and structure. Throughout the interviews, Duncan demonstrated that children actively use their reflexivity and agency to navigate the child protection system. She concluded, however, that due to the limited resources that children can access, their agency does not result in any structural change. Duncan also explored the cultural and ideological experiences of child protection practitioners. She argued that traditional welfare-based paternalism sits in opposition to the ideals of individualism, creating conflict for child protection practitioners. As a result, in practice there is a denial of children's participation. While Duncan's study did not examine change in child protection, she did analyse the interplay of structure, culture, and agency. This analysis offered a better interpretation of why children still had limited participation in child protection practice despite recent reform efforts.

The only study that deliberately focused on systemic reform was by Kessler et al. (2006). Also based in England, the study also focused on child protection practitioners in three local counties, examining the development of the Social Work Assistant role. The authors studied how structure and agency interacted to create the new role. Importantly, their findings showed how although the same role was created in all three counties, each used a 'grow your own' strategy that created variation. The authors concluded that discretion remained strongly evident in how roles were filled and used to meet the local context.

When assessing the body of literature, the few identified studies show similarities. First, all of the studies were located in England, likely reflecting familiarity with Archer's work which

is less well-known outside of Europe. Second, the studies mainly focused on understanding a point-in-time rather than systemic reform. Only one study (Duncan, 2018) used the full range of Archer's theories rather than just a single aspect. While the studies using Archer's approach are limited, they offer insight into both the breadth and depth of change in systems. The Morphogenetic approach is valuable in that it recognises people nested within systems, nested within other systems. Further, Archer's Morphogenetic approach has been applied to other systems, such as education (Archer et al., 2022) to study how they change over time.

Implementation Science Literature Used in Child Protection Studies

In this section I will present a summary of the dominant theories, frameworks, and models relevant to implementation science. It would not be possible to review all theories within the scope of this study. Birken et al. (2017) identified over 100 different theories, with little consensus amongst researchers on which were most important. Additionally, the authors noted that theories were selected in a haphazard way with no conceptual underpinning. Consequently, implementation science literature lacks coherency.

To present the most relevant literature, I first summarise the full body of literature from a bibliometric perspective. This demonstrates how the field of implementation science has evolved over time. This evolution highlights the critical areas for future study, drawing attention to the relevance of this study. Next, I review the classic and implementation theories underpinning systemic reform as well as the implementation frameworks and models relevant for child protection research. In each of these sections, I focus on the theory, model, or frameworks most relevant to this study, describing the reasons for their relevance. To offer an analysis, I compare the concepts and relationships amongst the theories and frameworks as used in the child protection literature, concluding with a critique on their contribution to studying systemic reform.

Bibliometric Overview of the Body of Literature

Implementation science became a discrete field of study because scientists wanted to find better ways of integrating evidence-based interventions in health services (Hanson et al., 2016). Classical studies, such as those by Balas and Boren (2000) and Green et al. (2009)

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found that it could take up to two decades for research to be applied in practice. Consequently, researchers recognised that the study of *how* evidence was implemented mattered just as much as *what* evidence showed the best outcomes.

Although the term 'implementation science' represents the most recent labelling of the field of study, there are many alternatives. Estabrooks et al. (2006) identified knowledge translation, evidence-based decision making, research utilization, innovation diffusion, knowledge transfer, research dissemination, research implementation, and research uptake as all representing similar concepts within the implementation continuum. This made it challenging to locate studies to review.

Another challenge when reviewing the literature was the misuse of terminology. For example, in Bauer and Kirchner (2020), 'Diffusion of Innovation' was identified as a keyword, yet the theory was not applied in the study. This trend was seen with other theories, especially when translated into frameworks. An illustration is the use of the Implementation Climate Theory. Although Implementation Climate theory is an explanatory approach, the term 'implementation climate' has become a common factor listed in studies. This makes it challenging to search for the theory rather than studies that simply mention implementation climate as a factor. Together, these barriers made the search and retrieval of appropriate literature difficult.

To address these challenges, I conducted multiple searches in the databases recommended by Bramer et al. (2017), Goossen et al. (2020), and Gargon et al. (2015). This resulted in using Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, PubMed, and a confirmatory search using Google Scholar. Rather than limiting my search to "implementation science", I used the term "implementation" with combinations of "child", "protection", "welfare", "protective", and "services" based on the search strategy of Landsverk et al. (2011). All searches were limited to the abstract of the article to increase precision.

The broader trends in implementation science literature can be best shown in the Web of Science results. For example, when searching for "implementation science" on Web of Science, almost all 7,867 articles retrieved were from a health field, shown in Figure 4.

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Figure 4

The Dominance of Health Care Sciences in Implementation Science Literature

Legend:
- Health care sciences
- Health policy
- Public and occupational health
- General and internal medicine
- Infectious diseases
- Psychiatry
- Nursing
- Clinical psychology
- Oncology
- Immunology
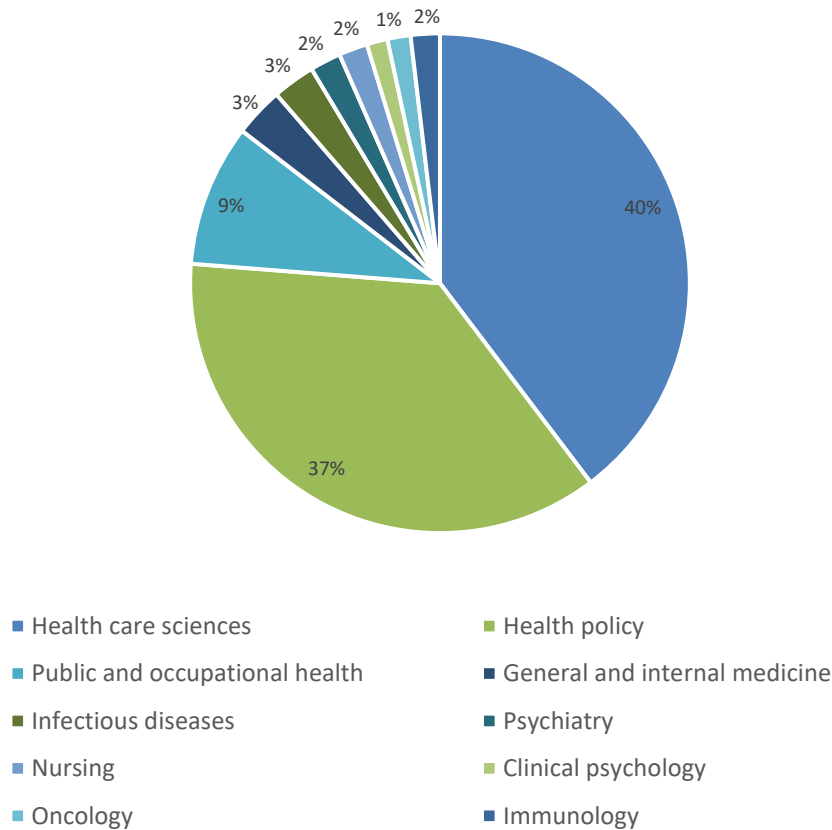
Note: Search conducted May 2022.

In contrast, when searching specifically for both implementation science and child protection systems, only 98 articles were retrieved. Here, health sciences remained the dominant, with 63 articles located within health policy and health care sciences; however, social work was the second highest category, with 31 articles. Psychology and family studies were also represented. Based on this data, child protection only occupies a small portion of implementation science research. Even within child protection literature, the health sciences are strongly represented.

With further analysis, the data also shows the recent development of implementation science research. Figure 5 shows the subset of child protection articles based on year of

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publication and citation. Both the number of publications and citations shows an increase, with a spike in 2020.

Figure 5

The Increase of Publications and Citations for Implementation Science in Child Protection
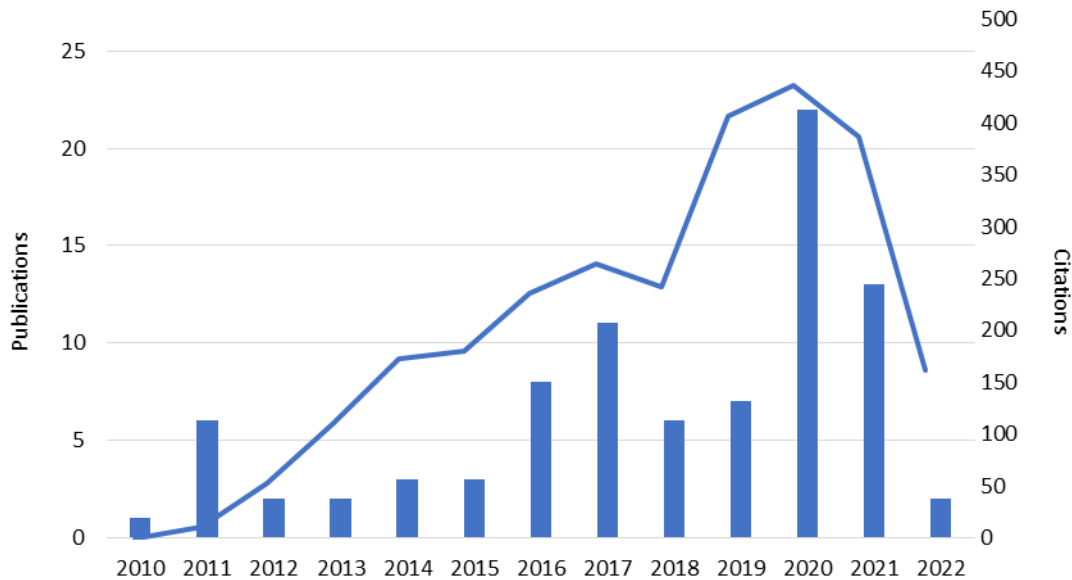
Note: Search conducted July 2022.

Applying the same search strategy in Scopus retrieved a larger number of documents, with 1,602 identified as relevant to both implementation science and child protection. Similar trends were seen regarding the disproportionate representation of health sciences. Additionally, the retrieved documents were significantly skewed towards the USA (n = 852), with Australia having only 88 identified documents.

Finally, the literature was dominated by a few key authors, who were responsible multiple studies, as shown in Figure 6. The author most highly represented was Gregory Aarons, with 21 relevant documents. Aarons is strongly represented in the literature due to his involvement in creating the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainment (EPIS) framework (Aarons et al., 2011) which has been widely applied in child protection. Further, the Implementation Science journal was founded by Aarons, further concentrating this area of study.

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The High Concentration of Authors in Implementation Science Literature
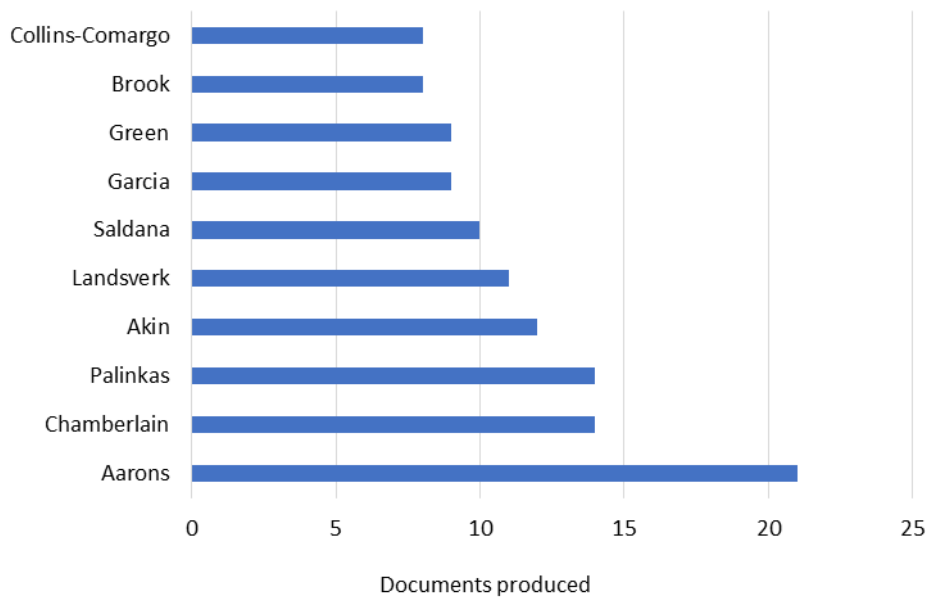
Note: Search conducted May 2022.

Overall, the literature shows that while implementation science is well integrated in the health sciences, it is less applied in child protection systems. The body of literature is also recent and has rapidly evolved across the last two years. Studies within Australia are limited, with most of the literature relating to child protection systems within the USA. These are even further concentrated when analysing authors, with a small group representing most of the literature.

Identifying Relevant Theories, Frameworks, and Models

Due to the rapid expansion of implementation science described in the previous section, there are many theories, frameworks, and models used to explain change. Providing a full review would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, to provide a useful conceptual synthesis, I drew on the work of Nilsen (2015). Nilsen reviewed the range of theories influencing implementation science, noting that the field has historically lacked a unified theoretical base. He then classified the literature into five categories: classic change theories, implementation theories, process models, determinant frameworks, and

evaluation frameworks. Consequently, Nilsen's work served as the foundation for my review of implementation science literature.

I also used four other reviews of implementation science frameworks to supplement Nilsen's review. Davis et al. (2015) conducted a scoping review of theories of explaining human behaviour. These behavioural theories had relevance for the concept of psychological empowerment and so were included in my analysis. Additionally, Fixsen et al. (2021) conducted a recent review of implementation science frameworks. The authors attempted to integrate 23 different frameworks by consolidating their core components. I used this review not only for its identification of relevant frameworks, but as a partial structure for comparing them. Specifically, I used the concept of systemic change as a factor for evaluating models. The authors defined systemic change as changes in structures and processes so that the implementation outcomes can be maintained on a larger scale (p. 6). Finally, I also used the work of Albers et al. (2017) and Hanson et al. (2016) in determining which frameworks and models were most relevant to child protection. Both reviews highlighted frameworks that had been used in empirical studies in child protection systems, demonstrating their usefulness for this study.

After identifying a range of theories, models, and frameworks through the aforementioned reviews, I then read the literature describing each of them. Through this process, I identified any determinants highlighted as relevant to implementation. Based on the definitions of Damschroder et al. (2009), I then categorised the determinants into those that relate to the individual, inner setting, outer setting, process, and intervention. The individual level refers to any person involved in the implementation process. Typically, these are the staff members of organisations involved in the implementation. Determinants related to the individual may be characteristics (such as attitude) as well as behaviour (such as adoption of the intervention). The inner setting refers to the organisational setting, highlighting determinants such as management or the organisational culture. The outer setting is the context in which the organisation sits. Outer setting determinants consider funding, political influences, and collaboration with other systems. Process determinants focus on the implementation itself. Examples include training and communication about the reform. Finally, intervention determinants are those characteristics of the intervention

that make it more or less likely to be successfully implemented. For example, the more complex the intervention the more challenging it is to implement.

Once I had identified these levels of determinants, I then examined whether the theory, model, or framework contained causal mechanisms explaining change and how closely they aligned with the constructs of psychological empowerment (PE). I did this by comparing the determinants or causal mechanisms with the sub-dimensions of PE. To finish, I assessed each theory, model, or framework for its relevance to systemic reform by categorising the primary focus of each within the system. This decision was based on the number of determinants within each domain (eg. Inner vs outer) as well as the causal mechanisms presented. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Characteristics of Implementation Theories, Frameworks, and Models

Theory, model, or framework	Aligns with PE constructs	Causal mechanisms	Individual	Inner	Outer	Process	Intervention	Systemic reform	Focus
Classic theories									
Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM)	Moderate		x						Individual
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Moderate	x	x						Individual
Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)	Strong	x	x						Individual
Information-Motivation-Behavioural-Skills Model (IMB)	Moderate	x	x						Individual
Theoretical domains framework (TDF)	Strong		x	x					Individual
Diffusion of innovation (DOI)	Moderate	x		x	x	x	x		Whole system

Theory, model, or framework	Aligns with PE constructs	Causal mechanisms	Individual	Inner	Outer	Process	Intervention	Systemic reform	Focus
Implementation theories									
Implementation Climate Theory (ICT)	Strong	x	x	x			x		Organisation
Absorptive Capacity Theory	Weak	x		x					Organisation
Organisational Readiness Theory (ORT)	Strong	x	x	x	x	x			Whole system
Behaviour Change Wheel (COM-B)	Moderate	x	x	x	x	x		x	Whole system
Normalisation Process Theory (NPT)	Strong	x	x			x			Individual
Implementation frameworks and models									
Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC)	Strong	x	x	x	x	x			Organisation

Theory, model, or framework	Aligns with PE constructs	Causal mechanisms	Individual	Inner	Outer	Process	Intervention	Systemic reform	Focus
Consolidated framework for implementation research (CFIR)	Moderate		x	x	x	x	x	x	Whole system
Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainment (EPIS)	Strong		x	x	x	x	x	x	Whole system
Learning Collaborative (LC)	Weak			x		x			Process
Active implementation frameworks (AIF)	Moderate	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Whole system
Practical robust implementation and sustainability (PRISM)	Weak			x	x	x	x		Whole system
Interactive systems framework (ISF)	Weak				x	x			Process
PRECEED-PROCEED	Moderate		x	x	x	x	x		Process

The data show that most of the theories, models, or frameworks address individual factors (74%) followed by inner setting determinants (68%), process determinants (63%), outer setting determinants (53%), and finally intervention determinants (37%). Based on the definition of Fixsen et al. (2021), only four (21%) of the theories, models, or frameworks contained guidance for implementation within a system. When comparing them with the constructs of PE, many showed a strong overlap, particularly with determinants relating to self-determination and competence.

Based on the data, the framework with the most relevance to this study was the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainability (EPIS) framework created by Aarons et al. (2011). However, the EPIS framework does not provide any causal mechanisms. While some authors identify that EPIS is explanatory (Moullin et al., 2020), others categorize it as a framework, only offering a classification of determinants rather than showing causal relationships (Damschroder, 2020). These conflicting perspectives may be because EPIS provides a framework for both determinants and the process of implementation. Additionally, EPIS highlights which determinants may be most relevant at which stages. While this does not result in an explanation of causal relationships, it is more sophisticated than cross-sectional frameworks that do not account for the process of implementation.

The data also showed that five theories and models had both a strong alignment with PE constructs and offered causal mechanisms. These were the Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC) model (Glisson & Schoenwald, 2005), Normalisation Process Theory (May & Finch, 2009), Organisational Readiness Theory (Weiner, 2009), Implementation Climate Theory (Klein & Sorra, 1996), and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986).

Systematic Literature Review

After identifying a list of relevant theories, models, and frameworks, I constructed a search strategy to identify relevant literature for their use in child protection systems. The strategy was based on PRISMA methods (Moher et al., 2009). The search strategy consisted of the name of the name of the theory, model, or framework, combined with the terms "implementation" and combinations of "child protection", "child welfare", and "protective

services". All terms were restricted to the abstract to increase precision of the search. I separately searched ProQuest, Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and Science Direct.

Studies were then screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they were in English, peer reviewed, used an implementation theory, model, or framework, and were based in a child protection system. All types of studies were considered. Studies were excluded if they did not use an implementation theory, model, or framework or were in not in a child protection system (e.g., Mental health). Additionally, some of the studies were proposals or pilots that did not contain data on implementation but indicated that a follow-up publication existed. These were located separately. The PRISMA diagram is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

PRISMA Diagram
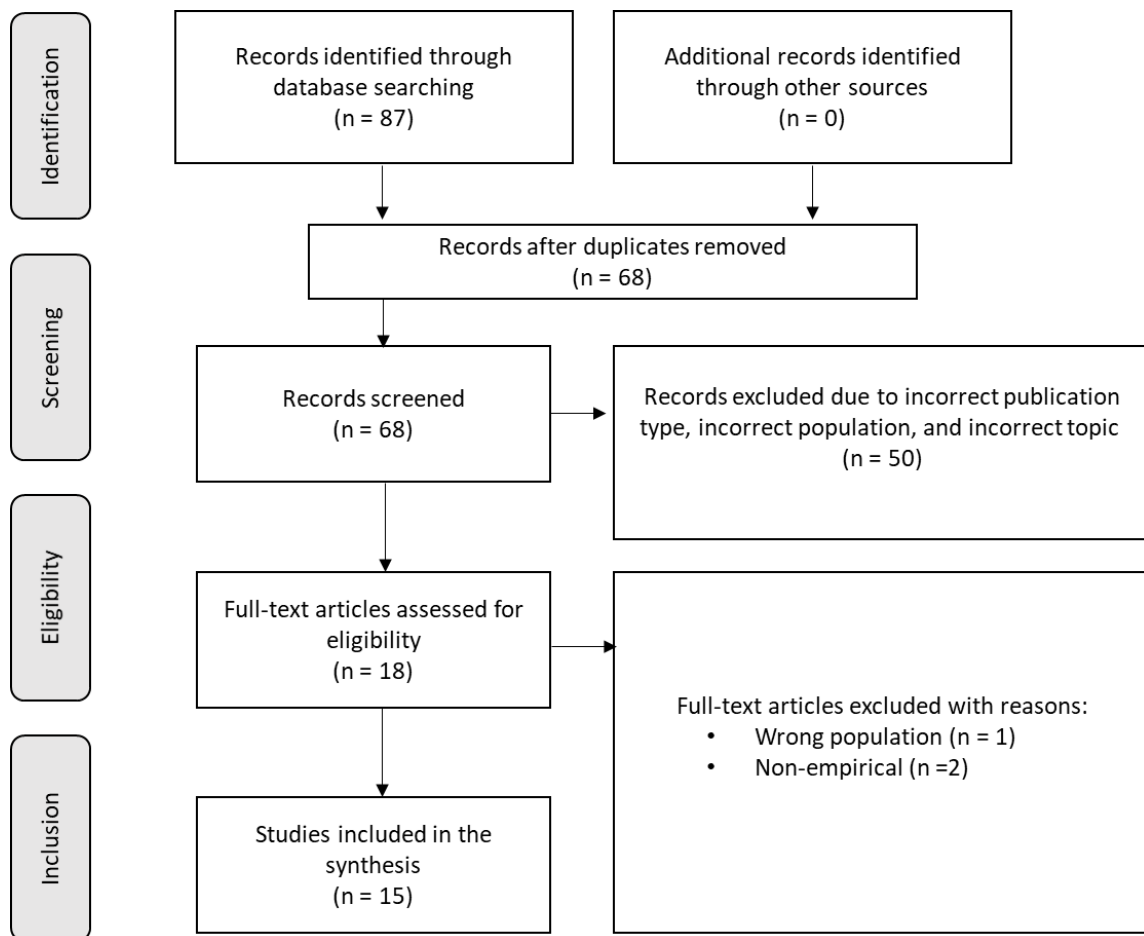
Data were then extracted and placed into an extraction table. As factors were identified, they were also placed in relation to other factors based on the contingent or reciprocal relationship identified in the literature. For example, in Albers and Shlonsky (2020), funding, structural changes, and the time dedicated to implementation were linked, as shown in the following quote:

> The rushed preparation of the process contributed to this lack of readiness, but it was not the only factor. Multiple interviewees pointed to a lack of adequate resources and expressed a sense of fatigue about their own attempts to navigate the system. (p. 392)

Once these factors were identified, along with their relationships, they were drawn into a causal-loop diagram. This diagram represents the factors most strongly associated with change in child protection systems across the different theoretical perspectives.

Characteristics of the Studies

The characteristics of the studies are shown in Table 5. Most of the studies were based in the USA (n = 10) with two based in Australia and one in Belgium. The theory most used to interpret the results or guide the implementation was the Diffusion of Innovations (n = 4). The ARC implementation model was used for both the product and process of implementation. As the ARC model is a management style, it can be used not just as an implementation model but as an organisational management model. The other interventions that were implemented varied. Some were broad frameworks, such as SofS. SofS is used to guide all decision-making in every stage of child protection practice. It contains multiple tools and guidance for case discussions and supervision sessions. Other interventions were discrete programs that were delivered, such as Circle of Security. Circle of Security is an attachment-based parenting program aimed to improve attunement in parenting rather than just skills. The implementation was most often studied through qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups. These qualitative methods were frequently woven into mixed-methods (n = 2) or used a range of data sources to conduct a case study (n = 5). The use of case studies highlights how implementation studies are often embedded into a specific context and project.

Table 5

Characteristics of the Implementation Science Studies

Study	Author (year)	Theory, Model, Framework	Intervention	Type of study	Country
1	Aarons et al. (2016)	EPIS	SafeCare	Qualitative multiple case study	USA
2	Agner et al. (2020)	DOI	Intensive Home-based Services, Family Wraparound, and Safety, Permanency, and Well-being	Quantitative	USA
3	Albers and Shlonsky (2020)	CFIR	Multi-systemic Therapy	Qualitative case study	Australia
4	Bartlett et al. (2016) Fraser et al. (2014)	LC	Trauma informed care package	Mixed-methods	USA
5	Blome et al. (2010)	DOI	Circle of Security	Qualitative multiple case study	USA
6	Glisson et al. (2006)	ARC	Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity	RCT quantitative	USA
7	Gopalan (2016)	PRISM	4Rs and 2Ss	Multiple case study	USA
8	Greeson et al. (2015)	EPIS	Youth mentoring	Qualitative case study	USA

Study	Author (year)	Theory, Model, Framework	Intervention	Type of study	Country
9	Leathers et al. (2016)	DOI	Keeping Foster Parents Trained and Supported (KEEP)	Quantitative	USA
10	Metz et al. (2014)	AIF	Success Coach, Strengthening families program (SFP), and Parent child interaction therapy (PCIT)	Mixed methods case study	USA
11	Myers, Garcia, Beidas, Trinh, et al. (2020) Myers, Garcia, Beidas and Yang (2020)	TPB	Triple P	Qualitative	USA
12	Salveron et al. (2015)	DOI and AIFS	Signs of Safety	Qualitative case study	Australia
13	Santens et al. (2020)	CFIR	Attachment-based family therapy	Qualitative	Belgium

Relationship Between Determinants

The literature from the systematic search served as a secondary data source. Determinants were identified across the different theories as applied to child protection implementation projects. In total, 18 determinants were inductively identified. These are shown in Table 6 along with a description of their meaning. The full table showing the presence of the determinants in the associated literature is shown in Appendix B.

Table 6

Descriptions of the Inductively Derived Implementation Determinants

Determinant	Description
Adaptation	The degree to which the intervention was adapted to fit with the local context.
Champions	People within the inner or outer setting advocating for the implementation.
Change agents	People employed to support the implementation.
Collaborative relationships	Relationships amongst staff and between different organisations.
Compatibility with values	Staff identifying that the change is compatible with their individual values or those of the organisation.
Competing policies or initiatives	Multiple initiatives or policies not aligned with the implementation.
Complexity of child protection work	The inherent complex nature of child protection practice.
Complexity of the intervention	How complex the intervention is to implement with fidelity.
Feedback and problem-solving	Actively assessing barriers and working through problems.
Funding	The amount of funding available for implementation.
Managing risk	How well the implementation and new intervention managed risk.

Determinant	Description
Mandated change	The implementation being mandated rather than voluntary for staff.
Observing positive impacts	Staff witnessing the success of a new intervention.
Organisational culture	Traditional norms, principles, beliefs and ways of practicing in the organisation.
Passion/commitment	Staff reporting an internal sense of commitment to change.
Politics	Pressure on the system to change due to public image.
Relative advantage	When staff perceive that a new intervention is superior to traditional practice.
Rushed implementation	Implementation processes that exceeded
Skilled staff	The level of competence of staff.
Staff resistance	Staff passively or actively refusing to change their practice.
Staff turnover	The frequency with which staff left the organisation.
Structural change	Changes to roles, policies, or procedures.
Supportive leaders	Leaders who create an emotionally and practically supportive environment for staff.
Trust	Staff reporting trust in leaders and the implementation process.
Workload	The number of cases and tasks associated with staff roles.

The determinants were classified based on the definitions by Damschroder et al. (2009), placing them in the different implementation settings. Some determinants were more frequent in the literature, as shown in Figure 8. The inner, outer, and process settings had equal representation across the studies (n = 11). In contrast, individual and intervention determinants were less represented (n = 7). The two

determinants which were most recognized across the studies were the importance of collaborative relationships (n = 9) and workload (n = 8). Relationships were also highlighted in other determinants. For example, in Blome et al. (2010), one of the supervisors became a champion for the Circle of Security parenting program. The authors identified that the "supervisor's enthusiasm and superior communication skills spread a sense of excitement and commitment to the program among caseworkers" (p. 437).

Figure 8

Distribution of Determinants in the Child Protection Literature
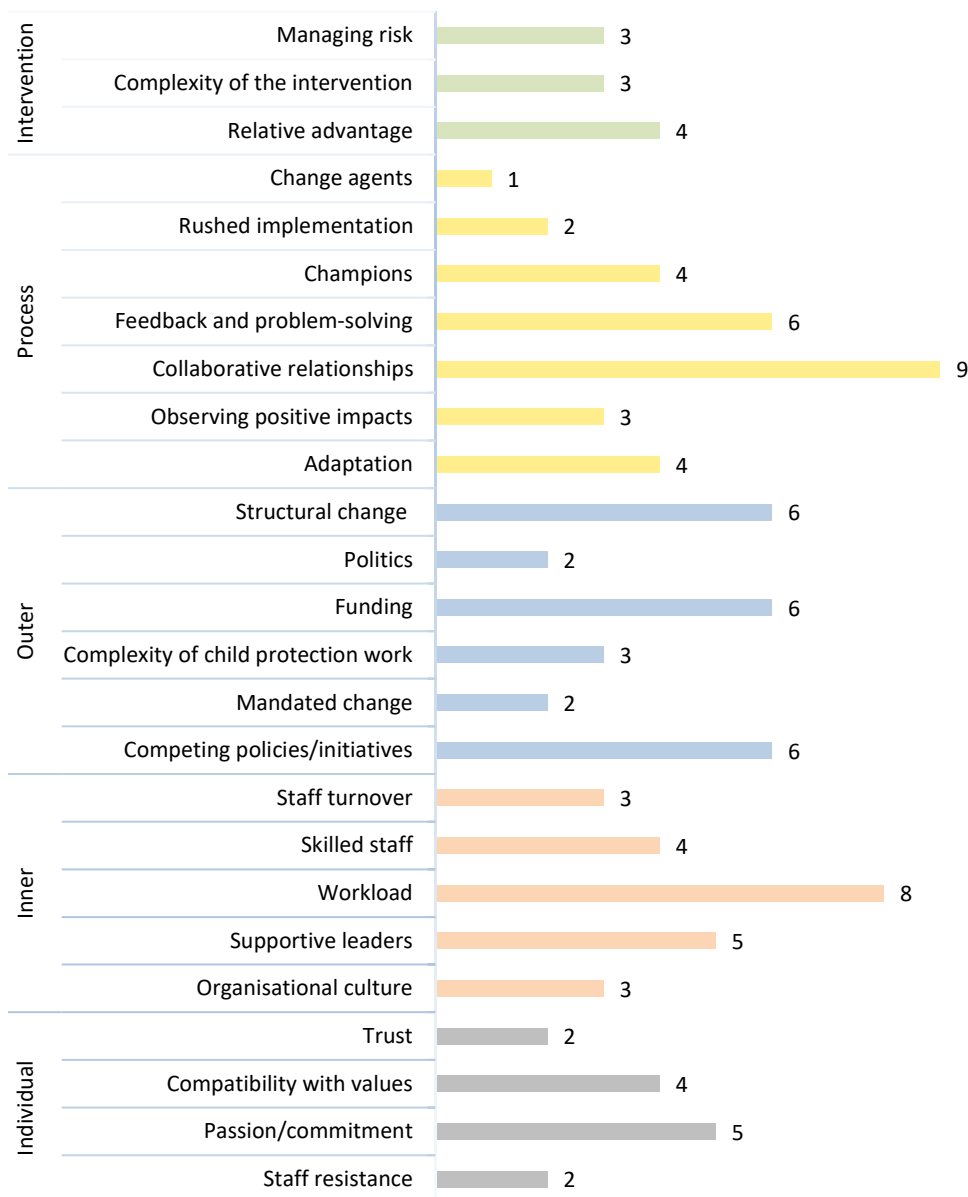
The example of champions also shows how different determinants are connected. In line with the recent recommendations about identifying causal pathways by Lewis et al. (2018) and Sarkies et al. (2020), these determinants were linked in Figure 9. The diagram shows that the individual, inner, outer, process, and intervention determinants interact with each other. There were two main hubs of connections. The first related to staff and their passion and commitment to change. Many determinants influenced the level of passion staff had for implementation, which in turn influenced collaborative relationships and the organisational culture. The second hub of connections was the level of structural change made in the system. The changes described in the literature included embedding implementation requirements in contracts (Aarons et al., 2016), internal policies to support state-wide collaboration (Bartlett et al., 2016), and administrative support (Metz et al., 2014). Many outer setting factors also interacted with each other. Funding, mandated change, competing initiatives, political pressure, and structural changes all interacted in a web of connections. These relationships only represent the findings in the literature. There are many other possible connections that could be inferred using other theory or face-value logic. Nonetheless, the purpose of the analysis was to focus on the findings of current literature. Further theoretical interpretation and connections will be discussed in Chapter Eight where the findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge. Overall, the causal loop diagram highlights the important determinants and their possible connections as identified across different theories, models, and frameworks. Next, I analyse the theories, models, and frameworks represented in the literature more closely to determine their relevance for this study.

Figure 9

Causal Loop Diagram of the Implementation Determinants
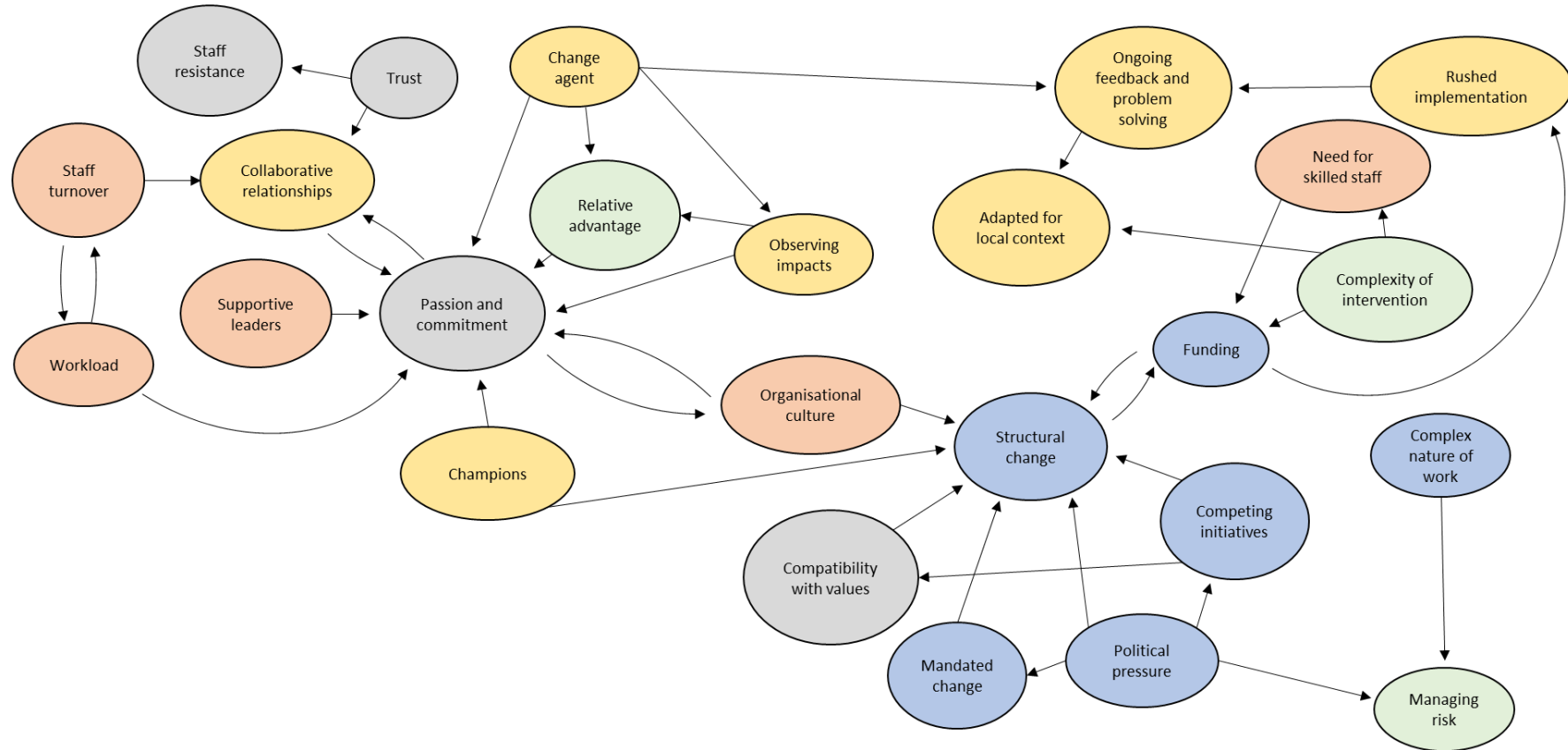
Note. → Represents a contingent relationship in the direction of the arrow

Represents a reciprocal relationship

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Selecting Relevant Theories, Frameworks, and Models

Based on the searches I conducted, I applied four criteria to determine the most relevant theories, models, and frameworks to review for this study. Criterion one was the alignment of the theory with the sub-dimensions of PE. Criterion two was a theory that addressed the whole system and not just one setting. Criterion three was the identification of causal mechanisms, rather than just the classification of determinants. Criterion four was prior studies that used the theory in child protection settings. The positioning of the theories according to the criteria is shown in Figure 10. No theory, model, or framework met all criteria, however, three met a majority of the criteria: Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity (ARC); Organisational Readiness Theory (ORT); and Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainability (EPIS). These will be discussed in more detail.

Figure 10

Application of Relevancy Criteria to Theories, Models, and Frameworks
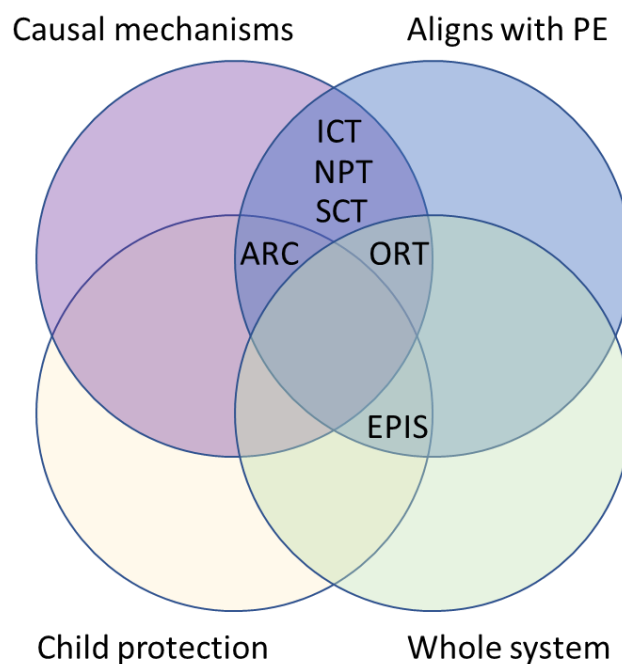
EPIS Framework

EPIS was developed by Aarons et al. (2011). The framework examines different phases of the implementation process, guiding organisations by ensuring a good fit between the intervention and the context. In the exploration phase, the organisation researches their

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client group, available interventions, and what adaptations may need to occur. During the preparation phase, barriers and facilitators are identified within the organisation. Locating these early, allows for proactive problem solving. Then the intervention goes into the implementation phase. This involves ongoing monitoring to ensure the intervention is being integrated into practice. Finally, the sustainment phase is when supports are built into the system to support the long-term use of the intervention. Alongside these phases, the framework also examines the interaction of different levels of determinants on how change is adopted in an organisation.

EPIS contains individual, inner context, outer context, process, intervention, and bridging level determinants. Overall, it strongly emphasises outer context determinants for successful change. As a result, it is better suited to studying governmental organisations. For example, Aarons et al. (2011) describe how child protection systems often change in response to state legislation or changes in funding. This is important as the incentive for change may not come from a desire to improve practice, but rather out of necessity. EPIS also emphasizes certain determinants being more or less relevant at different implementation stages. For instance, during the exploration and preparation phases, individual practitioners' attitudes are important to explore. Attitudes are less important during implementation and sustainment phases, provided the necessary supports were put in place during the preparation phase.

There are limitations to EPIS. While the framework highlights the importance of links between levels, it does not provide any theory behind how determinants are linked. EPIS therefore excels at identifying 'what' and 'how' but has less emphasis on 'why'. Despite these limitations, EPIS is widely used, with a systematic review by Moullin et al. (2019) identifying 49 studies where EPIS was the chosen theoretical framework. Additionally, EPIS has been used in many studies focused on child protection (Aarons et al., 2019; Aarons et al., 2012; Green et al., 2016; Shenderovich et al., 2020). These studies demonstrate the benefit of using EPIS to assess child protection systems.

ARC Model

ARC was developed by Glisson and Schoenwald (2005). The authors drew on a large body of research and practice experience to present their implementation model. The model focuses on human service organisations, highlighting how the inner context is critical to change efforts. This is due to the relationship between inner context determinants and differing quality in service outcomes and the behaviour of staff. Compared to the other frameworks, ARC strongly emphasises the interrelated networks of individuals within a system, and whose behaviour is based on norms, values, perceptions, and beliefs. Additionally, their behaviours affect the characteristics of the network. Consequently, ARC focuses on supporting implementation by drawing on 'boundary spanners' who connect the organisation to change agents and the community.

ARC is primarily driven by five principles. First, change is mission-driven rather than rule-driven. This means that change cannot occur through managerialism processes but should instead meet the individualised needs of clients. Second, the organisation should be results-oriented rather than process-oriented. Here ARC highlights that reform is only effective if it results in changed outcomes for children and young people. Reform efforts that measure success through number of clients served, or training delivered may lack any real results. Third, to avoid complacency, management must be improvement-directed rather than status quo-directed. Organisations are recognised as naturally resisting change and therefore management needs to be proactive. Fourth, reform needs to be relationship-centred rather than individual-centred. This means that the organisation focuses on building up a positive culture and supportive system around staff so that they can better serve clients. And fifth, reform should be participation-based rather than authority-based. This final principle increases communication across all levels of the organisation. All staff are seen as valuable members contributing to reform efforts.

Alongside these principles, ARC identifies implementation phases, and twelve components to support reform. The full model is based on theoretically and empirically supported mechanisms of change: enhancing organisational culture and addressing organisational capacity barriers. By enhancing the context and simultaneously reducing barriers, ARC supports organisations to move towards identified targets for change. Additionally, ARC has

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also been used as a management strategy to reduce staff turnover (Glisson et al., 2006). This means ARC can function as both an implementation model and a management style, even in the absence of systemic reform. Its versatility has made ARC a popular model for study.

Notably, ARC was part of a randomized trial (Glisson et al., 2010) supporting the implementation of Multi-systemic Therapy (MST). The trial showed the group using ARC had significantly lower problem behaviours reported in young people. Overall however, most ARC studies however are based in mental health systems rather than child protection (Glisson & Schoenwald, 2005; Glisson et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2017). These studies are still valuable given their similarity in supporting vulnerable clients in large systems. The ARC model has also been written about extensively in the most recent book by Hemmelgarn and Glisson (2018). The authors draw on 40 years of research and experience in the sector to highlight a sustainable form of management.

Organisational Readiness Theory

Organisational readiness is defined by Weiner (2009) as "organizational members' psychological and behavioural preparedness to implement change" (p. 217). Theoretically, organisational readiness is dependent on both change commitment and change efficacy. Change commitment refers to the shared resolve of staff to implement a change. Commitment may occur because staff value the change, are mandated to implement the change, or because they feel obliged (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Change efficacy refers to the shared sense of capability to perform the change. Both of these factors involve a shared perception amongst organisational staff to be successful. They are also dependent on the inner and outer context and the information staff have available to them. Weiner (2020) highlights how organisational readiness is essentially a psychological process that occurs within the mental world of staff members. Consequently, the process is not static, and organisational readiness can change as staff receive new information. Weiner et al. (2020) have more recently focused on the emotions of staff as a crucial part of organizational readiness. Emotions are conceptually and empirically distinct factors influencing organizational readiness, signalling their importance. Weiner et al. (2020) note however that there is limited research on emotions and organisational change.

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Overall, organisational readiness theory has strongly influenced implementation science literature. While the systematic literature search did not find many studies applying the theory, the concept of organisational readiness is used in many other theories, models, and frameworks. For example, Dearing (2018) identified 30 tools that measure organisational readiness. Dearing noted however that none of these tools assessed motivation, an important part of organisational readiness. Because organisational readiness lends itself towards management processes, it is often found in business and management literature rather than implementation literature (Weiner, 2020).

Summary of the Theories, Models, and Frameworks

While these implementation frameworks are promising, there are still considerable challenges. For example, Powell et al. (2013) examined the use of implementation frameworks in mental health contexts in the USA. They found that only three of the eleven studies showed both improved outcomes and significant differences between the groups using an implementation framework. Although the context of mental health is certainly different to that of child protection, the evidence still demonstrates how difficult it is to change a system. Additionally, the relationships between these determinants may be more important than the determinants themselves. For example, Sarkies et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review and subsequent mapping of the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research factors influencing hospitalisation for patients with chronic conditions. The authors found multiple relationships, many of which were reciprocal and caused complexity within the system. They concluded that it is important to study the entire system rather than just individual components.

Of the three identified theories, models, and frameworks relevant to this study, each focused on a key aspect of change. There was much similarity between them, specifically in that they all identified interactions amongst individual, inner context, and outer context determinants. ARC and ORT also went beyond just classifying determinants to link them in predictive theories. Both highlighted the importance of perceptions and emotions for staff within organisations. These theories humanise the change process, recognising that change only occurs through people. They also link strongly to the PE literature identified earlier in the chapter.

Critique and Summary of the Literature

There are several important gaps in the literature. First, the body of knowledge on implementation science and PE remain largely unlinked. PE is related to many determinants highlighted as foundational for change. Its main role in systemic reform appears to be by preparing individuals to change and sustaining their motivation. Despite the clear links, authors have noted that PE is rarely used as a change-related variable (Morin et al., 2016). This gap in the literature is even more apparent when looking at the context of child protection in Australia. Only one study was found that described PE within a child protection system (Lee et al., 2011). This study, however, was based in the USA. Within Australia, studies were located in nursing (Bonias et al., 2010; Brunetto et al., 2012), public servants (Taylor, 2013), and aged-care staff (Karimi et al., 2021). These studies broadly highlighted the benefits of PE but none examined systemic reform.

The lack of an empowering approach is also visible in the literature on systemic reform. Practitioners are frequently positioned as simply another determinant affecting implementation. A systematic review by Powell et al. (2013) identified that all included studies focused on changing the behaviour of individuals. Clearly, organisations recognise the importance of the behaviour of practitioners, yet the approach presented in the literature was strongly reductionist. Individual level factors, such as buy-in or adoption, do not account for how practitioners meaningfully engage with change. Instead, these views treat practitioners as having no agency. This sits in contrast with evidence from multiple settings which identify that individual level factors, such as autonomy, self-efficacy, and beliefs affect systemic reform (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Rogers et al., 2020). While some frameworks and theories attempt to link these factors, such as identifying limited resources as a factor influencing practitioner buy-in, they still do not explore the deeper causal mechanisms. In fact, when a system changes it can only do so when the people in the system change. This is a far more complicated process than terms such as 'buy-in' or 'adoption' imply. Instead practitioners involved in implementation have to undergo a process of change themselves. Deeply understanding this process will provide a much richer picture of systemic reform.

Another gap in the literature relates to the theories, frameworks, and models of implementation science. The proliferation of theories appear to cover every possible aspect of implementation, yet there are still gaps in the knowledge base. Ten years ago, Proctor (2012) summarised the implementation literature on child protection systems concluding:

> Recent advances notwithstanding, implementation research (1) focuses too often on the study of highly motivated ''early adopters;'' (2) yields a familiar proliferation of barriers; (3) focuses narrowly on the fidelity of a single program or treatment, ignoring other implementation outcomes and the complexity of co-occurring problems; and (4) reflects the ''push'' perspective of treatment developers and their disseminators rather than the ''pull'' of the field. (p. 110)

Many of these points remain true. When reviewing the literature, only a few studies identified a theory and fewer still used the theory for analysis. Even when used, typical implementation studies rarely hypothesize relationships between determinants (Birken et al., 2017) resulting in few causal mechanisms identified during implementation. To address this gap, the future research should focus on integrating theories, models, and frameworks (Fixsen et al., 2021) and moving beyond classification to study causation (Lewis et al., 2018).

These theories, models, and frameworks also lack a systemic focus. Canavan, McGregor, et al. (2021) identify that the field of implementation science is often narrowly focused on single change initiatives within organisations rather than systemic reform. Additionally, these change initiatives are frequently confined to implementing manualised programs. These two limitations place implementation science out of touch with the reality of child protection systems. This lack of broader focus limits the relevance of the current theories for studying systemic reform. Rather than implementing a single program, reform requires collaborated change across multiple settings. Lonne et al. (2020) identified eight key points required for systemic reform in child protection:

- A body with oversight of all jurisdictions to coordinate the reform.
- Legislative reform to provide an integrated set of responsibilities and roles across all tiers of the child protection system.

- Cross-organisational policy development to integrate the different sectors.

- A comprehensive workforce analysis with a plan to address the challenges.

- Alignment of core values, knowledge, theories, and skills required for child protection practice and suitable education provided to the workforce.

- Resilience initiatives to promote a stable and supported workforce.

- Greater support for staff to transition amongst the three tiers of the child protection system.

- Improved consultation with all stakeholders, including service users.

These points show the importance of reform being aligned and targeting individuals, organisations, structural factors, and supporting the implementation process. Additionally, systemic reform requires change in systems nested within other systems. This nesting structure means that sociological theories might offer unique perspectives. In fact, Canavan, Malone, et al. (2021) identify that sociologically oriented theories and concepts are critical for studying large-scale systemic reform. It is for this reason that I primarily used Archer's (1995) Morphogenetic approach as the theory underpinning this study. However, in line with the recommendations of Burton-Jones et al. (2015) and Estabrooks et al. (2006) I also used the perspectives of multiple systems oriented theories. These multiple perspectives allow a more thorough analysis of complex systems.

Conclusion

The three sections of the overview of literature demonstrate the complexity of change in child protection systems and how psychological empowerment relates to these changes. I presented the relevant literature on psychological empowerment, child protection reform, and implementation science. I concluded with a critique of the literature, highlighting the contribution of my study. Currently, psychological empowerment and systemic reform constitute two separate fields of study, with few links between them. The literature on systemic reform is vast, but most studies identify similar determinants influencing reform, classifying them either as facilitators or barriers with few causal relationships. The majority of the theories, models, and frameworks describe individual level determinants but do so in a deterministic and reductionist manner. This approach effectively reduces practitioners to

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'parts' rather than 'people' acting with personal agency in the system. Using a sociological approach that does not conflate these components offers a valuable opportunity to greatly enhance the knowledge of systemic reform.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the methodology of the research study. I start by summarizing critical realism which underpins all aspects of this study. Next, I present the research design and methods, explaining how the mixed-methods approach will be structured in this thesis. Finally, I describe the theoretical framework used to interpret the results of this study.

Research Methodology

This study used critical realism as the methodology. Consequently, critical realism influenced the research design, methods, data analysis, and theoretical interpretation. Although it is a less used methodology, I chose critical realism because it suited the complex topic of systemic reform. Here, rather than trying to reduce the complexity, I drew on sophisticated theory to interpret the layered findings of this study.

Critical realism lies between positivist and constructionist viewpoints. Positivism views the world as a set of empirical facts which can be observed and tested. In contrast, constructivism views the world as shaped by the interpretations of social actors who construct social reality (Peters et al., 2013). Historically, studies of systems have used a positivist framework to undertake empirical quantitative studies but found positivism inadequate for addressing the complicated issues of real-world practice (Mingers, 2015). In response to this perceived deficit, post-positivist frameworks have been developed. These frameworks state that empirical analysis is always conducted within the values and beliefs of those being studied as well as the researcher (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). To synthesise positivist and constructionist viewpoints, several approaches emerged, one of which was critical realism.

Critical realism originated with Roy Bhaskar who held the philosophy that reality was complex and existed on levels beyond our observation. Bhaskar found contemporary economic theories of development ill-suited to real world applications leading him to explore philosophical approaches (Bhaskar, 2016). Economics was largely positivist, and relied on the Humean theory of causal laws. The Humean constant conjunction argued that

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repeated observations of one event followed by another, over long periods of time, equals causation. However, this limited view meant that explanations could only be deductively derived from observation. Bhaskar (1978) instead argued that ontology should not be conflated with epistemology, leading him to create a realist theory of science. Bhaskar's work has significantly evolved over the years, first examining how scientific methods in the natural sciences could be applied to the social sciences, then exploring how open systems could be studied. The key factor defining critical realism, is the depth of ontology, which is differentiated from both constructivism and positivism.

Critical realism rejects the claims of positivism that our world is only understood through observation. Instead, similar to constructivist viewpoints, Bhaskar considered the values, beliefs, language, and thoughts held by individuals to constitute data. Unlike constructivism however, critical realism does not see the world as only social constructed. Rather, it argues that an observable structural world exists and is influenced by the perceptions of those in it. This places human agency at the centre of any analysis. While similar theories, such as structuration and post-structuralism, exist, they differ from critical realism through their treatment of the 'unseen' world of human agency. In critical realism, human agency is separate and independent from the structural world rather than an embedded duality (Peters et al., 2013). Consequently, critical realist researchers acknowledge that there are different domains of reality. Some domains can be observed, whereas others cannot. Additionally, each domain exists separate from other levels of reality but still interacts with them. Through observing the world, researchers can draw inferences about the causes of those observations, even though they cannot be examined directly. This makes critical realism strongly anti-reductionist.

Within critical realism, three different domains of reality are identified (Elder-Vass, 2008). The first is the domain of the empirical, containing that which is experienced and can be measured or perceived. The second is the domain of the actual. The events, people, and elements that exist make up this domain. This third is the domain of the real, composed of underlying mechanisms and causal properties. These three domains are represented graphically in Figure 11. These domains can be understood in a simple example. Feeling a breeze while standing outside will constitute the empirical, as the sensory system takes in

the feeling on the skin. The movement of air molecules make up the actual reality. And finally, the change from high to low pressure in the atmosphere signifies the real and is the causal mechanism by which wind occurs.

Figure 11

Stratified Reality According to Critical Realism
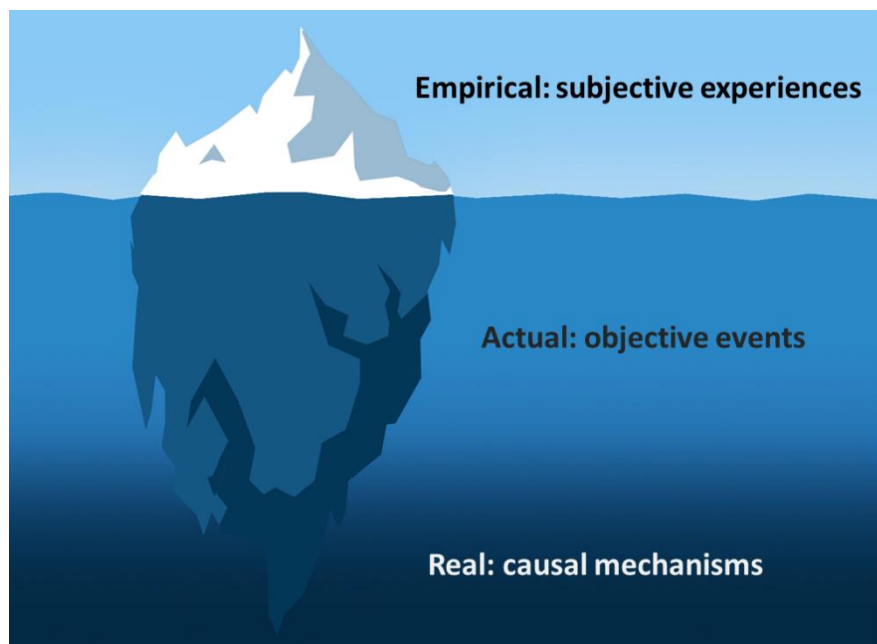
Elements within these domains are referred to as 'entities'. These can be concrete, such as cells in a body, or abstract, such as the concept of love. Events unfold in complex ways because of these interactions. As entities form groups, properties emerge that may not exist in the individual entities (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). An example of this is how water contains properties that neither hydrogen nor oxygen has on its own (wetness). Alternatively, employees may collectively form a union for advocacy (gaining more power than they had as individuals). As entities engage with each other, they enact their innate powers, which can cause change. Water may put out a fire or union advocacy may change the working conditions in an organisation. This creates new properties, referred to as second-order emergent properties.

The goal of studying these emergent properties is to uncover causal mechanisms and provide explanations of the observable world (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). Causal

mechanisms are how power exerts change. For example, water can put out fire by smothering the oxygen. This allows the property of 'wetness' to gain power. Many scientific aspects in the natural world have been examined this way, such as gravity or biological cells. In the social sciences, causal mechanisms are usually socially constructed and therefore gain power through collective acceptance and use by people within systems.

Alongside these ways of understanding reality, a philosophy of multiple interpretations and ongoing processes underpins critical realism. Because of this, critical realism aims to capture the complex array of influences within systems and show their connections (Edwards et al., 2014). Accordingly, critical realism offered an appropriate methodology for studying complex phenomena. Its ontological depth examines the unseen elements in human systems, such as human agency (Fletcher, 2017). This depth is important for large systems comprising both people and the structures created by people. Houston (2010) argues that a purely constructivist approach may capture the data related to the experience of people in systems, but not the structural elements of the system. Similarly, many positivist theories offer one-dimensional studies that cannot explain the unpredictable outcomes of systemic reform (Mihailescu et al., 2013). These opposing philosophies have led to extremist positions in the social sciences, which Mingers (2004) critiques as having "undermined even the most basic tenets of science and rationality" (p.88). Instead, critical realism provides a balanced framework for analysing these systems. It explores how people within systems are conditioned by structural and cultural elements while also using their own human agency to influence and change them. Consequently, these interactions offer better explanations for the wide variety of outcomes seen in systems (Archer, 1995).

In addition, I chose critical realism to uphold social work values in this study. This is because it probes beyond observations to deeper held values and representations that influence our morality (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012). In this way, critical realism supports the 'person-in-environment' view of social work. In fact, Houston (2010) maintains that critical realism is anti-oppressive by examining how people use their own agency and power within social structures that attempt to disempower them. Therefore, I explored how the day-to-day actions of people can transform social structures.

Because of the importance of the methodology to this study, the research design and thesis structure were aligned with critical realist processes. As advised by Hurrell (2014), the research design was created to first examine the quantitative data patterns followed by qualitative investigations of the structure, culture, and agency. I describe the resulting research design and methods next.

Research Design and Methods

To align with critical realism, I chose an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This allowed me to integrate multiple studies, each focusing on different ontological layers. The explanatory design incrementally built on each prior phase, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. In this way, the integrated data sought to answer the question: What mechanisms explain the results?

The purpose of an explanatory design is to link the quantitative and qualitative phases to explain specific results found in the quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). When creating the mixed-methods design, I considered the following guidelines by Bronstein and Kovacs (2013): (a) rigorous data collection and analysis in both quantitative and qualitative components, (b) ways the components were integrated, (c) which data was considered the priority, (d) the sequence of conducting the study, (e) the theoretical lens, and (f) the structure of the design to meet the needs of the research question. Table 7 lists how I addressed these factors in the research design. The priority is signified by using capital letters for the dataset that was a higher priority, with this study emphasizing the qualitative data.

Table 7

Design Considerations

Best practice guideline	Addressed in the study
Rigorous data collection	Quant data collected and analysed
	Nested sample of the quant participants chosen for QUAL data collection
Points of integration	Data integrated at two points: the analysis of the quant data determining the framework for the QUAL data collection and the full data integration at the conclusion of the study
Priority of data	Quant data used to inform QUAL data collection
Sequence of the study	Sequential data analysis and collection: quant → QUAL
Theoretical lens	Critical Realism and M/M framework
Structure of the design	Explanatory where the data from QUAL explained the results from quant

Note. Capital letters signify the dataset that was a higher priority.

This explanatory sequential design involved two sets of data integration based on the recommendations by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). The first occurred when the quantitative results informed the qualitative phase of the study. The data were first collected during the quantitative phase as a survey. Then, the results were used to inform the collection of qualitative data. The second integration point occurred where the results of both phases were connected. Here, specific quantitative questions were answered by the qualitative data. These two points of integration created three distinct phases to the study.

I present each phase as a self-contained study in a separate chapter in this thesis. The results are discrete, while also building on each other for the final analysis. Each chapter shows the specific methods used, followed by the results and a concluding discussion. Chapter Five identifies the quantitative results, gathering empirical data about the patterns

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of psychological empowerment found in the child protection systems in Australia. The results outline the relationship between psychological empowerment and systemic reform. Then, Chapter Six presents the qualitative results. These results offer an internal perspective to the quantitative data. Here, qualitative data describes the structure, culture, and personal agency of practitioners in the child protection system. Chapter Seven moves beyond description to explain and model the findings. Here, I use a critical realist systems theory to identify causal mechanisms explaining the data in the previous two chapters. This multifaceted analysis examines the intentions, motivations, and context surrounding the findings.

This final design ensured:

- consistent methods suitable to the methodology of critical realism,
- a strong connection between the quantitative and qualitative phases by having the first phase inform the design of the second phase, and,
- integration of the results to ensure the data provided a rich and contextualized answer to the research question.

An overview of the research design is presented graphically in Figure 12.

Figure 12

Diagram of the Research Design

Phase 1: Quantitative	Objective: Extensive data collection through a survey

Phase 1: Quantitative

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data analysis

Phase 2: Qualitative

Development of the interview

Qualitative data collection

Development of the analytical framework

Qualitative data analysis

Phase 3: Data integration

Systemic diagram

Objective: Extensive data collection through a survey

Variables: PE and its sub-dimensions with demographic variables

Participants: Child protection practitioners with experience within the last 5 years

n = 109

Analysis: Descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post hoc Tukey tests, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and multiple regression analysis.

Objective: Intensive data collection through semi-structured interviews

Interview framework informed by quantitative data

Participants: Nested sample from phase one

n = 19

Analysis: Critical realist content analysis using the M/M framework

Objective: Integration of quantitative and qualitative data to explain the patterns observed in the system

Analysis: Critical realist systems analysis

Systemic diagramming of findings illustrating relationships between psychological empowerment and systemic reform in the child protection system

Theoretical Framework

In this study I used the Morphogenesis/Morphostasis (M/M) approach created by Archer (1995) to interpret the results. The M/M framework explains how systems change or remain the same through the interaction of structure, culture, and human agency. Within the framework, society and its systems depend on the people who continuously shape the systems (Mutch, 2020). Additionally, people are shaped by the structure and culture of those systems and choose how they navigate their constraints. As an explanatory framework, the M/M approach offers guidance on analysing systems. It makes use of both researcher and participant expertise to explain the interaction of entities in the system, leading to the observed outcomes. In the next section I discuss the M/M framework and provides key concepts to interpret the results of this study.

Systems, Functions, and Feedback Loops

The critical contributions of systems-oriented theories have already been discussed in Chapter Three. In this section, I explore the concepts of systems approaches in more depth and link them to critical realism and child protection practice. Although Bhaskar did not use the term 'systems', his early work shows a clear understanding of systemic interactions. (Mingers, 2014) highlights these links stating:

> Systems consist of components and their relations which together are characterized as their structure. By virtue of that structure, systems have emergent properties or causal powers or tendencies to behave in certain ways. Systems are stratified: that is, they form nested hierarchies. (p. 37)

Holland (1992) highlights how recognising adaptation and complexity shifted the way systems were studied. Systems are not static and instead constitute a 'moving target' for study. This is because different parts of the system are governed by different internal rules that collectively result in observable changes. Therefore, systems cannot be studied as a set of factors but rather a set of interactions.

These interactions are also cumulative. When a system is nonlinear, small changes can have large and unexpected consequences. Accordingly, systems protect themselves from these

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consequences by becoming integrated. Integration refers to the connections between distinct entities of a system. A well-integrated system is flexible, adaptive, and stable because it receives feedback from its entities and responds accordingly (Siegel, 2009). In contrast, when integration is impaired, it results in either chaos or rigidity within the system (Ionita, 2000; Siegel, 2012).

Besides maintaining stability, each system has a function, which is the goal it is trying to achieve. Sometimes this function is explicit, such as a child protection system that has the function of preventing and intervening in situations of child maltreatment. At other times, the function of a system may not be clear. The best way to determine the system's function is to watch how it behaves over time (Meadows, 2008). This behaviour may show that the system has many functions, not all of which are explicit. This is also due to the different internal rules described by Holland (1992). As a result, different parts of the system may have different functions that are not necessarily harmonious.

Furthermore, the function of a system is maintained by feedback loops which cause it to adjust. Feedback loops are closed causal chains that compare actual against desired functioning (Meadows, 2008). These loops assess the outcomes of the system and transfer the information back to the people within the system. There are two main types of feedback loops: balancing and reinforcing. Balancing feedback loops show the difference between the desired and the actual states, decreasing the distance between the two (Meadows, 2008). Subsequently, the purpose of the balancing feedback loop is to keep the system stable and to pursue a goal. An example of a balancing feedback loop is an employee working overtime to catch up on work. Initially, this works well, and the employee gets a lot of work done. After some time, however, the employee becomes tired, and the extra hours lead to diminishing returns. At this point, rest will allow the employee to become more productive. This process shows that the action taken to reach the goal changes based on the feedback.

In contrast, a reinforcing feedback loop occurs when the feedback reinforces the initial action taken, rather than encouraging new action (Meadows, 2008). Instead of stabilizing the system, this type of loop leads to exponential growth or collapse. An example is if the

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employee who worked overtime successfully completed all their work. This employee may work overtime more frequently. They can then take on more work, which means they need to work more overtime. Of course, the balancing feedback loop may intervene, as that pattern is not sustainable. In this way, the two loops interact to explain the complex dynamics seen in the system. These two loops are shown graphically in Figure 13. Positive signs (+) in the diagram show a positive relationship, where the growth or decline of one entity leads to the same growth or decline of the other. The relationship goes in the same direction. Negative signs (-) show an inverse relationship where an increase in one entity leads to a decrease in the other. The relationship goes in the opposite direction. When all the signs in a diagram are neutral (an equal number of positive and negative), then there is no change in the system. An unequal number of signs leads to either growth or decline, depending on the final alignment.

Figure 13

Two Types of Feedback Loops

Balancing Feedback Loop
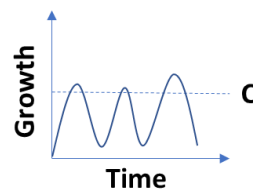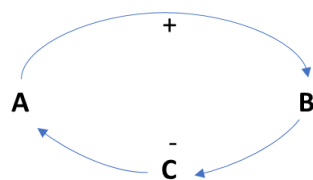
A and B stay in balance because of C (feedback)

Reinforcing Feedback Loop
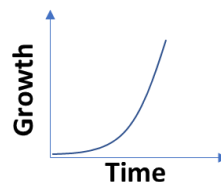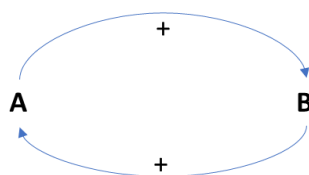
A leads to B which leads to A which…

Although the reinforcing feedback loop in Figure 13 contains both positive signs, a reinforcing loop can also contain both negative signs. This means that if one entity

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decreases, then so does the other. These feedback loops connect the entities in the system together and drive the behaviour of the system. The three main entities are structure, culture, and agency. These are discussed next.

Structure, Culture, Agency, and Their Interaction

The M/M approach distinguishes between 'parts and people' that together make up a system (Archer, 1995). The M/M framework has three main entities: structure and culture (representing the 'parts') and agency (representing people). As was discussed in the previous section, these entities can develop emergent properties. An emergent property exists when an entity has a property that its subcomponents do not have. Therefore, it is only through the interaction or joining of entities that a property emerges. Structure, culture, and agency can each develop their own emergent properties. These properties, in turn, can interact and develop second or third-order emergent properties. Consequently, each order represents an increasingly abstract property that can only be understood by tracing its progression over time.

The entity of structure is difficult to define (Crosby, 2013) and Archer herself did not provide a definition. The idea of social structure first developed with Spencer (1878) who used the analogy of biological structure to explain society. Spencer argued that the parts of society, and their relationship, meant that society functioned like a living organism. Bhaskar (1979) built on this idea further, stating that structures are the governing factors representing the reproduction and transformation of social activities. Structure broadly refers to the relationships between people and their social positions that govern the distribution of power and resources (Archer, 2003). Additionally, all structural emergent properties relate to resources, either physical or human (Archer, 1995). Systems can never be unstructured because positions in systems exist even without people to fill those positions. All humans enter systems that have already been formed and may have existed for thousands of years. Because of this, the study of any system needs to start by analysing its structure. Structures are typically enduring, creating lasting patterns over time that are reformed or reshaped by each new generation of people entering the system. As with other entities in the system, the relationship matters most. Structure is characterized by the pattern it produces, its power over other parts of the system, and the level of flexibility it allows. The child

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protection system itself is a structural emergent property, with people coming together in an organised way to use resources to meet the goal of protecting children. Within the child protection system, there are also structures such as policies, procedures, and employment positions like that of manager. These structures create patterns of connection between people in the system by distributing power and guiding behaviour. In child protection, the structure is defined by laws, policies, standards, regulations, and processes that govern behaviour (Wulczyn et al., 2010).

The second entity is that of culture. Culture is defined as is the collective ideas, beliefs, and values held by the members of the system (Archer, 1988). While culture is commonly spoken about as collective ways of living and being, in the M/M framework, culture is primarily identified by ideas. Therefore, when culture changes, it is not due to changed behaviours but changed ideas. Entrenched ways of thinking may limit the ability for a system to grow and change. However, new ideas may stimulate new ways of being and doing. Unlike structure, culture is often not recorded explicitly, and is informally regulated by the shared perceptions of people within the system. In child protection, there is a culture that permeates the way practitioners work together within the system. These cultural ideas describe how people interact with the structure of the system. An example is how cultural ideas influencing communication. Practitioners may speak one way to a colleague and another to a manager because of the difference in power. In addition, there are also cultural ideas about the role of the child protection system. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are different child protection orientations, with Australia historically using a forensic child protection orientation. Many contemporary systemic reforms aim to introduce new cultural ideas, such as family support models and strengths-based practice (Rijbroek et al., 2017). As with structure, these cultural ideas exist regardless of whether practitioners believe them, however, they have no power to change practice unless practitioners make use of them.

The final entity in the M/M framework is that of agency. Human agency refers to the capacity of people in the system to use their freedom and choice to act independently (Archer, 2000). Although both structure and culture may dictate how people should behave, people always have independent thought. This means they have the power of

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choice, an emergent property borne out of the human capacity for reflective thinking. Agency is also temporally embedded, meaning that it occurs at a specific point in time (Crosby, 2013; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). While much of the current discussion about agency has focused on individuals, people also work together in groups, generating new personal emergent properties. When people work within the system, without attempting to collectively change it, they are Primary Agents. Primary Agents are concerned with their individual interests and navigating systems to meet their needs (Archer, 1995). When Primary Agents work together collectively to achieve a greater purpose, they become Corporate Agents. Corporate Agents shape the structure and culture of systems by using their collective power (Archer, 1995). The first Corporate Agents are created by the structure and culture of the system.

Corporate Agents are placed in positions of authority over the system, such as through management structures or political oversight committees. Despite their authority, the aggregate actions of Primary agents in the system may constrain or disrupt the goals of these Corporate Agents (Archer, 1995). This can often leave these two groups in conflict with one another. Corporate Agents often come to represent the 'institution' and Primary Agents the 'environment'; with corporate groups attempting to influence or control the structure of the system and Primary Agents working within its confines (Archer, 1995). As people interact with structure and culture within systems, they use bargaining power, negotiating strength, and transformative or reproductive action to influence the system.

Bargaining power is a first-order emergent property based on the distribution of resources in systems. Some people have high bargaining power due to their position in the system or the resources they have at their disposal. Negotiating strength is related to bargaining power, but is a second-order emergent property. Despite their position and access to resources, different groups may be able to negotiate based on what they have to offer other groups. For example, although managers in a child protection system may seem to have more power, the system could not function without frontline practitioners. This gives practitioners negotiating strength because their services are valuable to the system. The final emergent property is transformative or reproductive action. Every day, people make choices that either uphold the way the system is functioning (reproduction) or change it

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(transformation). These actions do not take place in isolation, however, and rather interact with structure and culture. As stated by Bhaskar (1994):

> At the heart of this idea is the conception of human agency or praxis as transformative negation of the give … and at the same time as both enabled and constrained by and reproductive or transformative of the very conditions of this praxis, so that these conditions are activity-dependent or auto-poietic. (p. 93)

Consequently, it is the interaction that causes systems to be formed and reformed.

To study this interaction, the M/M framework examines the three entities of structure, culture, and agency using analytical dualism. Analytical dualism refers to the artificial separation of each entity so they can be studied separately and together, allowing a clearer analysis of the interaction (Archer, 2010b). When the three entities interact, they either maintain the way the system is behaving, through morphostasis, or change it, through morphogenesis. This interaction also causes variability. Because people personify structural roles and cultural ideas, there is great variety in the types of child protection practitioners that exist. Two practitioners can hold the same structural position (e.g. caseworker) and follow the same cultural ideas (e.g. risk assessment) yet act in very different ways and have very different outcomes.

This variability does not just remain at the individual level and may influence the entire system. As has been discussed, the M/M framework sees these entities of structure, culture, and agency as having emergent properties greater than the sum of its parts. Structures may develop the emergent property of authority as they govern people and tell them how to function. Culture may hold the emergent property of norming, where people are conditioned by the culture of the system to think and act in culturally appropriate ways. Although structure and culture may exert these properties on people, it is not a one-directional process. Instead, people use their human agency to decide in their own best interest. People's actions may reinforce the dominant structure or culture, believing it is what is best for the system. Alternatively, people may use their agency to change the culture or structure.

Because of these interactions amongst structure, culture, and agency, change is constantly being introduced into systems through evolving ideas, technology, social perceptions, values, and the influence of globalisation. When a change enters the system, three outcomes are possible: (a) the new ideas and structures replace old ideas and behaviours (morphogenesis), (b) old ideas and structures are kept and the new ones rejected (morphostasis), or (c) elements of the new ideas and structures are incorporated into what is existing and forms a new morphostasis (Priestley, 2011). What is important to remember is that all the power in the system only exists through people (Archer, 1995). Structures have no authority if people reject their authority. Similarly, culture is only replicated as people share cultural ideas with each other. Although the term morphostasis implies the system is static, it actually refers to the system actively remaining the same. In a world of change, a system remaining robust and unchanging takes a lot of work (Meadows, 2008). This makes the study of the actions of people within systems so important. In fact, systems are only maintained or changed by the actions of people as they interact with the structure and culture. Because of the importance of people within systems, their agency is discussed in further detail.

Reflexivity, Emotions, and Personal Projects

Agency is choice applied to action, emerging out of reflexive thinking. Archer (2007) defines reflexivity as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (p. 4). Everyone has the power to think about their life and decide what to do with it. By thinking about their position in life, how well their context suits them, and the choices available to them, people use their agency to improve their circumstances. Consequently, reflexivity is a key concept relating to psychological empowerment. It allows people to be active in responding to their environment rather than passively letting circumstances happen to them (Archer, 2007). Because of this individual choice, people can resist, subvert, co-operate, or adapt in response to the structure and culture around them (Archer, 2007). These choices are based on the type of reflexivity used.

There are four broad types of reflexivity as defined by Archer (2007): communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity, and fractured reflexivity.

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Communicative reflexivity involves thinking through talking. People using this type of reflexivity like to work through their thoughts with another and appreciate confirmation and consensus before deciding. Communicative reflexivity forms in situations of contextual continuity, where the person feels part of a group and wants to fit in with others. Subsequently, the focus of communicative reflexivity is the thoughts and opinions of others. This encourages people to 'stay put' as relationships are formed.

In contrast, autonomous reflexivity is self-sustained and quickly leads to action. Here, people clearly think about what is important and how they can meet their needs. This type of reflexivity grows in situations of contextual discontinuity. People feel separate from their context and so act independently. As a result, they are not afraid to challenge social norms, allowing them to focus on their own needs. Because of this, autonomous reflexivity encourages independent and upward mobility, such as management positions or independent roles.

The third type of reflexivity is meta-reflexivity. Meta-reflexivity is values driven and questions the self with 'why?' Rather than focusing on outcomes or the opinions of others, meta-reflexivity argues that thinking is important for the sake of thinking. Meta-reflexivity occurs most in situations of contextual incongruity. A person may hold deep beliefs that they are not valued by their current context. Accordingly, this type of reflexivity encourages lateral movement. People transition through roles and systems, searching for place aligning with their values.

Finally, fractured reflexivity involves a state where thinking about a concern does not improve the situation, but only intensifies distress. Fractured reflexivity has the goal of self-preservation and reducing distress by avoiding thinking. This type of reflexivity encourages freezing. The person remains in their position, but this is not one that is comfortable. Instead, they are paralysed by a lack of agency.

Together, different types of reflexivity lead people to undertake 'personal projects'. These projects are the intentional courses of action people take to address their concerns (Archer, 2007). An example is when someone without enough income intentionally studies a degree that opens up a career in a well-paid sector. Although the degree itself does not

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immediately meet the concern of limited finances, the course of action is intentional and designed to provide benefits in the future. This type of planning and reasoning is a product of reflexivity and allows people to overcome constraints in their social world.

Reflexivity does not automatically lead to agency. First, a person must undergo the three Ds: discernment, deliberation, and dedication. Discernment is when someone realizes a need or concern (Archer, 2007). We face many issues daily, but not all of them clearly come to our conscious awareness. We may have an emotional response but not know why. Discernment clarifies where we are satisfied and where we are unsatisfied, so that we can act to improve our lives. Next comes deliberation. Deliberation takes the unsatisfactory concerns identified in discernment and considers, 'What do I do now?' Deliberation involves considering alternatives, weighing up pros and cons, and exploring emotional responses to the alternatives (Archer, 2007). Once someone has identified possible actions, they need to become dedicated. It is common for people to stay in deliberation, unhappy and considering alternatives but never acting to change their situation. Instead, to become dedicated, the person must prioritise their concerns and feel they have the skills, knowledge, and emotional capacity to make a change (Archer, 2007). Even if dedication is never reached, the person uses their agency. Deciding *not* to do something is still a choice and maintains the status quo of the system. Archer (2007) summarises this idea when she states, "'Staying put' has to be worked at" (p.158).

Overall, reflexivity, human emotions, and the three D's act as a feedback loop for people in the system. Just as the system itself adapts to meet its function, people compare their concerns and desires with their reality, using their reflexivity and emotions as feedback. Depending on their evaluation, people may stay with the same course of action or use their agency in new ways. Additionally, the structure and culture of systems conditions people to different types of action (Archer, 1995). These conditions are called situational logics and are discussed next.

Situational Logics: How Structure and Culture Influence Agency

Although people have choice and agency, we all enter systems already composed of structure and culture. They may influence us even when we are not aware of it, because

this is how the system has always seemed. Our access to resources, the languages we speak, and even our ways of thinking are shaped before we are aware of our existence. When we enter new systems, we are similarly constrained, and told how to act based on our position in the system. Although structure and culture can influence us directly, they also shape us through the interaction of different emerging properties. In any system, there may be many structural and cultural emergent properties that develop and interact, forming patterns and relationships. These properties may provide "good reasons for particular courses of action, in the form of the premiums and penalties associated" (Archer, 1995, p. 216). There are two main factors that influence this second-order emergent property: necessity and compatibility (Archer, 1995).

The first factor is necessity. Necessity means that the relationship between two structural or cultural emergent properties is linked and one cannot exist without the other. An example is how the structural emergent properties of case and caseworker are linked. A caseworker cannot exist without cases. Similarly, cases are just families and children if they do not have a caseworker. These are both necessary for the function of casework to exist within the child protection system. In contrast, two emergent properties may be contingent. While there may be some relationship between them, each could exist without the other. For many years, child protection practice existed without formal theory that explained the best way to protect children. Although evidence-based interventions have been developed, they may exist entirely separate from everyday practice. These two emergent properties are only contingently related. This is because it is not necessary to use evidence-based interventions when working as a practitioner in child protection.

The second factor is compatibility. Compatibility refers to the harmony or discord that exists between the two emergent properties. When properties align and are in harmony, they function well together. At other times, two emergent properties may be incompatible and struggle against each other within the system. An example of compatibility is the involvement of the legal system through court orders aligning with the belief that protecting children overrides parental autonomy. When parents do not consent to work with child protection practitioners, the court can be approached to mandate their involvement. Historically however, this was not always true, and the law upheld the rights of parental

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autonomy and ownership of their children. Instead, the law was changed to fit the new cultural ideals prioritising the wellbeing of children.

Based on these two factors, a two-by-two matrix can be formed. This provides four ways that emerging properties shape agency. This matrix is shown in Table 8. Each of the quadrants is labelled by the two categories that define it: necessary complementarity; necessary incompatibility; contingent complementarity; and contingent incompatibility. Archer (1995) further separates each of these quadrants into stratified layers: the cultural system (CS), the socio-cultural system (S-C), the social structures (SS), and the social interaction system (S-I).

The CS exists on a top level and represents the world of ideas. This cultural level interacts with people on the S-C level, where ideas are shared and influence people. The distinction is that one level exists independently of people whereas the other is a property of people (Archer, 1988, p. 4). Archer argued that interaction was dependent on the level of cohesion and consistency. Cultural System Integration refers to the level of logical consistency amongst the ideas within the cultural level (p. 6). Similarly, Socio-Cultural Integration refers to the level of cohesion amongst the people abiding by the cultural ideas (p. 6). Therefore, the S-C level is concerned with how people respond to the level of logical consistency in the CS. There is a similar stratification for structure. Structures (SS) exist and predate any human agency. However, agency is involved in either introducing new relationships or maintaining current ones. In this way, the S-I level either reproduces or transforms culture based on how people within the system form relationships and interact. Additionally, both structure and culture interact with each other through people. Archer (1995) highlights this assertion stating, "(1) culture influences structure and, (2) structure exerts its influence upon culture – but always (3) through the medium of social interaction" (p. 306).

Table 8

Situational Logics and Their Effect on Agency

	Necessary relationship	Contingent relationship
Complementarity	Creates Protective logic	Creates Opportunity within systems
	The structures in the system (SS) become highly **Integrated** and people (S-I) feel a sense of **Solidarity** within the system.	Rather than structures (SS) becoming integrated, there is **Differentiation** and choice, leading people (S-I) to **Diversification** within the existing in the system.
	Ideas (CS) become **Systematized** based on a certain type of thinking. It is difficult for new ideas to enter the system as the people (S-C) in it **Reproduce** traditional ideas, keeping them 'alive' in the system.	New ideas (CS) fit with the current structure and culture and offer people the freedom to grow in whatever way they choose. Different ideas result in **Specialization** within the system. This can lead to **Sectionalism** where people (S-C) become highly focused on a narrow set of ideas and loyal to their own groups.
Incompatibility	Leads to Corrective logic	Leads to attempted Elimination in systems
	Necessary structures (SS) contradict each other and cause tension. **Compromise** is created by balancing priorities. This generates a feeling of the system being fragile and so any changes or disruptions are **Contained** (S-I).	**Competition** arises between incompatible structures (SS) creating **Polarization** between people (S-I) on which structures should remain in the system.
	Incompatible ideas (CS) are merged using **Syncretism**. This allows people (S-C) to reinterpret how ideas fit together generating **Unification** in thinking.	New ideas (CS) compete with the current culture creating **Pluralism** and diversity in the system. People (S-C) eliminate the ideas that do not fit with them, generating social **Cleavage** where they become divided on issues.

Note. Bold terms are those used by Archer as the primary conditioned responses by people facing situational logics.

The types of situational logics are influenced by the stratified levels of the system. Inconsistencies at the cultural level might generate a sense of unbalance leading people to try and use syncretism. Here there is an effect on CS but also on the people using it through S-C interaction. Because these levels are separate, their effects need to be analysed separately. When examining the levels, Archer is specifically concerned with consistency of logic and coherence amongst people. That is, whether they are harmonious or incompatible.

When all emergent properties (both cultural and structural) are in harmony, they reinforce each other and create a situational logic called necessary complementarity. This situation leads to systematic protection (Archer, 1995). Protective systems are closely integrated and difficult to change. These systems strongly penalize anyone who violates the structural or cultural expectations (Archer, 1995) creating negative feedback loops. The loops lead people to protect traditional practices and defend the system because 'it is the way it is'. Because all the emerging properties reinforce each other, people who are unhappy with the system may have to take unpredictable action to disrupt the relationships (Nuryatno & Dobson, 2015).

When emergent properties are necessary but do not align, this is referred to as necessary incompatibility and results in a power struggle that needs correction (Nuryatno & Dobson, 2015). This situation is inherently unstable and requires the people in the system to balance their approach (Archer, 1995). Many of the interactions in the child protection system are necessary but incompatible. The cultural emergent property of distrust is often present in parents who are involved in the child protection system. They may not feel it is in their best interests to work with the child protection practitioner and instead react defensively. In contrast, the child protection practitioner may want to form a good working relationship with the parents, holding the culturally emergent belief that collaboration leads to successful reunification. It is necessary for the child protection practitioner to both maintain a relationship with the parents while also taking actions that may increase the defensiveness of the parent. An example could be applying for court orders and informing the parents. These necessary yet incompatible emergent properties leave the practitioner carefully weighing up decisions and trying to ensure one aspect is not prioritised over the

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other. Systems shaped by necessary incompatibilities tend to be morphostatic but fragile (Archer, 1995). Because the people in the system sense this fragility, change is often sacrificed in the name of compromise. This may involve assimilation, where new ideas change to fit with traditional practices, allowing the appearance of change without the loss of tradition (Wadsworth, 1984).

In contrast, sometimes change is produced outside of the system, affecting both structure and culture. When this new emergent property enters the system and is incompatible with the structure or culture, it competes with the other emergent properties already in the system (Nuryatno & Dobson, 2015). This situation is called contingent incompatibility, allowing people to hold incompatible views. People feel pressured to resolve the incompatibility by eliminating the emergent property that does not fit with them. The key to contingent incompatibility is choice, where people are presented with two opposing sides and made to choose their position.

An example of this type of logic is shown in the historical changes in Australia's child protection system as detailed by Scott and Swain (2002). Children were initially classed as property and used for labour. When society took notice of the treatment of children, the cultural ideals shifted. Interest groups raised the issue and forced society to make a choice about how children should be treated. They eliminated many systemic structures, such as 'boarding out', as they no longer fit with the dominant culture. This led to a significant morphogenesis where new systems were formed to protect children and legislation created altering the power of parents. Although this type of elimination resolves some of the tension in the system, it can also cause social cleavage, where people become divided into different social groups with different interests. Parents and child protection practitioners represent a form of social cleavage. While child protection and parenting are related, they are not necessary for each other to exist. In fact, most families parent successfully with no involvement in the child protection system. This creates social cleavage where there are some families who become involved with child protection and other families who do not. They have different interests from each other and may view the child protection system differently; with one group seeing it as punitive and the other as beneficial. These two

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groups may be divided on issues such as when it is appropriate for child protection to intervene and what level of intrusion is suitable.

The final situational logic is that of contingent complementarities. In this situation, people are free to use new ideas (Nuryatno & Dobson, 2015). This encourages opportunism where people can take advantage of the situation to benefit themselves and the system. New ideas result in accommodation (rethinking traditional practices to fit with the new ideas) (Wadsworth, 1984) and lead to morphogenesis in systems. An example of contingent complementarity was the introduction of the Family Tax Benefit by the Australian Government in 2000. The Family Tax Benefit is a means-tested form of income support to help parents in meeting the needs of their children. The benefit is not necessarily related to a child's safety but is complementary to the aims of child protection practitioners as it addresses the structural emergent property of poverty. This allowed a greater number of families to provide adequate care for their children, influencing the demands placed on the child protection system. As a result, there was cultural morphogenesis, where neglect became more closely scrutinized to determine whether it was because of poverty or inappropriate parenting (Featherstone et al., 2019). Overall, the definition of neglect changed.

The four situational logics discussed influence the choices people make but do not control them. People are still free to use their reflexivity and act in ways that are best for them. Although these actions are unpredictable, they still need to solve any contradictions in the system so that it makes sense to the people in the system. This is because all successful systems work towards harmony and try to unify their function and the personal projects of the people within them (Meadows, 2008). In addition, the relationship amongst cultural, agency, and structure determines whether a system transitions to morphogenesis or remains in morphostasis (Archer, 2013). The four situational logics are not mutually exclusive, and exist in different clusters in systems, with some entities reinforcing each other and others generating tension through incompatibility. This means that structures may change, or undergo morphogenesis, while the culture remains strongly traditional or vice versa. Consequently, it is these multiple interactions that lead to the unintended outcomes found in complex systems.

Morphogenesis and Morphostasis

The M/M approach offers an explanatory framework that uses systems thinking to explain how people use their agency to influence the systems around them. At the same time, the structure and culture of systems also influence people. This reciprocal process better captures the complexity seen in large systems and highlights the important role of individual practitioners within these systems. Archer (1995) highlights consistency and contradiction as the primary forces driving change. Morphogenesis occurs when the positive feedback loops in a system reinforce innovation and change. In contrast, morphostasis occurs when balancing feedback loops reject change in favour of maintaining existing practices. A diagram of the M/M framework is shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Process of change in the M/M framework
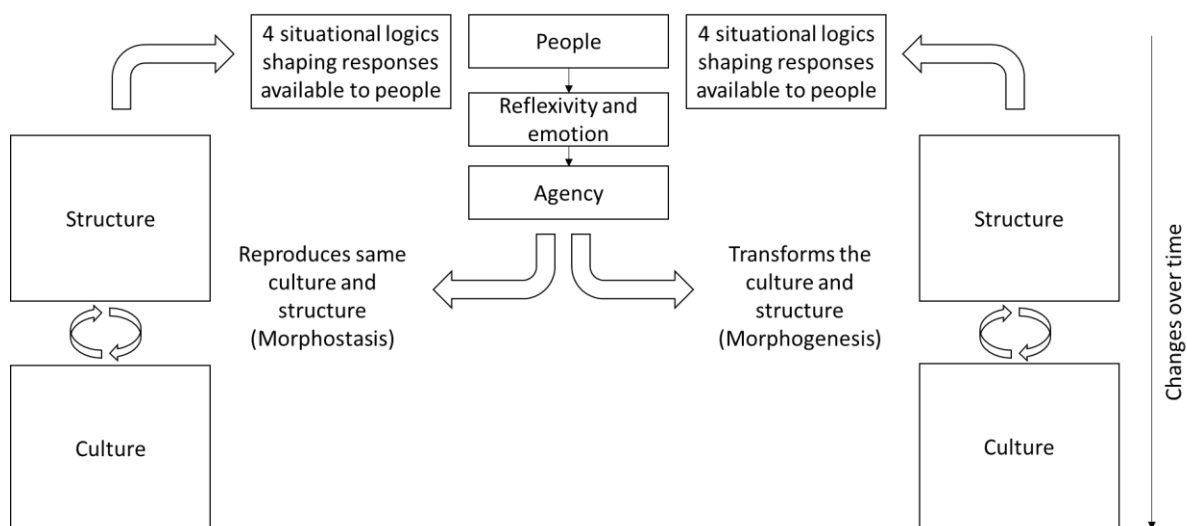
As people enter a system, the situational logics immediately shape them. The structure and culture guide them on how to think and behave, determining their position in the system and access to resources. While the structure and culture shape people's responses, this is not pre-determined, and people use their emotions and reflexive thinking to choose how they want to act in the system. They use their agency to meet their needs and either take action that reproduces the system (Morphostasis) or tries to change the system (Morphogenesis). Depending on the power available to them, and whether people work together, their attempts to change the system may either succeed or fail. People may also

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choose to resist attempts to change the system and actively work to reproduce and maintain tradition. This cycle never ends, and each system is continuously reproduced or transformed based on the agency of the people within it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarized the research methodology, research design, and theoretical framework. I described the critical realist methodology which underpins the study, influencing both the data collection and analysis. I outlined the research design, which is presented in three phases: quantitative, qualitative, and integrated analysis. Finally, I presented the M/M theoretical framework, which will be used throughout the study to interpret the findings. The next chapter presents the quantitative findings. This is the first of three sets of findings. The chapter is presented as discrete results, followed by the qualitative results in Chapter Six, and finally an integrated analysis in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER FIVE: PHASE 1: QUANTITATIVE

Phase 1: Quantitative				Phase 2: Qualitative				Phase 3: Integrated	
Relevant literature	Methods	Quantitative findings		Relevant literature	Methods	Qualitative findings		Methods	Integrated findings
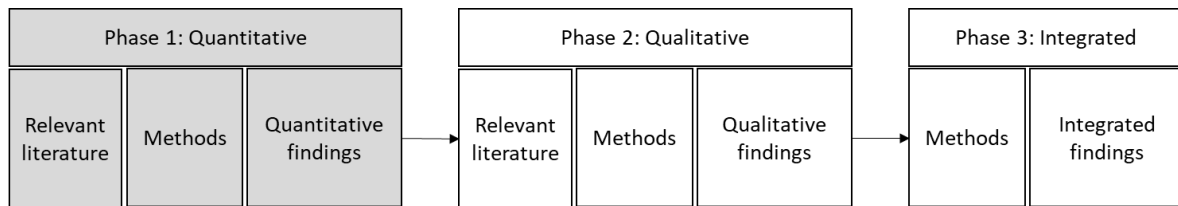
Introduction

In this chapter, I present the results of the quantitative phase of the study. The purpose of the quantitative phase of the study was two-fold. First, to situate the concept of psychological empowerment within the context of child protection practitioners, and second, to explore its relationship to systemic reform. This phase of the study sought to identify areas for further exploration in the qualitative phase of the study by understanding the breadth of the concepts being studied.

As this phase of the study sat as a discrete component, I present the findings here along with relevant literature, methods, and a concluding discussion. First, I summarize the concepts of psychological empowerment and systemic reform as they have been studied in other quantitative literature. Then, I describe the methods used, giving an overview of the population, recruitment, and sample. Next, I present the findings. I describe the sample, the specific patterns of psychological empowerment seen in the sample, and the relationship between psychological empowerment and practitioners' perceptions of their own change within the system. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the limitations of the quantitative phase and its relevance for the qualitative phase of the study.

Relevant Literature

The quantitative phase of the study used a survey measuring two main variables: psychological empowerment and practitioners' response to systemic reform. Each of these variables was measured using a separate instrument. This section briefly presents how these instruments have been used in other studies, drawing on the literature review in Chapter Three. The literature informed the methods of the quantitative phase of the study.

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The first variable measured was psychological empowerment. The Psychological Empowerment Instrument (PEI) was developed by Spreitzer (1995) and is a widely used measure that has four sub-dimensions representing psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning is practitioners' sense of purpose and passion for their work. It is an affective component that rates the personal importance an individual feels for what they do. Competence is the skills and knowledge practitioners feel they have to complete their work tasks. Self-determination is the level of autonomy practitioners perceive they have over their work tasks, letting them decide how they want to go about their daily work. Finally, impact is the influence practitioners feel they have over their local department. It represents their power within the organisational structure. These four dimensions are the most common used in the literature, highlighted in extensive reviews.

Maynard et al. (2012) conducted a multi-level review of PE exemplar studies across different countries and contexts. The PEI was clearly the dominant measure, with all studies examining individual PE using the PEI. The four most commonly tested associations with the PEI were structural empowerment, individual characteristics, work design, leadership, organisational support, performance, and affective reaction. These studies typically used PE as a unitary construct rather than testing the sub-dimensions. The authors therefore encouraged studying the sub-dimensions of PE more closely in future research.

Li et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of PE as measured in nurses. They located 20 articles examining the relationship between the PEI and job satisfaction in nurses. The review identified that the PEI was examined using Pearson correlations, multiple regression, multivariate analysis, Spearman's rank correlation analysis, path analysis, structural equation modelling, and chi square analysis. Although most studies used multiple statistics, regression analysis was the most common (n = 12).

When reviewing other literature, many studies were purely quantitative and used structural equation modelling (SEM) to test a hypothesized model. Another similarity was that psychological empowerment was tested alongside other internal variables, such as psychological capital, to predict outcome variables, such as work attitude. For example,

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Shah et al. (2019) studied employees in several telecommunication companies in Pakistan. They tested a model examining the relationship amongst psychological empowerment, psychological capital, job satisfaction, turnover intention, and organisational commitment. In fact, it was difficult to locate studies that explored the patterns of psychological empowerment, as most studies used a priori hypotheses for subsequent testing. For example, the studies by Aryee and Chen (2006), Alge et al. (2006), and Avolio et al. (2004) were identified as 'exemplar' studies in a review by Maynard et al. (2012). All three studies used modelling to test different hypotheses. Further, rather than examining demographic variables directly, many studies used demographics as control variables in regression testing, such as in Ergeneli et al. (2007). This process may overlook important data.

In addition, the review of literature found few sequential explanatory studies using mixed-methods to examine psychological empowerment. One example found was by Frey et al. (2020) who studied employees in two long-term care facilities in New Zealand. The authors examined the relationship between psychological empowerment and practitioners' confidence to deliver palliative care. They used hierarchical multiple regression to analyse the contribution of psychological empowerment and other factors (such as education) to predict practitioners' confidence. These data were then explained using qualitative interviews.

When searching for population specific studies, only one article was found where the PEI was used with child protection practitioners. The practitioners were based in a statutory child protection organisation in the USA. Lee et al. (2011) used the PEI and an environmental inventory to determine the effects on practitioners' emotional exhaustion and intention to remain in child protection. They theorised that psychological empowerment mediated a negative environment. To test this hypothesis, the PEI was analysed alongside the other variables using structural equation modelling. The results showed that psychological empowerment was inversely related to emotional exhaustion and positively related to practitioners' intention to remain in child protection.

There was less literature available on practitioners' response to systemic reform. Unlike PE, there are no widely used instruments to measure systemic reform. Instead, reforms are

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typically measured by their large-scale outcomes (Hacker & Washington, 2004), which is different to measuring whether individuals have changed their daily practice. There are some measures related to specific areas, such as the evidence-based practice implementation measure by Melnyk et al. (2008), but no general measures of change in individuals.

To address this gap, I used a set of items created by Sung and Choi (2014). The items categorise multiple forms of innovation implementation after change is introduced into an organisation. For ease of discussion, these items have been termed the Implementation Behaviours (IB). The IB measure examined how individuals put change into practice after implementation. Sung and Choi (2014) hypothesized that individual engagement with change is not binary but exists on four sub-dimensions: (a) Mechanical application whereby individuals engage with the change in a rote manner exactly as trained, (b) Learning, whereby individuals adapt their own knowledge and change their practice, (c) Reinvention, where the change introduced into the system is adapted by the individual and used creatively, and (d) Mutual Change, which involves a combination of learning and reinvention. Together, twelve items measure the four sub-dimensions, with three items per sub-dimension.

In the original study, Sung and Choi (2014) measured individual responses to a specific innovation introduced into a single organisation. They tested three demographic variables: participation in training, competence, and prior experience with the innovation; along with two innovation variables: compatibility and flexibility. The variables were tested in a hierarchical regression analysis against seven hypotheses. These hypotheses proposed how different variables would relate to the different implementation behaviours. Their findings showed that the choice of implementation behaviour depended on the practitioner, the organisational context, and the innovation itself.

Overall, the literature showed that PE is a widely studied concept with a robust measure. In contrast, the IB measure is a theoretical measure with only one study testing its validity. The literature also showed that while PE was frequently used as a variable in larger models, it was rarely explored in depth within any population. Demographic variables, such as

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education level, were used as control variables in hypothesised models rather than examined directly. To build upon the current literature, I first examined the significance of demographic variables on psychological empowerment and systemic reform. The two variables were located within the population and showed patterns for further analysis, aligning with a critical realist methodology. As a result, the quantitative phase was strongly data driven. The next section presents the methods chosen to achieve this.

Methods

Population and Eligibility Criteria

The original proposal for this study focused on a single state in Australia that had undergone systemic reform to the statutory system. Because of the low response rates and difficulty negotiating entry into the child protection system, the study evolved. Rather than focusing on a single state, I broadened the eligibility criteria to include anyone who had worked in an Australian child protection sector within the last five years. Non-government, governmental, private practice, and statutory child protection practitioners were all included. This broad definition has been used in other national studies examining systemic reform, such as by Wise (2017). This boundary excluded the primary level of services offered as well as early intervention services from the secondary level. The boundary is shown graphically in Figure 15. In addition, to be eligible, the practitioners did not need to be currently employed in a child protection role. As child protection systems typically have high turnover rates, surveying only current practitioners could exclude many participants who have recently left the sector. This might bias the sample towards either long-term practitioners or new starters. Similarly, too large a period after leaving the sector might invalidate the data because practitioners cannot report on the current context. As a result, a five-year span was chosen.

Figure 15

Chosen Service Sectors for the Study Population
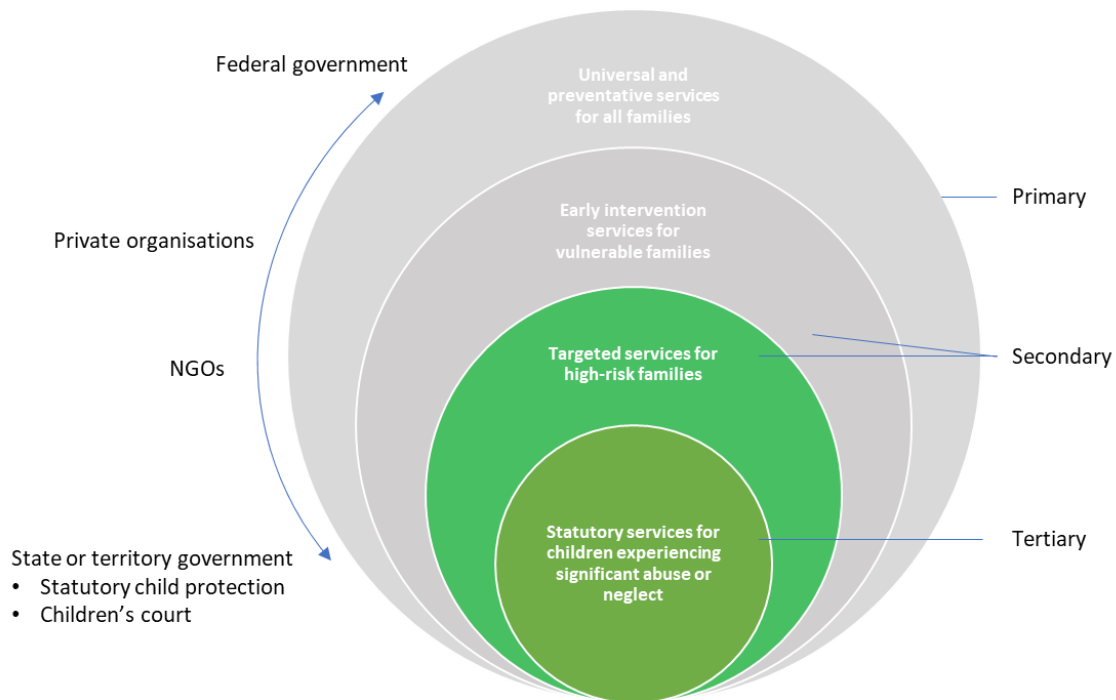
Recruitment and Ethics

To obtain a large sample, I used multiple methods of recruitment with three broad strategies: passive, active, and targeted. Passive recruitment involved advertising on the Flinders Research Website, the Australian Association for Social Workers website, and the Flinders Alumni magazine. Recruitment flyers were posted with the link to the survey and contact details for the chief investigator. This recruitment ran for four months.

Active recruitment involved outreach to community organizations who provided services to families involved in statutory child protection and statutory child protection agencies. These agencies were contacted via public email and provided with a flyer which could be distributed to staff if approved by management.

Targeted recruitment involved the construction of a social media campaign by Flinders Marketing. This campaign used an algorithm to identify potential respondents based on

their social media use. This recruitment ran for three months and targeted both Facebook and LinkedIn users by their occupation. Targeted occupations included statutory child protection, child welfare, children's social worker, intensive family support, youth worker, and foster care support.

If interested, participants followed the link to a Qualtrics survey. The survey first presented an information sheet and written consent for participation. The consent and information sheet were designed in line with the general requirements for ethical conduct of research by the National Human Ethics Research Committee (NHMRC, 2007). The consent form and study information sheet are included in Appendix C.

Sample Description

A total of 130 responses to the survey were received. Only 73 (56%) of the respondents completed the entire survey, with 15% exiting the survey after giving consent but not answering any instrument questions. The twenty respondents who did not progress past the demographic data were removed from further analysis. One further response was removed as the respondent had answered 'neutral' to every question and written disparaging comments for open answers. The remaining respondents represented every state and territory in Australia, with South Australia having the greatest representation. This is likely because Flinders University is located in South Australia, strengthening professional networks. Fifty-six percent (56%) of the respondents had over five years' experience in their respective child-protection sectors, with thirty-four percent (34%) between one and five years. Almost all the respondents (94%) identified as female, which is common in the sector. Fifty-two percent (52%) of the respondents identified practicing in a statutory child protection role, twenty percent (20%) in an NGO role, five percent (5%) as practicing in a private role (e.g., independent foster care assessors), and twenty-one percent (21%) as other. Sectors classified as 'other' were diverse and included child protection practitioners in settings such as schools or hospitals. Given the diversity, no analyses were performed on 'other' classifications. Figure 16 shows a graph of the mean length of time of practice for each sector and the different roles of practitioners in the sample. As is shown, the sample contained proportionately higher numbers of statutory practitioners.

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Figure 16

Sample Demographics
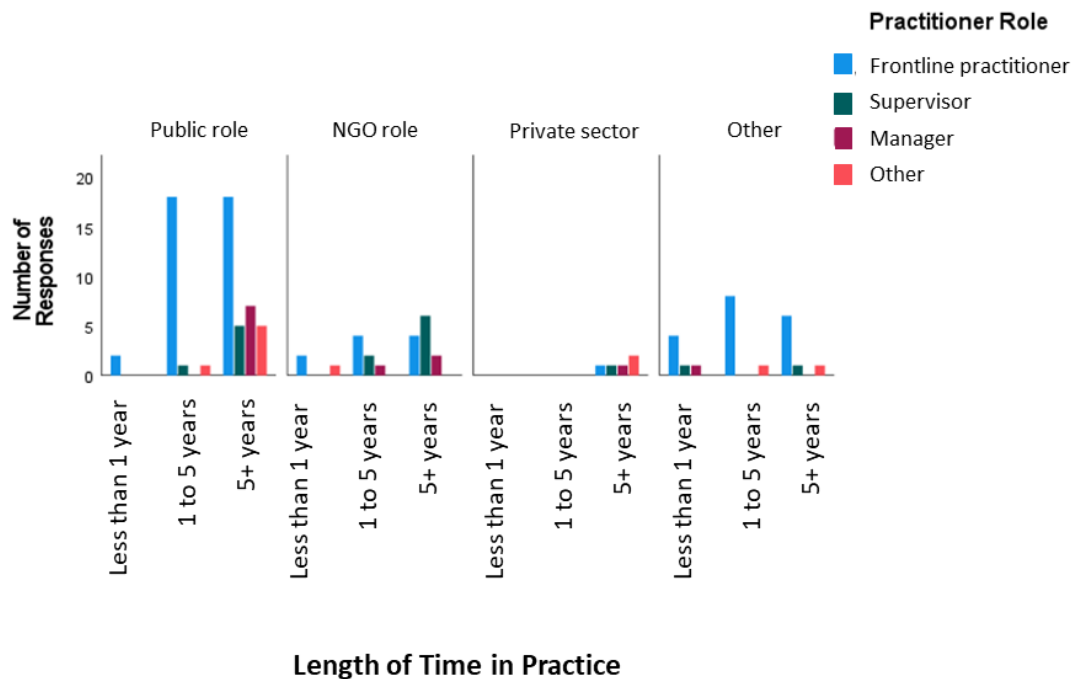
Sample Size Estimates

I obtained sample size estimates to determine the minimum size needed for the planned statistical analyses. First, I used G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to estimate the size needed to capture a range of effect sizes. The sample size was estimated at 176 based on (a) a power level of 0.80, (b) a minimum effect size of f = 0.25, (c) an error of probability of 0.05, and (d) four levels of the independent variable. Unfortunately, this sample size was not achieved in this study, leaving the analyses performed only able to detect large effect sizes. Consequently, some effects may not have been detected and would require a larger sample size in further studies.

Next, I performed a second estimate to calculate the size needed for validity and reliability testing of the chosen measures. Factor analysis becomes more reliable with larger samples, however, there is no agreement on minimum sample sizes (Mundfrom et al., 2005). Instead, the required sample size depends on the communality, item-to-factor ratio, and number of factors of the instrument being used (Mundfrom et al., 2005). MacCallum et al. (1999) demonstrated that level of communality is the most important determinant of factor

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recovery in sample size. Additionally, Mundfrom (2005) provides a table to assist with determining appropriate sample sizes. When assuming 4 factors, low item-to factor-ratio (most factors only having three items), and high communality (.6 to .7), a sample size of 260 was recommended as a minimum. Alternatively, if the communality was wide (.2 to .8) this increased to a minimum of 500. Unfortunately, this study could not achieve the minimum sample size based on Mundfrom's recommendations.

Given that neither of these estimates was achieved, I compared the sample size to similar studies. Osborne and Costello (2004) recommended a subject-to-item ratio between 10:1 and 5:1 for exploratory factor analysis. This study achieved a 5:1 ratio with 76 subjects and 12 items for the IB measure. With this sample size, it is expected that there will be an increase in the chance of Heywood cases (20%) (Osborne & Costello, 2004). This means an average of 1.20 items will be mis-classified into the wrong factor, and there will be an average error of 0.12 in factor loadings. These limitations were considered during data analysis and are discussed later in this chapter.

Validity and Reliability of the Measures

The PEI and IB measures were combined with demographic variables of interest into a full survey. An example is attached in Appendix D. Prior to data analysis, the psychometric properties of the measures were investigated to determine their validity and reliability.

Psychometric Properties of the Psychological Empowerment Instrument

First, I investigated the psychometric properties of the PEI. The PEI has been shown to have high reliability across a range of populations (Spreitzer, 1995). In this study, the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). The PEI comprises 12 items, which are designed to represent four sub-dimensions. However, it is assumed there is an underlying general factor which can be represented by a single total psychological empowerment score based on all twelve items. Because of an error in programming using Qualtrics, only two of three items were asked for the sub-dimension competence. Despite this, the mean of these two items was still taken to represent the competence score.

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The means ranged from 2.20 (Item 10: I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department) to 4.79 (Item 3: The work I do is important to me). Item means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 9. A confirmatory factor analysis was performed using MPLUS 8.5. A weighted least squares mean and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimator was used based on the non-normal distribution of categorical data, as recommended by Brown (2006). The results confirmed the underlying structure of the four-factor model and showed an adequate fit for the small sample size based on the predicted fit Chi square testing (x^2 (df = 38) = 53.78, p = .046); Comparative fit index (CFI = .992); Tucker-Lewis index (TLI = .988); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = .063). These indices all represent good fit for the model as defined by Schreiber et al. (2006). Additionally, the overall structure of the factors was supported by the inter-item correlations between the items from the same factor. No within factor correlation was lower than .51, with a clear preference for the underlying structure.

Table 9

PEI Item Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	Items	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
C1	I am confident about my ability to do my job	4.38	0.80										
C2	I have mastered the skills necessary for my job	4.27	0.83	.64**									
M3	The work that I do is important to me	4.79	0.49	.28**	.26**								
M4	My job activities are personally meaningful to me	4.42	0.71	.32**	.14	.55**							
M5	The work I do is meaningful to me	4.68	0.66	.32**	.18	.51**	.59**						
S6	I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job	3.16	1.19	.15	.03	.14	.25*	.21*					
S7	I can decide on my own how to go about doing my own work	3.30	1.27	.18	.04	.27**	.33**	.26**	.80**				
S8	I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job	3.18	1.25	.20*	.00	.26**	.37**	.27**	.72**	.62**			
I9	My impact on what happens in my department is large	2.57	1.42	.30**	.21*	.23*	.34**	.16	.28**	.14	.35**		
I10	I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department	2.20	1.24	.26**	.20*	.19*	.32**	.23*	.50**	.47**	.46**	.60**	
I11	I have significant influence over what happens in my department	2.27	1.27	.31**	.27**	.20*	.36**	.28**	.49**	.42**	.51**	.68**	.80**

Note. n = 107 Unit of analysis is the individual. C = Competence, M = Meaning, S = Self-determination, I = Impact.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Reliability was calculated based on the ordinal omega. This was to ensure the ordinal data was being accurately measured (Gadermann et al., 2012; Zumbo et al., 2007). In this study, the PE instrument showed acceptable reliability on all subscales (Competence = .77; Meaning = .91; Self-determination = .92; Impact = .91). These levels of reliability indicate that the items in the sub-dimensions share sufficient variance to measure the latent variable (Field, 2018). Given that the scale measured a single concept (psychological empowerment) with different dimensions, its overall internal consistency was assessed for Cronbach's alpha (.89), and ordinal omega (.89). Because of the abundance of literature supporting the reliability and validity of the PE instrument, and the CFA demonstrating adequate fit with this sample, no alterations were made. The final subscales and total psychological empowerment scores are shown with their means, standard deviations, and median interquartile ranges in Table 10.

Table 10

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for PE Subscales

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*Median*	*IQR*	1	2	3	4
1. Meaning	4.64	0.51	5.0	(4.3, 5.0)				
2. Self-determination	3.25	1.11	3.7	(2.3, 4.0)	.37[**]			
3. Impact	2.38	1.16	2.0	(1.3, 3.3)	.36[**]	.51[**]		
4. Competence	4.32	0.73	4.5	(4.0, 5.0)	.32[**]	.11	.32[**]	
5. Psychological empowerment	3.65	0.64	3.7	(3.2, 4.2)	.62[**]	.78[**]	.84[**]	.55[**]

Note. n = 107 Unit of analysis is the individual.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Next, I examined the data to determine its normality using both visualisation and statistical measures. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed non-normal distributions for all the PEI sub-dimensions (all $p < .001$) but not for the total psychological empowerment score ($p = .20$). The sub-dimension, Meaning, was the most skewed ($Z = -2.08$) and was higher in value than the recommended cut-off for assuming normality (±1.96) by Hair et al. (1998). To account for this non-normal distribution, either non-parametric testing or bootstrapping (5000) was used for all analyses on the PE sub-dimensions, as recommended by Field (2018).

Psychometric Properties of the Implementation Behaviours Measure

The psychometric properties of the IB measure were also assessed. On a five-point scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree, the means ranged from 2.38 (Item 2: I have never tried to adapt the way I use the practice change) to 4.20 (Item 8: I always search for new ways to improve the practice change in my work). Item means, standard deviations, and inter-item correlations are presented in Table 11.

First, I performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the model structure used by Sung and Choi (2014). I used the cut-off values suggested by Schreiber et al. (2006) to determine the quality of fit of the model. The analysis of the IB data showed very poor results for the model fit (X^2 = 280.14, df = 168, p = .000; RMSEA = .096; CFI = 0.873; TLI = .841, SRMR = .096). The overall low validity for the IB measure could relate to the broad population sampled and range of practice changes measured. In the original study by Sung and Choi (2014), the IB measure was used on a sample within a single organization all having experienced a recent change implementation. In contrast, this study sampled practitioners in different roles across the country and multiple implementations of change. Therefore, it may be that the current IB measure is not generalizable outside of measuring a single, uniform change. Despite this setback, I examined the measure further.

Table 11

IB Measure Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
MI1	I straightforwardly follow the guidance of my supervisor in using the practice change	3.36	1.15	--										
MI2	I have never tried to adapt the way I use the practice change	2.38	1.12	-.17	--									
MI3	I try to adhere as much as possible to the original instructions of how to use this practice change	3.72	1.09	.44**	-.09	--								
L4	Through this practice change I have developed a new way of thinking related to my work	3.52	1.23	.13	-.07	.22	--							
L5	I have changed the content of my work (what I do) according to the practice change	3.25	1.12	.26*	-.19	.17	.34**	--						
L6	I have changed my work procedures (how I work) due to the practice change	3.61	1.15	.12	-.15	.12	.28*	.29*	--					
R7	I put effort into adapting and applying the practice change to my work	3.92	1.07	.32**	-.05	.38**	.16	.18	.32**	--				
R8	I always search for new ways to improve the practice change in my work	4.20	0.85	.30**	-.18	.35**	.45**	.31**	.19	.42**	--			
R9	According to different circumstances, I flexibly apply the practice change in conducting my tasks, as it does not always fit my work	3.39	1.23	-.10	-.12	.03	.11	.23*	.35**	.23*	.07	--		
MC10	Through using the practice change I not only experienced many changes in my way of working but also put much effort into creatively using the practice change in new and different ways	3.49	1.10	.11	-.14	.31**	.53**	.29*	.39**	.29**	.42**	.33**	--	
MC11	This practice change has led to changes in my work, but I have also created my own ways of doing things different from the practice change	3.46	1.17	-.08	-.23*	-.08	.26*	.16	.20	-.00	.16	.44**	.53**	--
MC12	Because of this practice change, I experienced many changes in my work, but I also adapted how I use it, so it fits better with my work	3.49	1.11	.08	-.19	-.01	.46**	.30**	.42**	.25*	.18	.38**	.50**	.32**

Note. MI = Mechanical Implementation, L = Learning, R = Reinvention, MC = Mutual Change.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Given that the original model did not fit, I conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to explore if the data was measuring different latent factors to the original design. First, I examined the data to determine if it was suitable based on the criteria laid out by Pett et al. (2003). To do this, the analysis must have high factor loading, low number of factors, and a high number of variables (De Winter et al., 2009). Next, I examined the correlation matrix for the items to ensure no inter-item correlation exceeded r = .53. Finally, I conducted Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy to evaluate the strength of the association among the items in the correlation matrix. Bartlett's test was significant (X^2 = 242.22, df = 66, p < .001) and the KMO (0.72) indicated 'middling' sufficiency (Kaiser, 1974). The determinant of the matrix was .03 showing that the matrix was not an identity matrix and was suitable for factor analysis. To further explore the correlation, I examined the anti-image correlation matrix. All items achieved the minimum measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) needed for further analysis (MSA > .50) as advised by Kaiser (1974). These tests all indicated that the data were suitable for EFA. I started the EFA by exploring a four-factor model that aligned with the theory and initial model presented by Sung and Choi (2014). This model showed very poor fit indices, with few items loading clearly onto factors. The item loading of the four-factor model is shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Factor Loading for the Original Model

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
MI1	0.59*	-0.07	0.01	-0.05
MI2	-0.12	-0.16	-0.07	-0.14
MI3	0.82*	-0.00	-0.01	-0.06
L4	-0.01	-0.06	0.99*	-0.06
L5	0.19	-0.00	0.26	0.27*
L6	0.13	-0.03	0.15	0.61*
R7	0.60*	-0.05	-0.02	0.39*
R8	0.47*	0.16	0.43*	0.00
R9	-0.02	0.28*	-0.11	0.59*
MC10	0.30*	0.30*	0.45*	0.24
MC11	-0.02	1.14*	0.02	-0.03
MC12	-0.14	0.02	0.50	0.56*

Note: *indicates significance at p = < .05

I then considered other models ranging from one factor through to six, which was the maximum number of factors that converged. Table 13 shows the results of the first six models with their fit indices, none of which reached acceptable cut off criteria. Once all the models were explored, I iteratively removed items based on their contributing level of communality, cross loading, and theoretical contribution to the model. Given the small sample size, factors were interpreted to increase communality, create high factor loading, and align with theory. This enhanced the robustness of the analysis and likelihood of an appropriate model being found, as advised by De Winter et al. (2009).

Table 13

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Six Models for the IB Measure

Model	X^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
One-factor model	169.29	54	.17	.64	.56	.16
Two-factor model	104.78	43	.14	.81	.71	.10
Three-factor model	64.72	33	.12	.90	.80	.07
Four-factor model	34.76	24	.08	.97	.91	.05
Five-factor model	19.19	16	.05	.99	.96	.03
Six-factor model	9.28	9	.02	.99	.99	.02

Note: RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

Additional data for the tested models and fit indices are presented in Appendix E. None of the models met the established cut off criteria. The analysis did, however, reveal that a single IB factor, Mutual Change, showed good loading after confounding items were removed. In this way, the exploratory factor analysis replicated some of the original theoretical categories. Consequently, I re-performed the confirmatory factor analysis, removing whole categories iteratively until the model fit indices showed acceptable validity. This allowed for retention of the original theoretical model while removing sub-dimensions from the IB that were confounding the data. The final model retained the original sub-dimension Mutual Change, the added sub-dimension of No Change and the independent variable Compatibility while demonstrating acceptable fit indices compared to the cut-off

values (X^2 = 36.41, *df* = 32, p = .0.271; RMSEA = .043; CFI = .994; TLI = .991, SRMR = .053). The full data is available in Appendix E.

Next, I performed a reliability analysis on the two remaining factors. The analysis showed acceptable reliability for Mutual Change (.71), Compatibility (.86) and No Change (.70). This indicated the items in the dimensions shared sufficient variance to measure the latent variable, as advised by Field (2018). The final scale scores used for the study are shown with their means, standard deviations, median, interquartile ranges and correlations in Table 14.

Table 14

Means, Standard Deviations, Median, Interquartile Range, and Correlations for the IB Measure

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*Median*	*IQR*	1	2
1. Mutual Change	3.49	0.87	3.7	(3.0, 4.0)		
2. Compatibility	3.32	1.11	3.3	(2.3, 4.3)	.34**	
3. No Change	3.32	0.95	3.3	(2.6, 4.0)	-.26*	.99

Note: N = 107 Unit of analysis is the individual

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, I examined the data to determine normality using both visualisation and statistical measures. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed non-normal distributions for Mutual Change, No Change and Compatibility (p < .05) with mild skewness for Mutual Change (z = -.60), No Change (z = -.17 and Compatibility (z = -.20). Given the sample size was greater than 30, the data was considered normally distributed with skewness and kurtosis within acceptable ranges (Field, 2018).

Findings

Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment and its subscales were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). There was no missing data for the PE measure after the initial removal of respondents who did not progress past the demographic questions.

The means of the variables were examined at a 95% confidence interval using bootstrapping. The data show practitioners identify themselves as competent (*M* = 4.32, *CI*

= 4.24, 4.52) and hold meaning about their work (*M* = 4.64, 95% bootstrapped *CI* [4.52, 4.71] with both mean scores above the agree category. Self-determination scores were slightly above neutral (*M* = 3.26, 95% bootstrapped *CI* [2.91, 3.43]) with a large distribution of scores and clustering around the "agree" category (4).   Practitioners viewed their impact on their respective departments as low (*M* = 2.38, 95% bootstrapped *CI,* [2.12, 2.61]) with a mean below neutral. Overall psychological empowerment was higher than neutral (*M* = 3.65, 95% bootstrapped *CI,* [3.51, 3.82]). The scores for PE and its sub-dimensions are presented in Table 15 with the different demographic groupings measured.

Table 15

Bootstrapped Means, Standard Deviations, and Confidence Intervals of PE across Sample Demographics

Variable	PE total				Self-determination			Competence			Impact			Meaning		
	n	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI
All practitioners	107	3.65	0.64	[3.51, 3.82]	3.26	1.12	[2.91, 3.43]	4.33	0.73	[4.24, 4.52]	2.38	1.16	[2.12, 2.61]	4.64	0.52	[4.52, 4.71]
Length of employment																
Less than 1 year	11	3.62	0.73	[3.34, 4.16]	3.44	1.16	[3.50, 4.18]	3.83	0.83	[3.32, 4.59]	2.53	1.23	[1.74, 2.93]	4.67	0.62	[4.71, 5.03]
1 to 5 years	36	3.38	0.64	[3.12, 3.53]	2.82	1.13	[4.32, 4.77]	4.08	0.86	[3.90, 4.43]	2.02	1.12	[1.76, 2.37]	4.57	0.47	[4.33, 4.75]
5+ years	60	3.82	0.57	[3.70, 4.03]	3.48	1.04	[3.22, 3.60]	4.57	0.50	[4.42, 4.74]	2.56	1.15	[2.43, 2.93]	4.68	0.53	[4.62, 4.83]
Level of education																
Bachelor's degree	53	3.63	0.70	[3.49, 3.71]	3.20	1.17	[2.86, 3.31]	4.35	0.71	[4.26, 4.66]	2.38	1.19	[2.16, 2.68]	4.59	0.59	[4.44, 4.70]
Master's degree	40	3.74	0.57	[3.55, 4.06]	3.37	1.06	[2.89, 3.64]	4.44	0.60	[4.32, 4.76]	2.42	1.22	[2.23, 2.94]	4.75	0.36	[4.62, 4.94]
Diploma/certificate	6	3.35	0.55	[2.79, 3.88]	2.71	1.11	[1.43, 3.76]	4.29	0.49	[3.84, 4.93]	2.00	0.88	[1.08, 2.73]	4.38	0.76	[3.57, 5.26]
Child protection role																
Frontline practitioner	67	3.48	0.62	[3.23, 3.62]	3.06	1.15	[2.69, 3.30]	4.22	0.83	[4.02, 4.53]	2.06	1.00	[1.63, 2.28]	4.58	0.50	[4.44, 4.72]
Supervisor	17	3.84	0.72	[3.47, 4.31]	3.63	1.12	[2.91, 4.23]	4.38	0.45	[4.17, 4.72]	2.75	1.30	[2.19, 3.83]	4.59	0.75	[3.95, 5.27]
Management	12	4.13	0.46	[3.73, 4.45]	3.53	1.02	[2.74, 4.25]	4.71	0.50	[4.68, 5.03]	3.47	1.18	[2.53, 4.38]	4.81	0.30	[4.52, 5.03]
Child protection sector																
Public role	59	3.62	0.64	[3.43, 3.88]	3.16	1.14	[2.81, 3.27]	4.43	0.69	[4.23, 4.68]	2.23	1.10	[1.94, 2.53]	4.64	0.45	[4.57, 4.85]
NGO role	22	3.87	0.68	[3.60, 4.31]	3.52	1.07	[3.02, 4.00]	4.27	0.81	[3.93, 4.66]	3.08	1.30	[2.63, 3.92]	4.62	0.54	[4.42, 4.93]
Private sector	5	3.47	0.63	[1.94, 4.37]	2.80	0.80	[0.76, 4.08]	4.50	0.35	[4.00, 4.91]	2.27	0.92	[0.88, 2.57]	4.33	1.31	[2.79, 5.98]

Note. CI = confidence interval. Bootstrapping was at 5000.

A series of one way between-subjects factors analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. The aim was to examine the difference between the PE mean scores based on length of employment, type of child protection sector, role in child protection, and level of education. The data met all assumptions for the ANOVA being normally distributed, containing independent observations, and having homogeneity of variance (Field, 2018). Analysis of pairwise comparisons was conducted using the Tukey correction suitable to unbalanced designs given that some levels of the factors had few cases (Bender & Lange, 2001).

When examining overall levels of PE, there was a statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) between the three levels of employment experience, $F(2,106) = 6.02$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .10$. This is a medium effect size (Leech et al., 2005) explaining 10% of the variance. Post hoc Tukey HSD tests showed that expert practitioners who had worked for more than five years ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.57$) had significantly ($p = .002$) higher scores of PE than proficient practitioners who had worked between one and five years ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.64$) with a medium effect size ($d = 0.73$). There was no significant difference between novice practitioners with less than one-year experience to either proficient practitioners ($p = .460$) or expert practitioners ($p = .550$). This was because of a decrease in overall PE for practitioners who identified as having between one and five years of experience.

There was a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between the levels of employment roles, $F(3,101) = 2.33$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .13$). The effect size was slightly higher than for length of experience and explained 13% of the variance. Post hoc Tukey HSD tests showed that practitioners in management positions ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.46$) had significantly ($p = .005$) higher scores of PE than frontline practitioners ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.62$) showing a large effect size ($d = 1.20$). There were no significant differences across other roles.

There was no statistically significant difference for any of the levels of education ($p = .460$) or sectors of employment ($p = .360$) on overall PE scores.

While the data for the PE instrument as a whole showed a normal distribution, the sub-dimensions did not. Further, bootstrapping was not felt to be sufficient given the skewedness of the data. Because of this, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used instead of ANOVA, with the Dunn-Bonferroni for post hoc tests (Field, 2018).

Competence

There was a statistically significant difference between the three levels of employment length in terms of their reported competence, $H(2) = 13.39$, $p < .001$. Post hoc tests showed that competence steadily increased, with a significant difference ($p = .013$) between expert (5+ years, $Mdn = 4.5$) and proficient practitioners (1-5 years, $Mdn = 4.0$) and a significant difference ($p = .005$) between expert and novice practitioners (1 year, $Mdn = 4.0$). There was no statistically significant difference related to sector ($p = .391$), role ($p = .155$), or education ($p = .310$) on scores of competence.

Self-Determination

There was a statistically significant difference between the three levels of employment length based on reported self-determination, $H(2) = 7.34$, $p = .025$. Post hoc tests indicated that proficient practitioners (1-5 years, $Mdn = 2.67$) had significantly lower reports of self-determination ($p = .025$) compared to expert practitioners (5+ years, $Mdn = 4$). There was no statistically significant difference related to education ($p = .405$), role ($p = .105$), or sector ($p = .326$) on scores of self-determination.

Meaning

There was no statistically significant difference across sector ($p = .581$), role ($p = .061$), education ($p = .397$), or length of employment ($p = .176$) on scores measuring practitioner's sense of meaning from their work.

Impact

There was a statistically significant difference between the levels of practitioner work roles in relation to their sense of impact, $H(3) = 15.20$, $p = .002$. Post hoc tests showed that impact was significantly different ($p = .036$) between frontline practitioners who reported the lowest perceived impact ($Mdn = 2.0$) compared to those in supervisory positions ($Mdn = 2.3$) and those in management ($p < .001$, $Mdn = 3.8$). There was no significant difference across levels of education ($p = .684$), sector ($p = 0.714$) or length of employment ($p = .068$) for how practitioners perceived their impact on their department.

Figure 17 shows the results graphically grouped by independent variable. A reference line has been added showing a neutral response (neither agree nor disagree). Although

categorical analysis was used for the sub-dimensions, the mean has been used on the graph for easier visual interpretation.

Figure 17

Graphs of the Mean Distribution of PE Across Demographic Variables
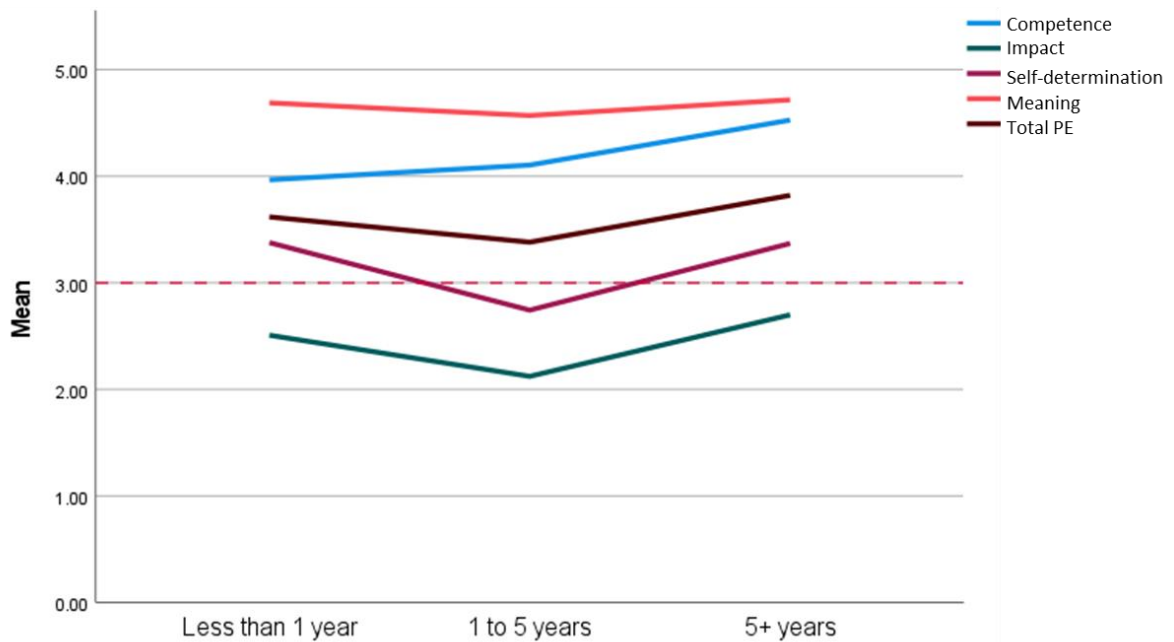
PE and sub-dimension scores by length of employment
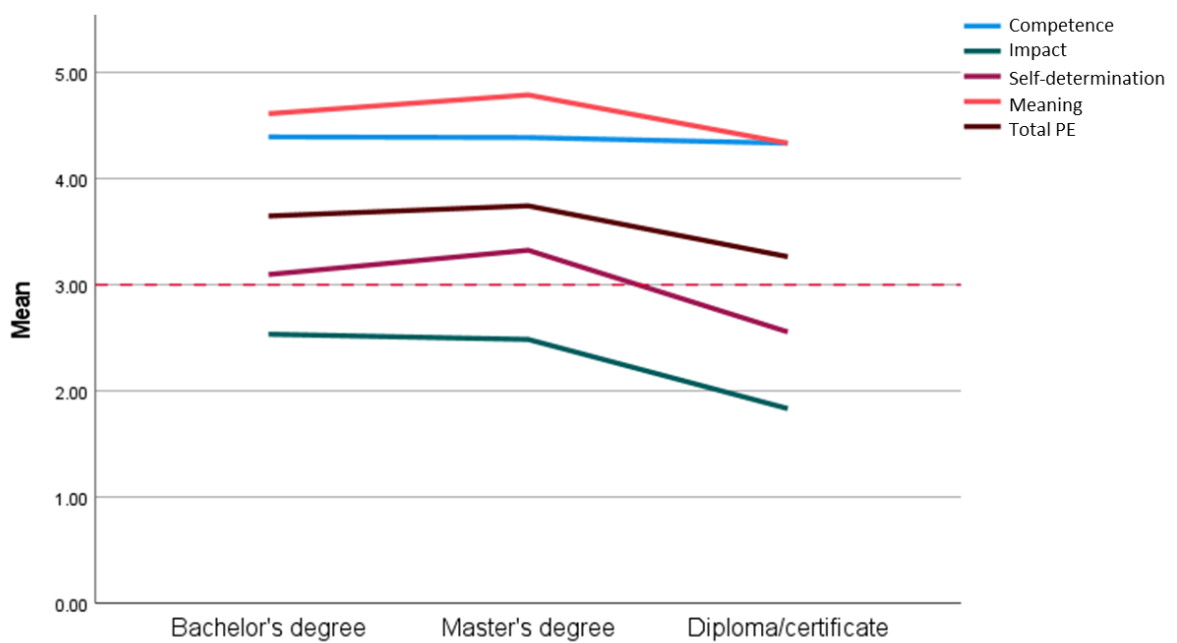
PE and sub-dimension scores by education
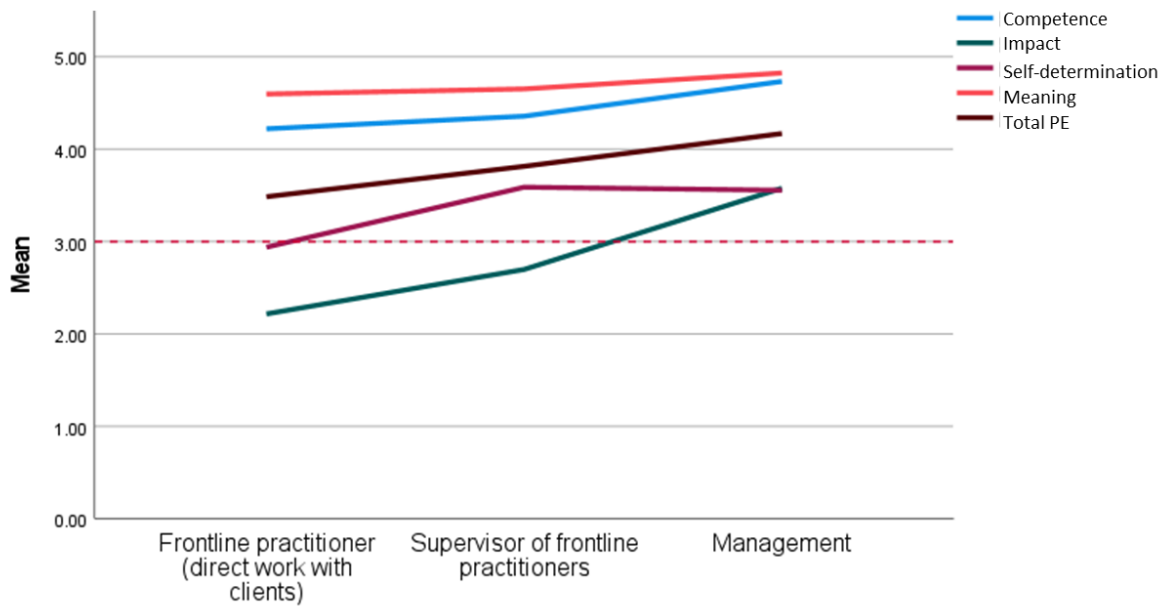
PE and sub-dimension scores by role
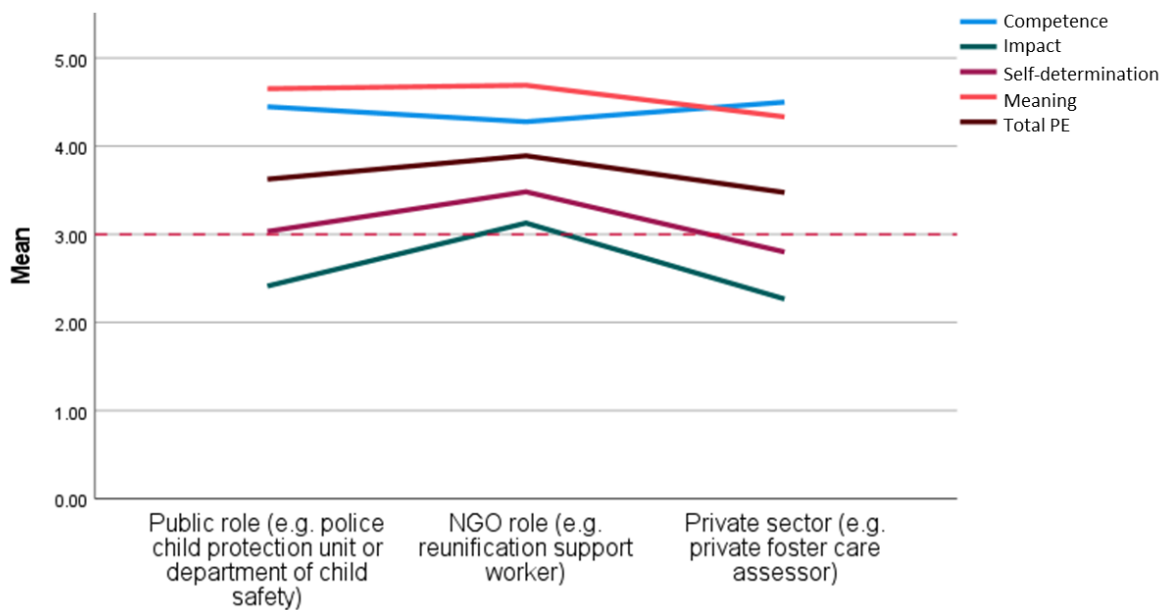
PE and sub-dimension scores by sector

Responsiveness to Change

Because of difficulty validating the IB measure, only the variable Mutual Change was measured as practitioners' response to systemic reform, allowing it to be compared to the sub-dimensions of PE to answer the research question. Mutual Change was measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The mean of the variable was

examined at a 95% confidence interval using bootstrapping. The data showed that practitioners perceived themselves as responding to change. They did this by adapting both their own practice and the tools or frameworks provided to them through Mutual Change (M = 3.49, bootstrapped $CI,$ = 3.34, 3.72). These responses clustered around the 'agree' category.

A series of one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare practitioners' perceptions Mutual Change against the demographic variables. There was no significant difference for practitioner's use of Mutual Change between child protection sectors (p = .860), level of education (p = .663), or length of employment (p = .787).   There was a significant difference across the child protection roles (p = .041), however, post hoc testing did not reveal any significant difference between the groups. Overall, there were no significant differences found for practitioners' response to systemic reform amongst any demographic variables.

Relationship Between Psychological Empowerment and Systemic Reform

Correlations

Spearman's rho was used to assess the relationship between the PE sub-dimensions and the Mutual Change variable. The resulting correlations are presented in Table 16. The correlations showed a relationship between PE and Mutual Change. The sub-dimension of meaning showed the strongest correlation, while competence was not significantly correlated. All statistically significant correlations were of a medium effect size (> .3) based in the criteria by Leech et al. (2005).

Table 16

Correlations Between Variables for the Regression Model

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mutual Change	--				
2. Meaning	.42**	--			
3. Impact	.32**	.40**	--		
4. Competence	.19	.29*	.37**	--	
5. Self-determination	.32**	.34**	.49**	.09	--
6. Psychological empowerment	.41**	.61**	.84**	.54**	.75**

Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Prior to regression, data assumptions were checked to determine suitability as advised by Field (2018). The data had normally distributed residuals, showed linear relationships between variables, homoscedasticity on scatter plots, tolerance levels greater than 0.2 and variance inflation rates below 5.0. This indicates no issues with multicollinearity. Two influential outliers were removed prior to regression.

Given the associations, hierarchical multiple regression was performed to test the model. Each of the sub-dimensions of PE were loaded in order of strength of correlation (meaning, impact, self-determination, and competence). For the first block of the hierarchical regression, the predictor variable meaning was analysed. The results showed that the model was statistically significant ($p <$) with the R^2 value of .15 suggesting that practitioners' sense of meaning accounts for 15% of the variance in Mutual Change. This is a medium effect size (Correll et al., 2020). The second block added the predictor variable impact to the analysis. The addition was not significant ($p = .142$) accounting for an additional 2.5% variance. The third block added the predictor variable self-determination. This addition was not significant ($p = .207$) accounting for an additional 1.8% of the variance. A similar outcome was found for the final block when the predictor variable of competence was added. This addition was not significant ($p = .451$) and accounted for only an additional 0.06% of the variance. Once all the predictor variables were added, the R^2 value was .21 indicating that PE accounted for 21% of the total variance. Table 17 shows the coefficients for the regression model.

Table 17

Regression Model Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE_B	β	t	p	r_{sp}^2
Constant	3.48	.10		36.68	<.001	
Meaning	.48	.21	.28	2.25	.028	.05
Impact	.06	.10	.07	0.54	.591	.00
Self-determination	.14	.11	.18	1.37	.175	.02
Competence	.11	.15	.09	0.76	.451	.00

Note. r_{sp}^2 is the part correlation squared

Discussion

The quantitative data provided information on the patterns of psychological empowerment within the child protection system. This data showed how practitioners perceived their personal agency within the system, an important component of the M/M framework. The PE sub-dimensions of meaning and competence theoretically relate to internal concerns rather than influence on the system. These reflected the personal projects that practitioners prioritised, based on what was important to them. Both meaning and competence had a mean score between 'agree' and 'strongly agree', showing that practitioners had success in achieving the goals of these personal projects.

The high levels of meaning held by practitioners was not surprising. Child protection practitioners are typically passionate about their work and gain satisfaction from helping others (Cabiati et al., 2020). In contrast, the high levels of reported competence were surprising. Many child protection organisations face significant challenges to improving staff learning such as the time-consuming nature of the work, the breadth of knowledge required for the role, and high rates of staff turnover (Akin, Brook, Byers, & Lloyd, 2016; Akin, Brook, Lloyd, et al., 2016; Barth, Lee, & Hodorowicz, 2017; Weegar, Moorman, Stenason, & Romano, 2018). In addition, there is currently no specific model to support learning in organisations serving children (Barth et al., 2017). Despite these factors, the practitioners in this study felt confident in their skills, even early in their careers.

The sub-dimensions of self-determination and impact showed lower median scores and wider distribution than those of competence and meaning. This reflects more variation amongst practitioners. The total median score for self-determination was slightly above the 'neutral' category (*Md* = 3.3) and the median score for impact below neutral (*Md* = 2.3). Theoretically, both sub-dimensions analysed practitioners' influence on the child protection system. While self-determination is the control and influence someone has over their individual work, impact extends this influence to the broader system (Spreitzer, 1996). Therefore, rather than being internal, empowerment for these sub-dimensions is relational. This means these sub-dimensions examine power and control between the practitioner and the governing structures within the system (Schirmer, 2019).

When examining the different roles of the child protection system, impact increased as practitioners gained the role of supervisor (*Md* = 2.3) or manager (*Md* = 4.0). This shows that the system is structured to increase agency hierarchically, to a smaller number of people. Overall, these levels of psychological empowerment point towards practitioners feeling they are in a static system they cannot change. These practitioners are active but contribute to morphostasis. This is explained by Archer (2013), where morphostasis occurs not because people lack agency but rather because people mould themselves to the system. As a result, the everyday actions of individuals continuously reproduce the surrounding systems (Archer, 2000).

In addition, the multiple regression showed that only a sense of meaning predicted responsiveness to change. The finding has implications for systemic reform, given that most reform recommendations include competence. Even the most recent National Framework (Department of Social Services, 2021) identifies the upskilling of practitioners as a target for change. This recommendation may not be easily achieved if practitioners already perceive themselves as competent and only engage with reform when it is compatible. However, Archer (1995) does offer some theoretical insight into these results. People use their values and emotions to guide them on what actions to take, weighing up the costs and benefits of 'doing' or 'not doing'. The data identifies that for practitioners in child protection, their sense of meaning is important and influences how they think about changes to their practice and the system around them.

Strengths and Limitations

The study examined the psychological empowerment of child protection practitioners in Australia. The national sample allowed for a comparison against demographics. Given that PE has been identified as a critical workforce issue, these findings provide data about the perceptions of practitioners. The use of the PEI allowed for a nuanced measure of PE, with the data showing that the sub-dimensions were experienced differently. These findings give an indication on where changes can be made in the child protection system to better support practitioners.

There are notable limitations to the quantitative phase of the study. Firstly, the IB measure did not show validity for the original model. Many items were removed, resulting in only a

single category of change measured. This category measured both practitioners' change and the adaptations they made to any interventions. This means that although it measured change, it was not representative of fidelity.

A second limitation is that a single systemic reform was not measured. This meant that practitioners responded to many different changes, ranging from full frameworks to individual tools. It is likely that this influenced the results, making them harder to generalise. In fact, these different changes may be a significant and overlooked factor in the study.

A final limitation is the small sample size. The size of the sample made validation of the measures difficult. It also influenced the detectable size of results. Some effects may not have been detected, especially amongst the small sub-groups. Given the difficulties validating the measures, additional rigour was built into the qualitative data to triangulate the findings.

Conclusion

The quantitative phase of the study located with sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment and implementation behaviours within the Australian child protection population. It also examined the relationship between PE and practitioners' perception of responding to change. ANOVA tests and non-parametric equivalents were conducted to determine demographic differences between levels of empowerment and implementation behaviours. PE showed variability in its sub-dimensions, with significant differences noted across practitioners' length of employment and their role within the organisation. Practitioners' sense of meaning remaining high and constant regardless of their role or length of employment.

Competence was generally rated as a high score, reflecting practitioners' confidence in their skills and knowledge. There was a significant difference when comparing expert practitioners (5+ years) to proficient practitioners (1-5 years), and novice practitioners (<1 year), demonstrating a steady increase in competence as practitioners gained experience in child protection. Interestingly, this same significance was not demonstrated when

compared across practitioners' roles within the organisation, with managers not scoring themselves as significantly more competent than frontline practitioners.

Self-determination reflected an interesting pattern, with scores changing based on length of employment. Unlike with the steady growth of competence, self-determination showed a non-significant decrease to below neutral between novice practitioners and proficient practitioners, followed by a significant difference between proficient practitioners and expert practitioners, with scores again rising to indicate positive self-determination. This trend demonstrates that although practitioners perceive their competence to grow, there is a period during their employment where their sense self-determination and autonomy over their work decreases before later improving again.

Impact was generally below neutral, indicating that practitioners do not feel they have a say in their department or can influence the management structure. This sense of impact did not change based on length of employment but varied between practitioner roles, with supervisors and managers showing a steady increase in their ability to influence their departments. This is an understandable finding as influence increases with structural authority. It is noteworthy however, that even managers perceived their impact to be only slightly above neutral, demonstrating that much of the authority or influencing power in child protection practice does not remain solely with managers.

Practitioners' perception of mutual change, where they changed both their own practice and adapted their response to systemic reform, did not show any difference based on level of education, length of employment, sector, or work role of the practitioner.

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed, identifying practitioners' sense of meaning as the most important PE sub-dimension influencing their response to systemic reform. The sub-dimension of meaning explained 15% of the variance. The final model showed that psychological empowerment, accounted for 21% of the variance explaining practitioners' use of 'Mutual Change' as a response to systemic reform.

These results are explored further in the next chapter that presents findings from analysis of interviews with practitioners to identify the structure, culture, and agency in the system. The data was then integrated, and the final results presented in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER SIX: PHASE 2: QUALITATIVE

Phase 1: Quantitative			Phase 2: Qualitative			Phase 3: Integrated	
Relevant literature	Methods	Quantitative findings	Relevant literature	Methods	Qualitative findings	Methods	Integrated findings
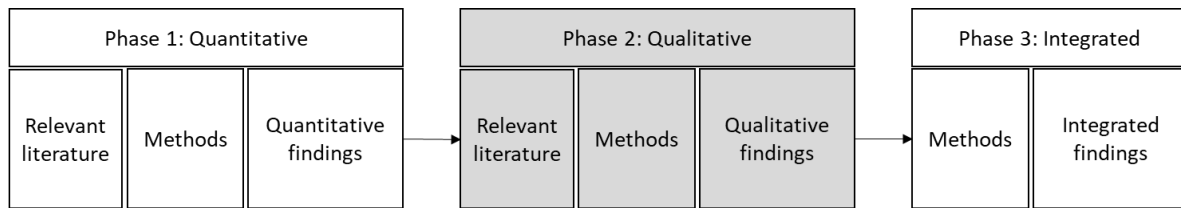
Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings of the qualitative component of the sequential explanatory mixed-methods study. First, I outline the relevant literature where the Morphostatic/Morphogenetic (M/M) framework of Archer (1995) has been used in other studies. Next, I describe the methods used, based on the literature. Then, I describe the data collection and analysis before finally presenting the findings. The purpose of the qualitative phase of the study was to describe the structure, culture, and agency of the child protection system. Accordingly, I present the findings in those themes. This formed the foundation of the critical realist framework for further analysis. I conclude the chapter with the strengths and limitations of the qualitative phase of the study.

Relevant Literature

This section outlines the relevant literature for studying systemic reform. I start by presenting a summary of studies examining systemic reform in child protection. Next, I describe how critical realism has informed the study of systems more generally. This situates this phase of the study within the broader literature to compare the methods used. I conclude with factors that influenced my choice of methods.

I conducted a systematic search of the literature to locate studies on systemic reform in child protection. The studies found typically involved a case study of one or more reforms. Many of these also occurred alongside evaluations of outcomes. This meant that the information related to specific reforms, with little generalised data. For example, when systematically searching for literature, 46% of the included articles studied SafeCare. The dominance of a single model made it challenging to draw conclusions, as the results may

have been specific to the model. In the remaining studies, the systemic reforms varied widely. For example, in Australia, Salveron et al. (2015), implemented a full Signs of Safety framework across all facets of child protection practice. In contrast, Alfandari (2017) studied a set of discrete decision-making tools implemented across child protection in Israel. These are two very different reforms, although interestingly both highlighted similar challenges. These findings may indicate that the underlying structure and culture of child protection systems influence change regardless of the extent of reform.

The methods used in the also literature varied. Most studies used qualitative interviews, supplemented with observations, surveys, or focus groups. Studies that used observations generally reported on fidelity, noting whether changes occurred. Examples were seen in Alfandari (2017), where Israeli practitioners did not use the new structured decision-making tools. Similarly, in England, Peckover et al. (2009) reported superficial engagement and poor fidelity by practitioners with the Common Assessment Framework. These studies showed the importance of observation when studying reform. In contrast, studies that only used interviews focused more on facilitators and barriers to implementing reform. For example, Akin et al. (2014) examined the perceptions of practitioners when implementing Parent Management Training in the USA. The study noted the importance of sequential and paced training, supportive leaders, and individualised coaching to create successful reform.

The grey literature also contained many evaluations of large systemic reform. Because of the numerous child protection reviews and recommendations, there are many follow up implementation reports. For example, McDougall et al. (2016) conducted an independent inquiry in the response to the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission in Australia (Government of South Australia, 2016). The inquiry examined how prior recommendations had been implemented by examining publicly available documents. Unfortunately, the study found that many of these documents were shallow, providing only basic information about the reform. An example is the 2021 recommendation report for South Australia (Department for Child Protection, 2021). This document merely lists the recommendations, lead agencies, whether the recommendation was accepted, and its implementation status (e.g., in progress). Because of this, the information from reviews and inquiries may lack depth and robust methodology, biasing any evaluation of reform.

Given the methodology of this study, additional literature was located about conducting critical realist studies in systems. Sayer (1999) wrote extensively on critical realism, arguing that it is tolerant of a wide range of methods. He states that interviews are useful for answering 'what produces change?' as they gather data directly from people within the system. Further, Pawson and Tilley (1997) provide guidance for conducting critical realist interviews. They state the interview should investigate the relationship between underlying causal mechanisms, the social and environmental context, and the observed outcomes of those factors. This requires the interview framework to be based on the researcher's theory and for the participants to confirm, falsify, or refine that theory through the process of interviews (Pawson, 1996). Here, the participant and researcher each hold different types of expertise which are then brought together to explore the mechanisms behind the content (Smith & Elger, 2014). Therefore, the researcher is not neutral in the interview, but actively seeks to collaborate with the participant to explore the theory of causal mechanisms. This active role leads to nuances within the interviewing process where each subsequent interview leads to the exploration of additional concepts, perceptions, and refinement of the theory (Mills et al., 2010). All questioning explores, 'What must be present for these results to be observed?' (Willis, 2019).

Despite the guidance above, few critical realist studies provided clear methods. Fletcher (2017) addressed this gap by outlining the interview and analysis process in a study on women in Saskatchewan farm work. She conducted 30 in-depth interviews and then used abduction and retroduction to analyse the results. Rather than relying solely on the qualitative themes, Fletcher hypothesised causal mechanisms that led to the observed themes. This meant the results were not thematic but emerged through Fletcher's interpretation of links between their statements. Additionally, Fletcher highlighted the importance of remaining flexible during the research process so that the methods can be tailored to important issues that arise. When examining other studies, the data collection methods, types of analyses, and presentation varied widely. For example, Herepath (2014) studied the systemic changes caused by a public inquiry into the Bristol Royal Infirmary. Herepath collected observational data of formal and informal meetings. They analysed these data using abduction and retroduction, as outlined in Danermark (2019). Herepath identified different groups within the system such as policy leaders, managers, civil servants.

They then identified the main emergent properties of each group. Together, these properties showed how the different groups interacted with each vying for power. While this analysis related to culture and structure, neither was defined. In contrast, Goldman (2020) examined the structure and culture influencing succession planning in libraries. They gathered data from semi-structured interviews and analysed the data using a combination of a priori and in vivo coding. Goldman then presented the data by describing the sub-themes within structure, culture, and agency. This showed how their interaction shaped the responses of people within the system.

In summary, the methods for studying systemic reform varied widely. One commonality was that all studied a specific reform. Although that was the original intent of this study, the design was adapted. Instead, systemic reform was studied as a concept, across a range of different reforms and systems. This generalization addressed one of the gaps highlighted in the literature in Chapter Two where it was identified that the knowledge base needs to be synthesized. Multiple theoretical frameworks informed the interview and analysis, by creating a deductive coding frame for the data. This ensured important factors were considered. Additionally, the literature on critical realist studies informed the methods of this study. These are discussed next.

Methods

Development of the Interview Framework

I developed an interview framework where I asked participants the same broad questions and then explored their unique situation using follow-up probes. The goal was to construct explanations for the observed social patterns by understanding the decision making of practitioners leading to certain outcomes, within a particular context. The questions were broadly designed to address the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment and reflect on both personal and systemic change. The literature review, quantitative analysis data, and interview questions are presented in Table 18 showing how they aligned.

Table 18

Planning the Interview Framework

Data obtained from the literature review	Data obtained from the quantitative analysis	Qualitative interview questions
Competence Practitioners who feel competent in their skills are more likely to engage in systemic reform when it is compatible with their skills.	Practitioners reflected high levels of confidence in their own skills. Competence gradually increased over time with more experience. Competence was not related to responsiveness to change.	How has your way of thinking and practicing changed since you first became child protection practitioner? What led to these changes?
Impact Compliance culture reinforces top-down decision-making. High level administration is disconnected from frontline practice.	Practitioners identified having low impact on their department, indicating a top-down flow of information. Impact did not change based on length of experience and only when practitioners moved into higher level management roles.	Tell me about a time when you were able to have an impact on a decision about your work Tell me about a time when you were unable to have an impact on a decision about your work
Self-determination Systems have become more techno centric in an effort to control variability in practice. More responsibility is placed on individual practitioners but they have less capacity to respond.	Self-determination showed a decrease as practitioners transitioned from novice to proficient in their skills. This self-determination increased after more experience and as practitioners became experts, they felt their self-determination increased. This change was not related to the role of practitioners.	What components of your practice do you feel you have control over? If you had control over all elements of your practice, what would you do differently?
Meaning Practitioner's sense of satisfaction from their work decreases with a strict compliance culture. Higher focus on administrative components takes away from relationships with children and families. High levels of meaning are correlated with burnout due to over-investment in outcomes.	Practitioners held high levels of meaning for their work. These levels remained stable regardless of the number of years of employment, role, or sector. Meaning was most strongly related to responsiveness to change.	What changes, if any, do you feel the system needs to better achieve its goal? Why did you choose these changes? (What matters to you?) What are the barriers to these changes happening in your system?

While the interviews were structured based on these broad questions, I also followed the guidance of Smith and Elger (2014), where practitioners were consulted as active participants in exploring the data rather than rigidly following the interview guide. Here I engaged practitioners in reflecting about their answers to encourage them to express the reasons behind their behaviour. These additional prompts were based on the findings of the quantitative data in Chapter Five.

Data Collection

I collected data through 45-minute semi-structured telephone interviews. I used a nested sample of the participants from phase one, with a portion of them agreeing to an interview after completing the survey. I obtained consent for the interview in writing at the conclusion of the survey and again, verbally, at the start of the interview. Although 30 participants agreed to be contacted after the survey, only 19 completed their interview. Reasons included not responding to phone calls, participants stating they were too busy, or incorrect contact details provided.

I interviewed practitioners over a 3-month period from December 2020 to February 2021. I recorded the interviews on a password protected digital recorder and uploaded them to a password secured laptop. I then transcribed all interviews in Microsoft Word. Next, I uploaded the transcripts into the QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software, version 12 Pro.

Qualitative Analysis

To ensure a robust analytical framework for this study, I chose a theoretical model to connect the data and reviewed the critiques of critical realism. Throughout the processes, I applied standards of high-quality analysis using guidelines for rigor in critical realist methods as outlined in Mullet (2018). These were creating a transparent view of whose reality was represented in the research and of researcher bias, ensuring completeness and adequacy of evidence, obtaining an adequate sample and variety of data, using a clear analytical framework, immersing oneself in the data, searching for disconfirming evidence, generating educative and catalytic authenticity where the findings improve social justice, upholding fairness, speaking to social or political change, and writing to suit the audience and context. While working through these criteria, I was focused on being transparent and respectful to

the participants who had shared their experiences. I aimed for scientific rigor but also an analysis underpinned by ethical and principled practice. The specific ways that I addressed these criteria are discussed in Appendix F. It was also important to use a methodologically consistent analytical framework. I used two sources of literature to create the framework: a critical realist analysis proposed by Danermark (2019) and best practice qualitative analysis by Flick (2014). The resulting framework is shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18

Data Analysis Framework
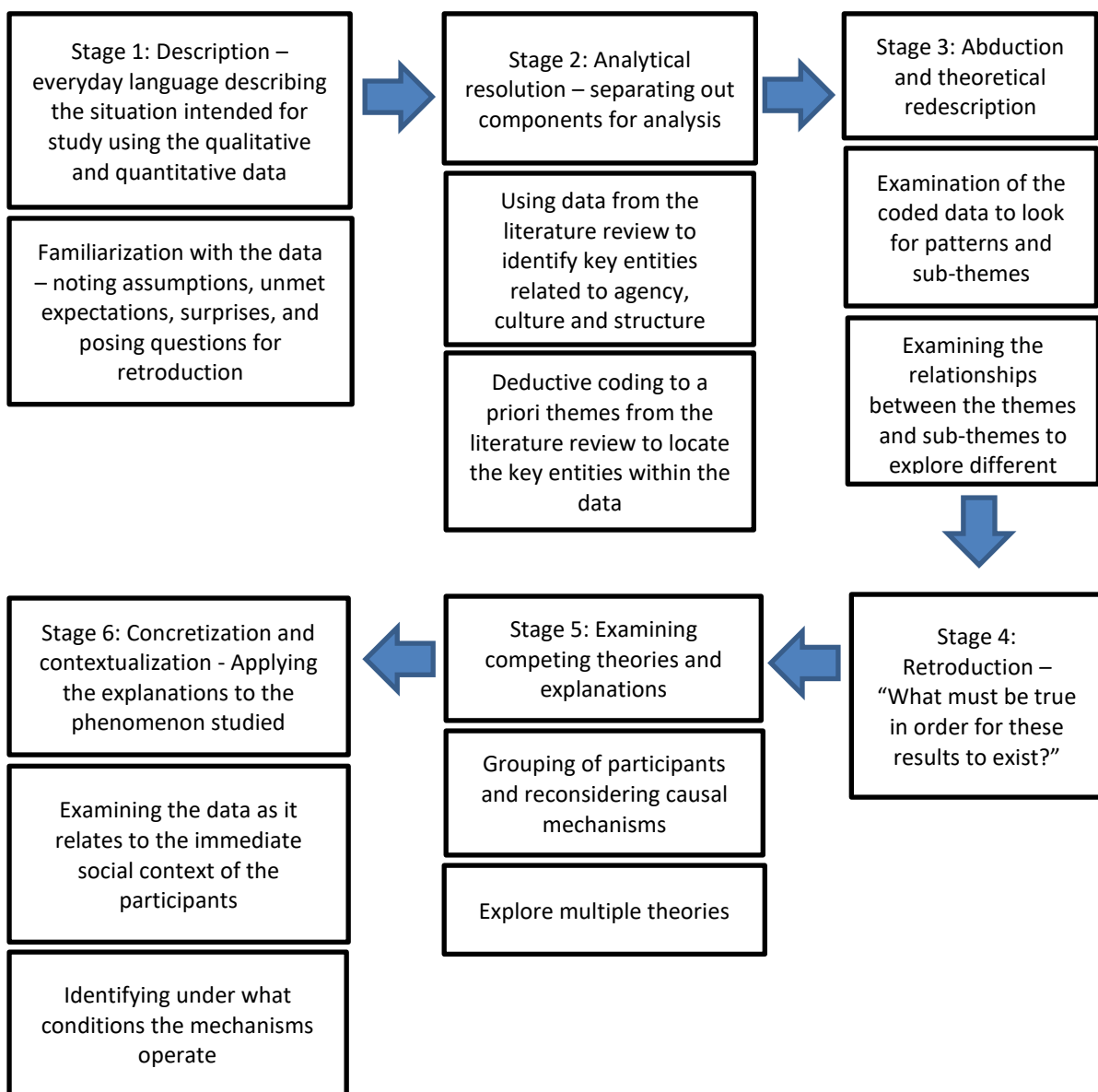
Critical realist data analysis

Stage 1: Description of participants and key entities

First, I transcribed all interviews with the support of offline Microsoft Dictation Software. I also checked each transcription for accuracy and recorded my initial thoughts and comments in a column alongside the text. Then, I loaded all data transcriptions into Nvivo 12 Pro. I formed cases for each participant, noting their employment history, role within the child protection sector, and their scores from the quantitative phase of data collection. This created a profile of each participant that informed the reading of their interviews to better seek causal mechanisms.

Next, I re-read the transcripts and recorded memos about notable characteristics, apparent themes, participant's use of language, and my own reflections. I placed these alongside the interviews and kept as part of the data for the additional stages of analysis. This was important as recording the research process lessens the risk of bias by making implicit assumptions explicit (Mullet, 2018).

Stage 2: Analytical resolution

During analytical resolution I coded the data into the a priori coding frame, shown in Table 19. The frame was created based on the literature review in Chapter Three and the key variables of PE. This frame then provided the contextual background for further analysis and positioned the data within known theory. The deductive coding contained exclusive categories, with data coding to a single theme only. To determine the difference between themes that were similar, I re-read the data within each theme and compared it to the definitions. This enhanced the reliability of the themes for further analysis.

Table 19

A Priori Coding Frame

Element	Themes from the literature	Language examples
Agency: Actions taken by the individual as a response to the environment	Assimilation	The participant changed their practice as little as possible/did not feel there was any change/fits the change into their prior way of thinking.
	Accommodation	The participant has altered their practice and thinking.
	Staff turnover – personal decision	The participant resigned/changed role/left the sector.
	Relationship building	The participant made requests to be heard/respected/understood by others.
	Refuse	The participant actively or passively remained practicing the same way out of a sense of defiance/in a subversive manner.
Culture: Descriptions of the day-to-day way of engaging in practice.	Crisis driven	Participant describes interruptions to daily work due to emergent priorities or high-risk situations. Participant describes having to prioritize certain tasks due to deadlines.
	Bureaucratic	Participant uses the word bureaucracy, describes high levels of policy or authority, or references administrative tasks prioritized over other tasks.
	Risk averse	Participant uses the term 'risk-averse', describes situations where risk was deemed too high and the participant disagreed, or describes difficulty holding risk. Participant describes the importance of risk and fear of holding risk in the system.
	Relationship driven	Language by the participant describing connections between others in the system including stakeholders, practitioners, and clients.
Structure: Descriptions of the institutions, governing policies, roles, communication patterns, and other	Impact	Participant describes their attempts to influence the structure, be heard or of being understood and valued.
	Resources	Participant descriptions of financial, human resources, time constraints, physical supplies, or other material factors.

Element	Themes from the literature	Language examples
factors that constrain or enable individuals.	Communication patterns	Participant descriptions of how knowledge, information, and opinions flow through the system.
	Staff turnover – structural impacts	Participant references attrition of staff or the impacts of turnover in addition to limited human resources.
	Power/authority/roles	Participant descriptions of power or authority and a role structure that is hierarchical or collaborative.
	System values	Values of the participants, stakeholders, agencies, or conceptual values embedded in practice.
	Policies and procedures	Participant descriptions of formal policies and procedures.
Participant's perceptions of their role	Meaning	Participant descriptions of how well the role aligns with their own values/beliefs/ways of working. Participant descriptions of what components of their work promotes or hinders a sense of meaning.
	Self-determination	Participant descriptions of how much power/autonomy they have in their role to control their own work and decisions.
Sources of growth/competence development	Competence	Participant responses to how they developed their competence as well as the factors they consider important for competency in child protection.

Stage 3: Abduction and theoretical redescription

Abduction involves examining the data to view relationships and connections that may be outside of the initial theory or purpose of the study (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013). Whereas the previous stage used literature to position the interview data based on what was already known, abduction involved seeing the data differently. In abduction, the researcher starts with an observation of a phenomenon, which is then related to a hypothesized rule, therefore drawing new assumptions about the phenomenon (Danermark, 2019). I conducted abduction by re-reading the data and recorded memos. These clarified patterns and possible links between ideas. I recoded each interview into abductive themes that sought the causal mechanisms behind the experiences that participants shared. I then reread the themes until they generated larger, more latent themes. These better captured the 'invisible entities' that lead to visible effects, as described by Danermark (2019).

Next, I theoretically re-described the data according to the M/M framework. Structural, cultural, and agency were separated out so that I could analyse them. Because of the causal nature of the research question, the coded data was then shaped in different ways for analysis. I performed a cluster analysis to look for similarities and differences amongst the interviews. This allowed me to examine outlying interviews. The process encouraged counter-factual thinking to explore alternatives and reduce researcher bias as shown in Meyer and Lunnay (2013). I also used a matrix to examine the data by comparing themes across the different attributes of participants. These analyses allowed patterns to be seen in the data, from which I drew conclusions about the 'rules' governing the system.

Stage 4: Retroduction

Retroduction seeks to understand phenomena by asking "what must be true for this empirical data to exist?" This involves outlining the conditions under which the findings are revealed (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013). Whereas abduction is data driven, retroduction is concept driven, and draws on theories and assumptions (Danermark, 2019). To perform retroduction, I developed a concept map of the main themes and charted their relationship. At each stage I asked if there was further evidence that might be behind what I observed. Figure 19 shows an example of my retroductive process.

Figure 19

Example of the Retroductive Process

```
┌─────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Participants used different │ ──→  │ The strategies mirrored │
│ strategies to regain a sense │     │ those used in a trauma  │
│ of empowerment           │        │ response                │
└─────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────┘
          ↑                                     │
          │                                     ↓
┌─────────────────────┐            ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Participants report │            │ Both practitioners and the │
│ feeling under-valued │            │ system are responding   │
│ and overwhelmed     │            │ with a trauma response  │
└─────────────────────┘            └─────────────────────────┘
                                                │
                                                ↓
┌─────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ The key interactions occur │ ←──  │ Traumatised systems     │
│ due to the situational logics │   │ are characterised by    │
│ created by chaos and rigidity │   │ chaos and rigidity      │
└─────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────┘
```

Stage 5: Comparison of competing hypotheses

The fifth stage involved the comparison of multiple hypotheses to best explain the data. Here, I re-read the literature review in Chapter Three, searching for links to the abductively generated themes. Next, I examined alternative explanations for the data which I recorded in memos. I also examined the number of participants that spoke to a theme when determining whether to include it in the results. By tracing the theme through the participant interviews, I tracked the patterns in the data. These patterns presented the multifaceted causal mechanisms of the findings. To illustrate these abductive patterns, multiple quotes are shown in the findings.

Stage 6: Concretisation and contextualisation

The final stage involves placing researcher's explanations back within the original research context. After evaluating competing theories, I chose the explanation that best fit the data. Then, I drew up a conceptual model that identified the elements in context. I present this model at the conclusion of each section of findings, building it as new data are added.

Characteristics of the Participants

I created a profile for each participant based on their length of employment in a child protection role, whether they were in management or frontline practice, and their education. Initially, participants were organised according to whether they were in a statutory position or working at an NGO. However, through the interviewing process I found that movement between these sectors was common. To better capture this data, I organised participants based on their movement between sectors. Here, I identified four categories: worked only in a statutory organisation, worked only in an NGO organisation, moved from a statutory to an NGO organisation, left child protection work completely. The characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 20.

Table 20

Characteristics of the Participants

Participant characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Education		
Certificate	3	16
Bachelor's degree	13	68
Master's degree	3	16
Role		
Management	5	26
Frontline	13	58
Training and development	1	5
Sector movement		
Statutory only	9	47
NGO only	1	5
Statutory to NGO	5	26
Left child protection	4	21
State		
WA	3	16
NSW	5	26
QLD	4	21
ACT	1	5
SA	6	32
Length of employment		
10+ years	6	32
6-10 years	6	32
1-5 years	4	21
<1 year	3	16

Next, I examined the characteristics of the participants to determine how they may have influenced the data. Most participants were frontline practitioners who remained in statutory positions (n = 4) or transitioned to NGO positions (n = 4). Considering the high turnover in child protection, this sample showed a notably stable workforce. In fact, 64% (n = 12) of participants had over six years of experience and 32% (n = 6) had over ten years of experience. Most practitioners with over ten years of experience identified as managers (n = 4) and both these characteristics likely influenced their responses in the interview.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings were organised according to the M/M framework, identifying themes relevant to the structure, culture, and agency of practitioners within the child protection system. First, I present the structure and culture, describing the 'parts' of the system, termed entities in critical realism. Then, I present agency which describes how the practitioners navigated the structure and culture to achieve their goals. These findings show the emergent properties of the system, where effects arise because of the collective action of a group of entities. At key points, I draw in Archer's (1995) realist morphogenetic approach. I use quote boxes to summarise the key aspects of the theory as described in Chapter Two.

Structure: Containing Chaos

Structure refers to the way that the system is organised around human and material resources. Three themes emerged describing the structure of the child protection system: hierarchical power, being understaffed, and ongoing turnover. Each of these themes represented an emerging property. Together, these properties created chaos in the system: a higher order property. This property of chaos drove the structure of the system as it sought to try and contain the chaos.

Chaos left practitioners struggling to protect children amidst competing priorities. When examining these themes, the key causal mechanism was understaffing. In fact, every practitioner interviewed (100%) highlighted poor staffing ratios and ongoing turnover as chronic issues. Even practitioners who recalled periods of successful staffing thought that it was not sustained. This revealed that the system had difficulty maintaining sufficient

human resources to function. The following quote shows a practitioner recalling how high demand led to some children not receiving services. Here, the system struggled to provide services to children.

> And now we're back at the stage where we have insufficient staff, many kids on what we call the waitlist, not getting any service at all. That's bloomed to astronomical numbers. That was, we are back where we started from 15 years ago. The more you expect staff to do the more resources they need … Everything we're doing is important. We just don't have enough people to do it. (Participant 10)

A partial explanation for the high demand was that there were now more children needing protective services. This was because of the high-risk issues in the social system. Here, practitioners described increasingly complex cases that required more of their time. They defined complex cases as those with multiple child protection issues, intergenerational trauma, and factors that placed children at high risk. As a result, complex cases not only required intensive time from practitioners but also skills. The following quote came from a practitioner who had worked in statutory child protection for over twenty years. It illustrates how the number and complexity of cases appeared to be increasing.

> Drug and alcohol, domestic violence, mental health. That's the norm now. I remember working with families who had one or maybe two issues. And perhaps you could say that, you know, of course, you would have mental health issues, if you're engaged in domestic violence relationship. It was less usual, perhaps 10 years ago, to say, all the cases coming through the door, we're going to have two, three, four, five complexities to work with, that actually needed much more than one practitioner… we're not miracle workers. (Participant 5)

The practitioner's quote also shows the sense of strain felt by the developing chaos. The reference to not being "miracle workers" identifies how practitioners viewed themselves as responsible for the outcomes of children. Here, practitioners were left trying to bridge the gap between resources and outcomes. This placed them in an impossible situation.

In addition, practitioners also had to respond to crises. While proactive planning could reduce the number of crises, practitioners considered them inevitable. They reacted to

each new situation as it arose, with little time for reflection, planning, or professional development. Without the time to plan ahead, crises were then more likely, creating a negative feedback loop. Here it can be seen how the first emergent property of complexity combined with the second emergent property of crisis to create a greater sense of chaos. Each reinforced the other, with a cumulative impact on practitioners. The next quote provided shows this cumulative or 'snowball' effect as the practitioner talks through the impact on their work.

> Having so much caseload and you know, there's one crisis come up, but then this next crisis, you have to prioritize that, because that's even worse. Or we lose people. So, then we're not only doing our casework, our crisis, we're also doing, finding replacements. So, our role turns into like, multiple roles. (Participant 13)

These properties continued to interact and impact the system. More cases required more caseworkers, and complex cases required a smaller case to caseworker ratio. Yet neither of these requirements could be met with the available staffing. In addition, practitioners regularly left, causing high staff turnover. An analysis of the data showed that these properties formed a reinforcing loop rather than a linear relationship. For example, when the system was understaffed, it reduced the likelihood of successfully managing complex cases. As there were fewer practitioners to monitor and support the complex cases, more crises occurred. Consequently, this led to an increased likelihood of practitioners developing burnout and leaving child protection work. This left children and families without case management. However, the system could not simply ignore these children, and so the remaining practitioners had to carry oversight of both their caseload and cases from the practitioners who left. This cycle then placed further strain on the remaining practitioners. Participant 16 described the challenge of supporting families who had transitioned from previous practitioners stating, "I had to pick up a number of families that had been supported previously by other practitioners that were either moving into a different field or were moving into a different area." The practitioner continued to reflect on the challenge of maintaining relationships with families when there was no consistency. Over time, this instability also impacted the whole team, as expressed by participant 12:

I think a lot of new people tend to come and go quite quickly. So, I feel like they get people for a little while, and then they decide it's not for them … we really haven't had any new people stay for some time. Most have just left.

The quotes highlight the resulting chaos felt by practitioners. Their teams did not have consistent staff. Neither were their caseloads consistent. As a result, frontline staff struggled to deliver services to children and their families. While research often focuses on the practitioners who choose to leave child protection, the quotes illustrate the importance of considering practitioners who remain in the system.

Turnover was not limited to frontline staff. Practitioners also highlighted high turnover in leadership roles. This further contributed to the reinforcing feedback loop because practitioners did not have the support needed to manage complex cases and emerging crises. Consequently, new staff were left without mentoring in their roles. The following quote illustrates these effects. The practitioner described being a new frontline staff member who developed their skills without guidance from any leader.

When I first started the role, my case manager left after four days. And then my manager left after three months. And really, I was left to learn the entire role by myself. My supervisor left as well; I think around four months. [I was] trying to navigate and learning from previous case notes and the kind of work that the previous social worker, the caseworker, and case manager was doing. (Participant 18).

The quote again illustrates the experience of practitioners who remained working in a system driven by chaos. This experience is what generated the feedback loop within the system, where staff turnover led to more staff turnover as the system could no longer support its remaining practitioners.

While the impacts just described were easily evident in the data, there was another impact which was less visible. The high turnover led to a disproportionate number of inexperienced practitioners in the system. Because of the chronic understaffing, these practitioners carried caseloads prior to completing their training. This had two notable effects. First, practitioners themselves felt pressured to take on more cases than they were ready for.

Second, even if the system achieved full staffing capacity, the high proportion of inexperienced staff impacted the quality of work. The next quote demonstrates this first effect. It shows a practitioner talking about being a new staff member and taking on cases.

> I think that it is quite disempowering, I think, to have that. To feel perhaps that you know, you are not ready for this but if they are expecting you to do it and well, maybe that is what the normality is. (Participant 1)

The quote also shows how the understaffed structure shaped the culture. Here, the practitioner wondered if the experience of feeling disempowered was simply normal. The chaotic structure sent implicit messages to practitioners about what was expected from them, influencing their behaviour.

As mentioned above, the second effect of high turnover was lower quality work. While new practitioners were eager to learn, developing their skills took time. However, the system's structure did not support this. Instead, to cope with the constant turnover, the system emphasised more training. Practitioners did not feel that most training they attended was suitable for their role. They described it as disconnected from practice and lacking a personal focus. This mattered because practitioners wanted to be nurtured and mentored rather than just given knowledge. The next quotes show practitioners highlighting this point. Overall, they described training as insufficient to develop their competence.

> But the way that they delivered it was not very practitioner friendly, if you know what I mean. It was sort of really not practical, it was very theoretical and really hard to sort of get an understanding of it. (Participant 9)

> And I think it makes people feel then quite probably unsupported. Because whilst they may get their manager, and they do get their manager's attention to discuss the caseload they are working on but not necessarily their personal journey. (Participant 1)

These quotes show the pattern of a utilitarian nature developing in the system's structure. Information was delivered quickly and practitioners were left to integrate the knowledge into their practice. This pressure not only impacted frontline practitioners but also

management. Here, practitioners reflected that staff in supervisory positions often lacked significant field experience. Instead, they were employed in management roles to contain turnover. This created a balancing feedback loop in the system. Practitioners were promoted, thus filling needed management roles, but this did not mean they had the necessary skills. Again, the system met the structural requirement but not the function as simply filling leadership roles did not create good leaders. The following quote describes this feedback loop. It shows how inexperienced supervisors inadvertently generated risk aversion which then permeated the system.

> So, I'm aware there are supervisors and senior prac[titioners], they're senior prac[titioners] before they've done two years, like practice themselves. ... And that's all because of high turnover… A lot of the people who are making decisions are really quite young, and sometimes not as experienced as you'd like, they see only the risk, they don't see the potential. (Participant 6)

Overall, each theme contributed to more chaos in the system. Practitioners could not plan ahead in their work and instead functioned reactively. Further, they regularly changed or gained new cases, disrupting their relationships with children and families. The system also suffered, lacking the staff to protect the many children in complex situations. Together, these properties created the situational logic of correction.

Corrective logic

When two entities in a system are both vital and

connected to each other but also incompatible.

The system tries to correct itself by containing any

disruptions. People begin to compromise to try

and balance competing priorities.

Archer (1995) states that this type of relationship is inherently unstable, predisposing the system compromise and contain. An example of compromise was shown in the system's attempt to promote inexperienced practitioners to supervisory positions. Here, the system could not recruit and retain enough experienced staff, and therefore compromised. Positions were filled at the expense of experience. As demonstrated throughout this

section, however, these properties also affected the wellbeing and empowerment of practitioners. As a result, the structural needs of the system opposed the emotional needs of practitioners.

In addition to compromise, the structure of the system also showed containment. The structure developed with the goal of containing the chaos. To do this, the system developed a strong hierarchy that controlled power. This response of the system generated another higher-order property, that of rigidity. Rigid structures became the antidote to chaos and tried to control aspects of the system through close monitoring of practitioners' practice.

The hierarchy of the system was shown in the way communication moved amongst entities. Here, practitioners described feeling that their frontline practice was being monitored and controlled. The system's structure did this by regulating information and decision-making. The following two quotes illustrate the top-down communication structure. Despite the quotes coming from practitioners in two different states, both identified rules about communication. First, there was control over professional communication, as illustrated by Participant 18 who explained, "We were pulled aside before we started, and we were told not to say anything during that meeting." Communication was further controlled even during informal interactions, as described by participant three:

> You do not talk, you do not even look at, you do not even email anyone who is not your, like anyone in management, who is not your management case work or your manager client service. You do not even talk to the director in the kitchen.

The quotes also demonstrate how power was maintained in the system. Practitioners spoke about this power as a tangible experience rather than an abstract concept. Both quotes show the pattern of power in the data were practitioners "were told" by supervisors how to act or even when to speak.

In addition to controlling communication, power was shown by controlling decision making. Participant six illustrated this power over decision-making stating, "But there are other practitioners, you can say that they're really not making any decisions themselves, they're having to report back all the time and have decisions made for them." The practitioner

further described how even minor decisions went through a hierarchical process. Decisions were made at higher levels of management and then practitioners were informed of how to proceed.

This hierarchical structure affected more than just the frontline practitioners. Even management reported limited power because of the vertical stratification of the government. The following quote shows this stratification. It also demonstrates how the structure limited communication of the whole system within larger government departments.

> There used to be, you know, like about four levels, but it's probably about seven levels of management now … like it's not till about the fifth layer of management, that we have any representative at all, from child protection … I felt we were not being listened to. (Participant 19)

Ultimately, this disconnection created social cleavage. Here, 'the hierarchy' and 'the practitioners' represented two distinct groups with competing interests. In the data, there were no clear boundaries about who practitioners considered 'us' and who practitioners considered 'them'. Instead, they appeared to separate these groups based on their relationships. Most practitioners felt their colleagues and immediate supervisors, or line managers were supportive. In contrast, broad terms such as 'upper management', 'head office', or 'directors' were used to describe the hierarchy. These people often held different perceptions of the system to practitioners.

These different perceptions had consequences for practice and systemic reform. Practitioners felt that the hierarchy was too disconnected from practice to be useful. They explained that upper management sometimes made decisions that did not align with the needs of practitioners, children, or families. Participant ten illustrated this view explaining, "They're always experts at head office, telling you what to do. But they don't necessarily know what they are talking about." The social cleavage meant that practitioners were left implementing changes that did not fit with their needs. Further, because of the hierarchy's power, practitioners had little choice but to comply.

In addition to how people used power, the hierarchical structure was also seen in policies and procedures. Here, the goal of containment became embedded in many processes and practices throughout the system. These processes controlled practice and dictated how practitioners could perform their roles, illustrated in the next quote.

> The system is broken … just the internal processes that the workers have to do day in, day out … the amount of ass covering for what they have to do to cover [themselves] … there is just this whole entire layer, upon layer, upon layer of processes and, protocols that you have … at the detriment of young caseworkers being able to leave the office to build those relationships. (Participant 14)

The above quote also shows how the processes provided data about practitioners. Practitioners were required to report and document all their actions. This allowed the structure to closely monitor what practitioners were doing. As a result, practitioners felt undermined in their work and needed to do "ass covering". The next two quotes further illustrate how practitioners experienced this monitoring. Participant four expressed frustration with the rigidity stating, "It would be amazing if it could be less procedural and have a bit more scope or more like place there for me. I feel like there's a big gap." The practitioner emphasized that there did not feel like there was any 'space' to be personal in practice. Participant nine had a more intense reaction, feeling monitored and judged. They explained, "I couldn't have stayed in the office and all that because I just felt like, I felt like I was under scrutiny all the time." Ultimately, the practitioner chose to leave the organisation.

Together, the structural properties showed the tension between rigidity and chaos. Chaos was introduced into the system from outside elements, such as the complexity of cases and emergent crises. This chaos then affected the internal structure of the system, resulting in high turnover and understaffing. The properties continued to interact, creating a reinforcing feedback loop. To contain the chaos, the system developed a rigid hierarchy. The goal of the hierarchy was to control and monitor practice, creating a corrective logic. The structural emergent properties identified in the qualitative data are diagrammed below in Figure 20.

Figure 20

Structural Themes Within the Child Protection System
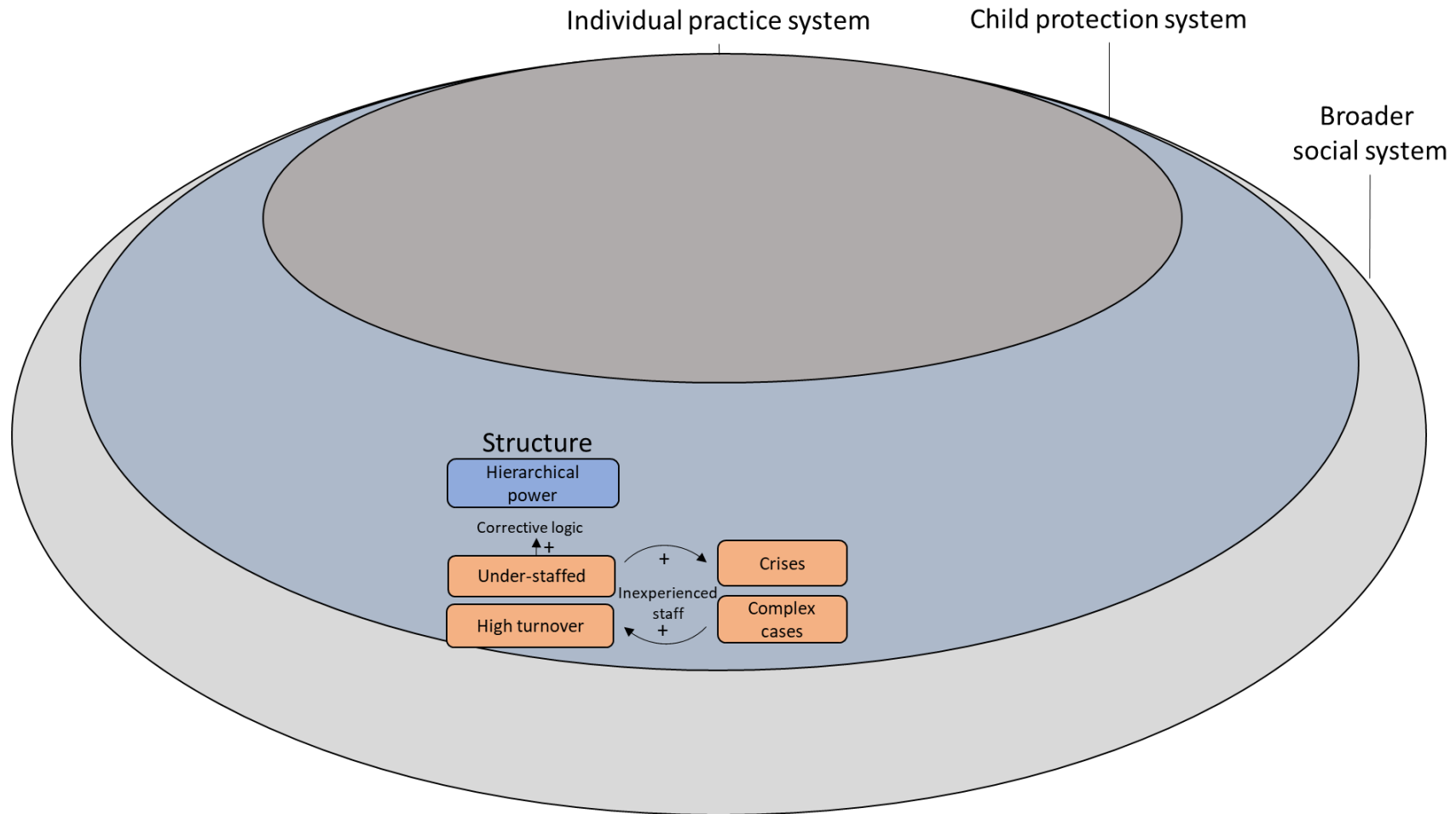
Note. + indicates a positive relationship. − indicates an inverse relationship. Orange = Chaos. Blue = Rigidity.

Culture: Reinforcing Rigidity

Culture describes the ideas that move through the system. These ideas are abstract representations of the logic that guides the system, shaping the rules, beliefs, and values. When examining the data related to the system's culture, both chaos and rigidity were again evident. Overall, the culture of the system aligned well with the rigid structure. This compatibility created a reinforcing feedback loop. Here, both the structure and culture in the system tried to contain and control practice. When structure and culture align, systems become difficult to change because the entities reinforce each other. This creates a protective logic within the system. In examining the data, the three main cultural themes were mechanization, risk aversion, and pragmatism.

Protective logic

The culture and structures in a system reinforce each other. There is solidarity amongst practitioners who exist in a closely integrated system. Similar ways of thinking are encouraged leading to the reproduction of traditional ideas. These systems are hard to change.

Mechanization refers to practice becoming driven by tools and procedures. During the interviews, practitioners identified that much of their practice became mechanized. This went beyond the high monitoring built into the system's structure and became embedded on a cultural level. Ideologically, human error was identified as the fatal flaw in child protection and so the system replaced people with 'more accurate' tools. As a result, practitioners described feeling as though their expertise was undervalued. Here, the system did not distinguish between 'parts and people' and instead *people became parts*. The following series of quotes identify this mechanization. In each one, the practitioner describes the system as forcing them to disconnect from their humanity and instead become a rat, a robot, or a number.

> It is this going through the motions and losing that capacity of being a human ... I just felt like I was just on a rat wheel just going through the motions and got to get these assessments done. And I didn't feel like I had the space to be creative or use any of the tools of social work that I love, to be a social worker. (Participant 4)

We do not want to tick boxes, we do not want people who are just automatons, we do not need robotics, in a space that is highly contentious social work like it is the hardest work you will ever do. (Participant 5)

And it is just the culture. Everyone is a number. No one is important or valued. You can leave, if you don't want to do this then go somewhere else, we will have another case worker come in tomorrow to do this job. Yeah, like suck it up, you do what needs to be done. (Participant 3)

Additionally, this mechanization changed the cultural expectations about how practitioners should feel and behave. Because people were merely parts of the system, their feelings were dismissed. Human emotions were replaced with having a 'thick skin' which became a cultural expectation. Participant five illustrated this stating, "The toxicity of the workplace in that it was a space really only people who had a very thick skin could work in as long as you kept your eyes only on your work." Practitioners felt this message was explicitly communicated to them. For example, participant 11 explained, "For me, it was very much when things were impacting on me, I felt devalued. You can't handle this, you can't manage this, you've got to toughen up or get out." When the system reformed, change was similarly implemented in a punitive way, as expressed by participant three, "But in my unit, the way some of those things were implemented was through fear. It was just like, my manager, she would just chastise people in a meeting in front of everybody else."

The three quotes show the pattern of mechanization influencing practitioners. In the first quote, the practitioner describes how a mechanized culture influences the expectations of practice and the politics of the workplace. The second quote builds to show the impact on practitioners themselves. Finally, the third quote shows how mechanization and fear were a tool used in systemic reform. These demonstrate the multi-faceted effects of the culture throughout the system.

Mechanization also served the corrective logic discussed in the previous section, where a lack of resources led to compromises being made. By dehumanising the workforce, and replacing practitioners' skill with tools or procedures, the impact of turnover on the system was reduced. Here, the system's 'parts' were easily replaced through new recruitment

because fewer skills were needed. While it is unlikely this was the intent of mechanizing child protection practice, it ultimately replaced professional practice.

The second theme identified in the cultural data was risk aversion. Given the hierarchical power and high monitoring, practitioners became afraid of practicing independently. This was also reinforced by structural chaos. Because of the limited resources, the system did not have the capacity to provide intensive case management. Many leaders were also not experienced enough to safely manage risk. As a result, leaders preferred to 'be safe than sorry' when removing children. This view was not universal amongst practitioners, however. While some felt risk aversion was increasing, others felt that there was a cultural shift occurring in their systems. Here, they were encouraged to hold more risk while building safety into children's lives. The following two quotes illustrate these competing perceptions, and the variability between different local child protection systems.

> And the department's becoming more and more risk averse. Workers are not, do not have the skills to actually identify where change can be made and keep kids at home or in the family. (Participant 6)

> I think we've become where we're not as risk averse. I think we have become a lot more skilled and willing to hold the risk and keep kids at home for longer than probably we would have done, in my experience, maybe a decade ago. (Participant 17)

Risk aversion not only influenced decision-making but also practitioners' wellbeing. The data showed the system as being in a constant state of defence, with practitioners speaking about 'fear' and 'protection'. This defensiveness is shown in the following quotes, which describe practitioners' reflections on the system. Participant 11 highlighted fear of the future stating, "[Practitioners are] guarded and worried as well, in terms of if they did something wrong, and how could that be seen and the implications?" This situation left practitioners feeling defensive, with participants describing their actions as a "fear response". Participant eight spoke about the importance of acting in self-defence stating, "… [practitioners have] got to protect themselves." The consistent emphasis was that every decision needed to be projected away from practitioners so that they would not be held

personally accountable. Practitioners further felt they could not voice their concerns, as explained by participant six, "Everyone was so terrified to give feedback because of the reprisal or the retribution that would happen." Each quote demonstrates how fear and protection permeated the child protection system.

This fear was prevalent, identified in 15 (79%) interviews. The fear practitioners identified was not related to a child dying or being harmed. In fact, they considered this fear as a healthy and natural part of their work. Instead, practitioners feared being *blamed* for a child dying or being harmed. It was not only frontline practitioners who were afraid, and rather this fear impacted many levels of management. As responsibility increased with each team leader, supervisor, or manager, so did the fear of mistakes and their consequences. As a result, risk aversion did not serve to protect children but to protect the child protection system.

Risk aversion also interacted with mechanized practice. Practitioners explained that the system prioritised administrative work over face-to-face engagement. The goal was to ensure clear documentation in the event of an inquiry or child death review. Consequently, practitioners could not form the close relationships with children they wanted. While the child protection system viewed children as a case on a caseload that required administrative deadlines, practitioners' saw them differently. They viewed children as individuals and wanted to spend more time listening to children. The following quotes show the incompatibility between practitioners' values and their daily work.

> The kids don't need all that paperwork ... they don't want it, they want to spend time with their caseworkers, they want to know that their voices being heard. And I think the system doesn't allow for workers, doesn't give permission for the workers to do that. It builds up this barrier between them and us and the kids and the families and the care, it's because we have to be accountable to all these processes. And it's the children in the middle who get lost. (Participant 19)

> I feel like maybe like 20% of my time is spent doing the things that I thought was most important for safety, which I think are actually being in there with the families in their homes, and seeing them more regularly … you build the relationship rather

than going off one visit and writing a whole assessment on them … I feel like the administrative part really takes away from what I think should be more of a heart. (Participant 4)

The quotes again show the multifaceted effects. The first highlights the voice of children, whose needs are not being prioritised. The second shows the impact on practice, with risk aversion affecting practitioners' capacity to build relationships. Eventually, practitioners described losing their passion because they were not doing the things that gave them meaning.

Despite the rigidity, practitioners also identified another cultural theme. Alongside the broader system's culture, frontline practitioners and local offices developed a pragmatic culture. Here, supervisors and other practitioners encouraged new staff to embrace any practices that fit with them. The following quotes show this process and how it created variability in the workforce.

And I've had so many staffing changes, new people come in, and they're like, 'Well, how do I do this?' And whoever's been there the longest explains to them how to do it without having any form or structure. And then it gets really confusing if the new person talks to a few different people and gets different responses. (Participant 12)

There was a lot of, I guess, conversation in amongst us at the time about what was the line between bad parenting and abusive parenting. And that seemed to sit really differently with different practitioners. (Participant 16)

This pragmatic culture was not necessarily viewed as negative but as part of practice. This was explained by participant 15, "My very first supervisor, she encouraged me to go out with different people, and kind of take from my toolbox, what I want and leave what I wouldn't." Overall, the quotes show how the pragmatic culture addressed many of the challenges already described. The culture served to build practice, cope with staff turnover, or reflect on risk aversion. Although the situations described appear different, the underlying response from practitioners was the same. Knowledge was transmitted locally through other practitioners.

The pragmatic culture also created independence from the rigid structures in the system and allowed a new type of situational logic to be present: opportunity logic. Practitioners could develop their own skills with the freedom to choose what fit best. Rather than coming from training, these cultural ideas were spread through mentoring and discussion. This gave experienced practitioners power because they informally controlled knowledge and practice.

Opportunity logic

New ideas fit with the culture and people have the freedom to choose. Specializations may develop where some people become focused on narrow ways of practicing.

Pragmatism was especially noticeable when practitioners spoke about their competence. They described competency as an ongoing journey that was self-initiated. The following quotes illustrate how practitioners saw the development of competence as a personal responsibility. Participant ten stated, "I have to make sure I go to professional development opportunities. Not just about child protection, but professional development around social work, or education, or health, because it all affects what you're doing." This self-led learning was important because the system did not always provide the necessary support for practitioners. This is illustrated by participant 14 who explained, "The system within itself doesn't support ongoing learning and development as things change. We need to be keeping up with that change at an internal level." The phrases "I have to make sure" and "we need to" signal the practitioners' dedication to improving their competence. These quotes also illustrate that practitioners did not find the system's structure sufficient for their development. Instead, they described this process as deeply personal, and made decisions based on their values and history. The meaning practitioners attached to their work and their life guided this process, as described in the next quote.

> I'm guided by my own values that, you know, we are all different in the way we approach things and attach meaning to things, and the way we solve things are going to be different for each and every person. (Participant 18)

In this way, the pragmatic culture was derived from practitioners' sense of meaning. It sat in constant opposition with the rigid structure and the mechanised cultural elements of the system. Because of this variability, different local offices had different cultural climates. While some practitioners identified high levels of self-determination in their practice, others had little scope for individual decision-making. This contrast is shown in the next two quotes.

> There was a great level of autonomy in my previous work. There's trust from the new supervisor that came in, my manager as well … this really good intention coming from my team that we want to help the parents keep their families together … So, there's a great level of autonomy there. (Participant 18)

> You knew that the decision was being made by somebody else, or you felt that you're conflicted because you knew that regardless of what your recommendation was, and this was [management's] viewpoint, and then you couldn't actually change that, because they were already making that point. (Participant 11)

Here, the balance between the cultural themes is shown. In local offices where pragmatism was encouraged, practitioners had increased self-determination. In contrast, offices that had strong hierarchies and mechanised practice limited self-determination.

The results so far have shown how different emergent properties shaped with child protection system, with indications of how this impacted psychological empowerment. The burden of managing complex cases with inadequate staffing placed pressure on the system to contain practice through rigid structures. In addition, the system adopted risk aversion and mechanisation as cultural ideals. These ideals both tried to reduce human error and encouraged conservative practice. Together, the culture and the structure reinforced each other, making the system more rigid and resistant to change. This process was not sustainable however, and practitioners instead turned to pragmatism to develop their practice. Here, they shared practice wisdom, often encouraged by experienced practitioners. Figure 21 adds the qualitative findings of culture into the model of the child protection system and demonstrates their interaction with the structure by creating two mutually reinforcing feedback loops.

Figure 21

Cultural and Structural Themes Within the Child Protection System
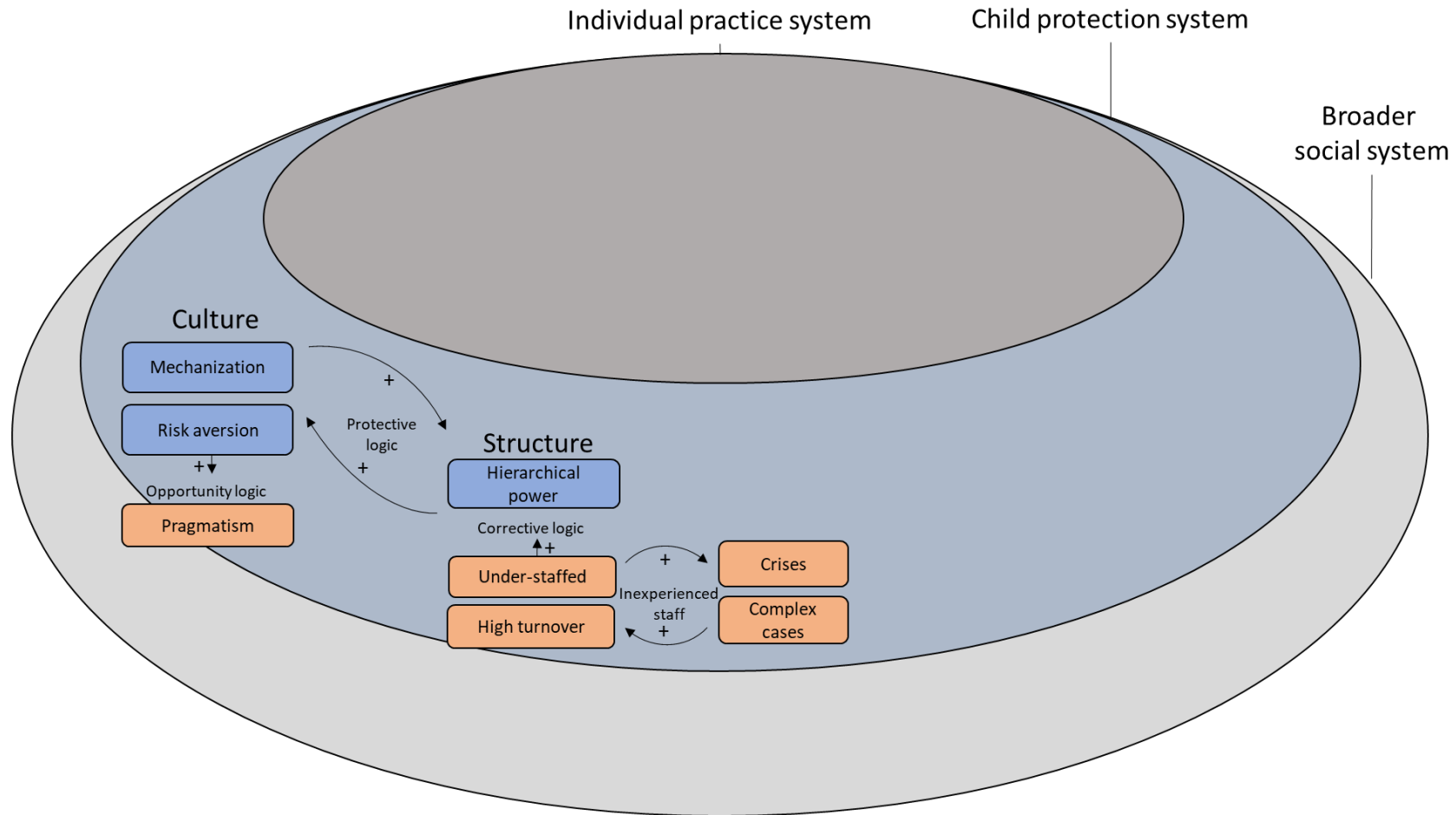
Note. + indicates a positive relationship. − indicates an inverse relationship. Orange = Chaos. Blue = Rigidity.

Agency: Self-Protection

Agency describes the actions practitioners take based on their discernment, deliberation, and dedication. This process leads practitioners to design personal projects that purposefully guide their behaviour. Additionally, the structure and culture of the system shapes the conditions in which practitioners can use their personal agency. In the preceding sections, the data showed that practitioners practice in a system with two competing emergent properties: chaos and rigidity. Given the tension between these properties, practitioners described ways they protected their sense of psychological empowerment using their agency. Three types of self-protection were identified: resistance, retreat, and resilient adaptability. These forms of agency somewhat mimicked natural responses to trauma, with fight and flight being the first ways of managing threat. The third type of agency, resilient adaptability, can be likened to post-traumatic growth, where a person undergoes a process of self-discovery and improvement in response to their adverse circumstances. These three types of agency are discussed in detail.

Resistance

The first form of agency shown was resistance, where individual practitioners perceived themselves as in conflict with the system. Here, practitioners responded using both active refusals and assimilation. When a practitioner actively refused, they would practice how they wanted, despite the dominant structure or culture. In contrast, assimilation occurred when a practitioner would 're-badge' practices to give the appearance of compliance while still resisting.

The first type of response was refusal. Practitioners rarely spoke about times when they refused the system and instead saw refusal in other practitioners. They often described these practitioners as having long careers in child protection, and some referred to them as the 'old guard'. These old guard practitioners felt confident in their own abilities and ways of practicing and resisted any interference with their preferences. The following quotes shows how practitioners became stuck in fixed ways of thinking, leading to fixed ways of acting. Participant 16 highlighted the process at an individual level stating, "There were workers that had only worked in child protection and had very specific lenses that they actually used, and that there was a sense of resistance of thinking or conceptualizing it

differently." Participant 15 further highlighted that this resistance could spread to an entire organisation, "I think some organisations are very much, 'This is how we do things. This is how we've always done things. And this is how we're going to continue doing it.'" In this way, practitioners developed their own form of rigidity within an already rigid system. The quotes show that resistance was most apparent when faced with systemic reform. While this outright refusal worked for some, most practitioners felt their impact was low. As a result, they looked for other ways to use their agency.

When reflecting on their choices, practitioners felt refusal would at best be ineffective, or at worst, lead to a punitive response. Participant three expressed this hopelessness stating, "Your feedback and your information is never getting through to the people making the decisions." In contrast, participant 13 highlighted a more punitive response expressing, "There's a real power differential, and it's not broken down, they don't try to diminish their power. They come in at a level of authority. And this is how it's going to be." Both practitioners concluded that trying to engage with the system, either through feedback or resistance, would be ineffective. These quotes demonstrate the impact of structure on practitioners' use of agency. Because practitioners had low impact on the system, and there was social cleavage between them and management, the more common way for practitioners to show resistance was through assimilation.

Assimilation occurred when practitioners fit new information into old ways of thinking. This process is often seen as 're-badging' in child protection, where there is a change of name or terminology without an associated change in practice. Practitioners frequently discussed re-badging in the interviews and explained that many changes they were asked to make were not actually new. These practitioners easily recognized the process of assimilation within themselves. The next three quotes each highlight practitioners using assimilation with no real change in their practice. Participant 18 described a change of language after a new practice framework was introduced, stating, "It wasn't much of a struggle to shift; it was pretty much the same. We were still doing action plans, but they were now called goal plans." Participant five similarly highlighted superficial language change, "… a different name for the same thing … but the reality is that it didn't change much at all." Finally, participant 14 identified how change often only occurred in the documentation, "It's really logical, it's not rocket science. But now, we're just re-badging a lot of conversations, and

documenting conversations in a different way." This type of resistance allowed practitioners to protect their psychological empowerment. Additionally, the saturation of quotes in the data demonstrates how common this process of assimilation was for practitioners. These practitioners described the system as superficially turbulent and always changing. Consequently, they anchored themselves by changing the parts of their practice that showed compliance while retaining the parts of their practice that were important. Often, this mean changing how they spoke about and documented their work without changing their practice.

Further to protecting their psychological empowerment, practitioners also resisted the system because they wanted quality outcomes for children and families. Practitioners described concerns about the system being detached from 'real life' practice. As a result, they needed to resist those changes to ensure they could still protect children. For example, participant three described a large framework change made to the child protection system, stating, "And they had come up with this idea of how they were going to change the system without actually considering the operational needs of the people that are going to be using it." The practitioner expressed frustration with reform that did not connect with the reality of frontline practice. The change did not align with what frontline practitioners needed to successfully perform their role, leaving them uncertain and anxious.

Because of the disconnected hierarchy, practitioners saw their resistance as a positive quality. In fact, they described it as necessary to survive in a system that was 'broken'. The following three quotes illustrate their thinking. The first quote shows how practitioners perceived the system, with participant eight stating, "The system is completely and utterly broken." The second quote, by participant 19, showed how the system promoted compliant practitioners adding, "But if people want to go up the ladder, they will just say what they think the people further up want them to say." Finally, the third quote, highlights the effects of not resisting the system.

> I've got a [new manager] who is completely incompetent and had never done the job
> before. And so, all she did was just whatever the [senior manager] said. "Yes,
> ma'am, yes, ma'am". [She] would say yes to anything no matter what the impact
> was on staff. (Participant 3)

The final quote also shows that the practitioner related competence to resistance. The manager, who was described as incompetent, did not know how to resist, which negatively affected staff.

Overall, the qualitative data demonstrated how some practitioners used resistance to protect their psychological empowerment. This resistance came either through active refusals or through assimilation. Practitioners described those who refused the system as highly experienced and rigid. In contrast, other practitioners used assimilation. With assimilation, practitioners skilfully avoided changing their practice without provoking conflict with the rigid structure of the system. On the whole, practitioners saw their resistance as positive; a way of creating self-determination and using their competence to protect children in a broken system.

Retreat

The second type of agency used by practitioners was retreat. This referred to practitioners leaving their role, organisation, or the child protection system entirely. Retreat created more instability in the system but also protected practitioners' psychological empowerment as a final and desperate measure.

In contrast with practitioners using resistance, practitioners using retreat spoke of burnout. Rather than trying to protect a specific area of psychological empowerment, such as self-determination, these practitioners felt completely overwhelmed. To address this, practitioners described changing specializations or roles within the child protection system to better meet their needs. When they moved from a role that was draining, practitioners became reinvigorated. These practitioners highlighted how a lateral change in roles helped them sustain their career. Practitioners also noted different teams aligned with different values. Because of this, they often tried several specializations before finding a role that felt sustainable to them. The next quote illustrates a practitioner purposefully using lateral movement to keep a sense of meaning, challenge their competence, and enhance their empowerment.

> I was able to do it [child protection practice] as long as I did, because I did move into
>
> different positions … my favourite role that I ever did in [child protection] was

manager casework. But that role is just so demanding. And so, I would feel myself kind of reaching my limit, and I'd reapply for the casework specialist role. And I'd go and do that for 18 months. And I'm like, 'No, I miss. I miss, you know, being manager. I'm going to go back and do it again.' And so, I think it's that self-awareness that staff need to have, right? It's not any less demanding, but it's a different type of work. (Participant 15)

Besides work strain, practitioners identified conflict with the organisational environment. When practitioners still felt passionate about child protection but could not cope with the environment, they changed organisations. The most common pattern in the data was moving from statutory child protection to a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Here, practitioners highlighted how they valued child protection work but needed a more nurturing environment. Further, they felt they had more self-determination, creative freedom, and lower caseloads at NGOs. The next three quotes show practitioners talking through their decision to leave statutory child protection roles. Their reflexivity shows varying reasons for being dissatisfied, with each identifying that they needed to leave the organisation to better meet their needs.

I felt like this wasn't for me. Because I loved the training. And the training was amazing … Anyway, back to the office. And you know, it gets wiped off you … I think I've been so much happier since I left. (Participant 4)

What has changed for me is a sense of survival. I left child protection because I recognized that it was going to impact my family, it was already impacting my contact with my children and was not a work-life balance. (Participant 5)

I had to leave the department … because I don't want to put kids in care because I don't think that the state makes good parents. I think kids who go into care are often probably no better off than they are [remaining at home]. Learning the system made me probably trust the system less and want to keep kids out … At [NGO] there's a real focus on trying to support families to keep kids, if not with Mom and Dad, with family … I've got a lot more freedom to try to do different things to help families. (Participant 6)

The three quotes show the multifaceted nature of practitioners' sense of meaning. Some ascribed emotional motivations, others the impacts on their family, and some their own ethics and integrity. Meaning encompassed all these aspects and influenced practitioners' use of retreat. Although the structure and culture of child protection remained similar in NGOs, the caseloads were lower and there was less responsibility attached to managing risk. This provided relief to practitioners. Their movement, however, still impacted the system and contributed to chaos. Even if practitioners only changed role, the ongoing turnover affected children and families.

Besides changing role or organisation, some practitioners left the child protection system completely. Practitioners identified personal impacts unsolved by changing organisations. The examples given included vicarious trauma, no work-life balance, or health impacts. The critical factor in the data appeared to be a sense of hope. Rather than holding onto meaning in a challenging system, practitioners who left questioned whether they made a difference to children. Further, they did not believe the system would ever change enough to make a difference to children, resulting in a loss of hope.

This sense of meaning was important to why practitioners finally left. All practitioners strongly identified that their work was meaningful and spoke passionately about protecting children. In fact, their passion provided energy that invigorated them even when their work felt stressful or disheartening. The next series of quotes illustrate the meaning practitioners held about their work. Participant 13 highlighted their emotional connection to their work stating, "I don't do it for my job. I do it for like, my love of what I do." Participant 18 similarly emphasized, "I'm really, really passionate about working with children and families." These feelings resulted in a sense of dedication as expressed by participant six, "I'm absolutely committed to what I do," and participant one, "I think that the people we have in the field are incredibly committed and dedicated." The statements used were unequivocal and reflect the passion of the practitioners.

While meaning offered some protection in a stressful work environment, it could also increase feelings of burnout when practitioners took on high levels of responsibility for children's outcomes. Here, practitioners needed to determine how much they were willing to sacrifice for their work. When practitioners had a strong sense of meaning about their

work, they were more sensitive to poor outcomes for children and families. This response tethered the wellbeing of practitioners to children they served, as demonstrated in the following quotes.

> There's a lot of heart aches attached to that work as well, where it feels like you're making progress with things [then] clients would take ten steps back … it's going to be the children that's going to get impacted in their future generations to come. (Participant 18)

> My most difficult week was not being able to go out and actually see people [due to COVID]. And what that meant for me as a practitioner, about holding risk and not really knowing what was going on in people's lives, particularly in families where the children were very young. (Participant 16)

The quotes show how practitioners carried the burden of their work internally. This impact was not just emotional. For example, participant 13 reflected on how they coped stating, "I will probably work really long hours. I think I'm supposed to do 76 at work for now. I think I do almost 100. And then don't switch off at night." These varying impacts show that, for these practitioners, child protection was not just work but an identity. When this identity felt unfulfilled, hurting more than helping, practitioners were faced with the decision about whether to stay in child protection practice.

Overall, the findings show how meaning influenced practitioners to use retreat as their choice of agency. Practitioners needed to feel their roles were meaningful to children and families. When practitioners no longer held this sense of meaning, they left unfulfilling roles, organisations, or systems. While a strong sense of meaning uplifted practitioners it also left them vulnerable and carrying the burden of risk with them outside of work. When this burden became untenable, or practitioners lost hope, they left child protection practice.

Resilient Adaptability

The final type of agency found was resilient adaptability. This was a flexible strategy that practitioners used, meeting their own needs and those of the system. Rather than simply resisting change, these practitioners assessed whether they could learn and grow from new ideas and experiences. They did this through accommodation. This meant reflecting on

new ideas or practices and integrating them with previous knowledge in a way that enhanced the result.

Unlike assimilation, which fits new knowledge into old frameworks, practitioners who used accommodation described fresh insights and changes to their behaviour. A common theme amongst practitioners who used accommodation was the capacity to be curious and suspend early judgement. They identified this openness as both a natural talent and a skill developed through experience. As practitioners gained expertise in child protection, they were less likely to rush to judgement, and instead focused on engaging with clients in the present moment. The next quotes illustrate practitioners applying curiosity to their practice, allowing them to adapt. Participant six reflected on curiosity as their responsibility stating, "You have a responsibility to be curious, you have a responsibility to really get in and understand what's going on rather than to make assumptions." This orientation led to action, as expressed by participant four:

> I normally like to go in with a plan. But now I'm kind of taking people where they're
> at, and just seeing where they're at today. And we just go on this journey together.
> And it might just go completely different than I expected. But that's okay.
> (Participant 4)

Practitioners identified how holding this open and mindful attitude was difficult in a structure and culture that pushed for rigid certainty and control. Here, practitioners had to be curious and reflective about themselves, their work, and the system itself. As a result, they created a space within the structure and culture of the system. This was an active process where practitioners maintained their priorities despite systemic pressure. The next two quotes highlight the use of curiosity and reflection, leading to a sense of psychological empowerment for the practitioners.

> I was sort of really focusing on developing the ways that I approached a situation
> with authenticity, with care, and beholding myself without feeling pushed around,
> there needing to be an immediate change. That if I just held true to my values, and
> the way that I wanted to be with people, that was actually going to facilitate quicker

change rather than, you know, using kind of threats for child protection intervention. (Participant 16)

The volume of work used to stress me out, but now it doesn't really because I just know that it is never ending, it doesn't matter what I do or, it is not going to change. So, you can only do what you can do at the end of the day and then you've just got to put it behind you and the next day you go, 'Oh well I will do what I can do today'. (Participant 2)

These quotes again highlight the importance of meaning to practitioners. Practitioners who 'stepped back' from the chaos and rigidity found themselves in a reflective space. Here, they considered the impact of their work with children and families. Practitioners thought that this reflection was a valuable tool that encouraged best practice. Further, they connected their sense of meaning to their competence.

It was practitioners' passion for children drove their desire to be better. The next two quotes show practitioners describing how they considered reflection and feedback to be a natural part of their everyday practice. They compared themselves and their work against the values and practice standards that keep children safe.

I attempt on a daily basis to reconsider if I'm the best person to be working with a family, I attempt to consider whether I've thought of better ways. And in sometimes I have to check myself as I haven't had enough contact with the family. (Participant 5)

I always feel I can do better. And I like constructive criticism. I like feedback, I always asked my families for feedback ... I do really try. And I'm very critical of myself as well. Once I've noticed I need to do something different. I will do it different. (Participant 13).

The quotes show the pattern of resilience and its connection to curiosity. Practitioners reflected on their practice and their own engagement with a family. Despite the vulnerability practitioners invited, this reflective space actually created a sense of 'surviving' within the system. In these quotes, practitioners used their sense of meaning protectively

because it re-established hope by focusing on improving practice. Rather than taking immediate action to either resist or retreat from the systemic pressures, adaptive practitioners reflected on their values and capabilities. Here, they dedicated themselves to goals they could achieve despite the rigidity and chaos of the system. This did not mean practitioners did not use their agency to influence the system, however.

Whilst practitioners showed an openness to new learning and growth, they also advocated for changes to the organisation when it was in their client's best interests. These practitioners identified standing up for their beliefs and argued for new and creative courses of action. This advocacy is illustrated in the following three quotes.

> I have to go with it, but I won't accept it on face value. I will try to get the rationale behind it. And I'll put forward my point of view as to how I think it won't work with or how we can do differently. (Participant 10)

> I think sometimes you've got to really put forward your case as to why you think a certain way. But I mean, ultimately, a lot of the time, I feel that although I might not have a decision, I can advocate as much as I can. (Participant 12)

> I feel like I stand out. I think a lot of people toe the party line. So, and I'm very much, I advocate very strongly for the people I work for, which is my clients, my carers, and the children in their care. Where like, I feel that a lot of people don't want to step on toes in the department. That's just my view. (Participant 13)

Practitioners generally reported feeling confident about their ability to advocate, but it came with costs. Despite the cost, practitioners felt advocacy was vital, and were willing to accept the challenges that came with "stepping on toes". The system often resisted advocacy, leading practitioners to take strong action, as illustrated by participant 12, "I think what's happened is that when I've gone to advocate before, like I can get shut down. So, what I do now is I just do it… I'm not scared of pushing the system a little bit." At times, a supportive leader could provide a buffer, as expressed by participant 14, "I don't shut up [about concerns with the system] that's my problem. I was lucky in that I had a team leader who was very supportive." Even without support, practitioners identified the importance of

feeling as though they tried to share their views. Participant four explained, "But I knew that I was alone. So, I walked out feeling at least I voiced what I thought."

Even if their advocacy was unsuccessful, these practitioners identified voicing their concerns and standing up for themselves and their clients as empowering. This created a sense of self-determination where they felt they had used their personal agency in the face of a challenge. Unlike the combative tone of practitioners who used resistance, practitioners who advocated were flexible and open. They did not focus on the outcome (as with practitioners who resisted) but on being heard. Here, they aimed to improve their own practice while also challenging the structure and the culture. Although practitioners felt it important that they be heard when making decisions, they did not want full responsibility for decision making.

Practitioners preferred sharing risk and responsibility. By talking through cases, gaining new perspectives, and making collaborative decisions, practitioners felt more confident moving forward because they were not carrying risk alone. The following two quotes show practitioners' discomfort with autonomous decision making and their desire for collaboration.

> There has been collaboration, you know, multi-agency care teams that have had good outcomes for young people. And they are the ones I prefer, I don't necessarily feel comfortable when the decision is just on me. (Participant 12)

> When there is a decision on safety that needs to be made, that when I go to my manager, so I don't, I guess I could just make a decision. But I would never do that. Because I don't want to hold all that burden myself. (Participant 4)

By working together, practitioners both protected their self-determination and avoided holding full responsibility for decisions. Unlike practitioners who retreated, this process kept them integrated in the system and gave them a clear voice in decisions.

Like the previous two forms of agency, practitioners felt that their resilience and ability to advocate came from the deep sense of meaning. The following quote illustrates how

practitioners gained meaning from their work. Here, they focused on individual relationships rather than just outcomes.

> And if you've got that long-term view, if you can know a person for that long, if you stick around long enough, that's the meat in the sandwich of life. Like everyone needs to have that, that's what you want to see, you want to help people. And maybe, then maybe there's people who will never thank you for it. Why would they? You're a child protection worker. But you hope that they too are living their life as robustly as they could. (Participant 5)

Overall, practitioners who used resilient adaptability were open to change. They held an open and curious mindset, embraced new learning, advocated for their values, and gained meaning from small successes. Consequently, they navigated the rigid structure and culture of the system using flexible strategies. This helped them feel empowered despite the challenges.

Together, the three types of agency provided a range of ways practitioners responded to protect their psychological empowerment. It should also be noted that these three types of agency were not mutually exclusive. Although they have been spoken about separately, there is no data to identify that practitioners only used one type of agency. It is likely that practitioners draw on the agency that will best meet their goals based on the context. Even usually resilient practitioners may burnout and retreat, or strongly resist changes that do not align with their values.

The three types of agency have been added to the model of the child protection system in Figure 22. The model now contains all three entities of the M/M framework, structure, culture, and agency, with some connections shown between them. The next chapter will expand on the links between the entities, their impact on psychological empowerment, and how these interactions affect the systems' capacity to change.

Figure 22

Structural, Cultural, and Agency Themes in the Child Protection System
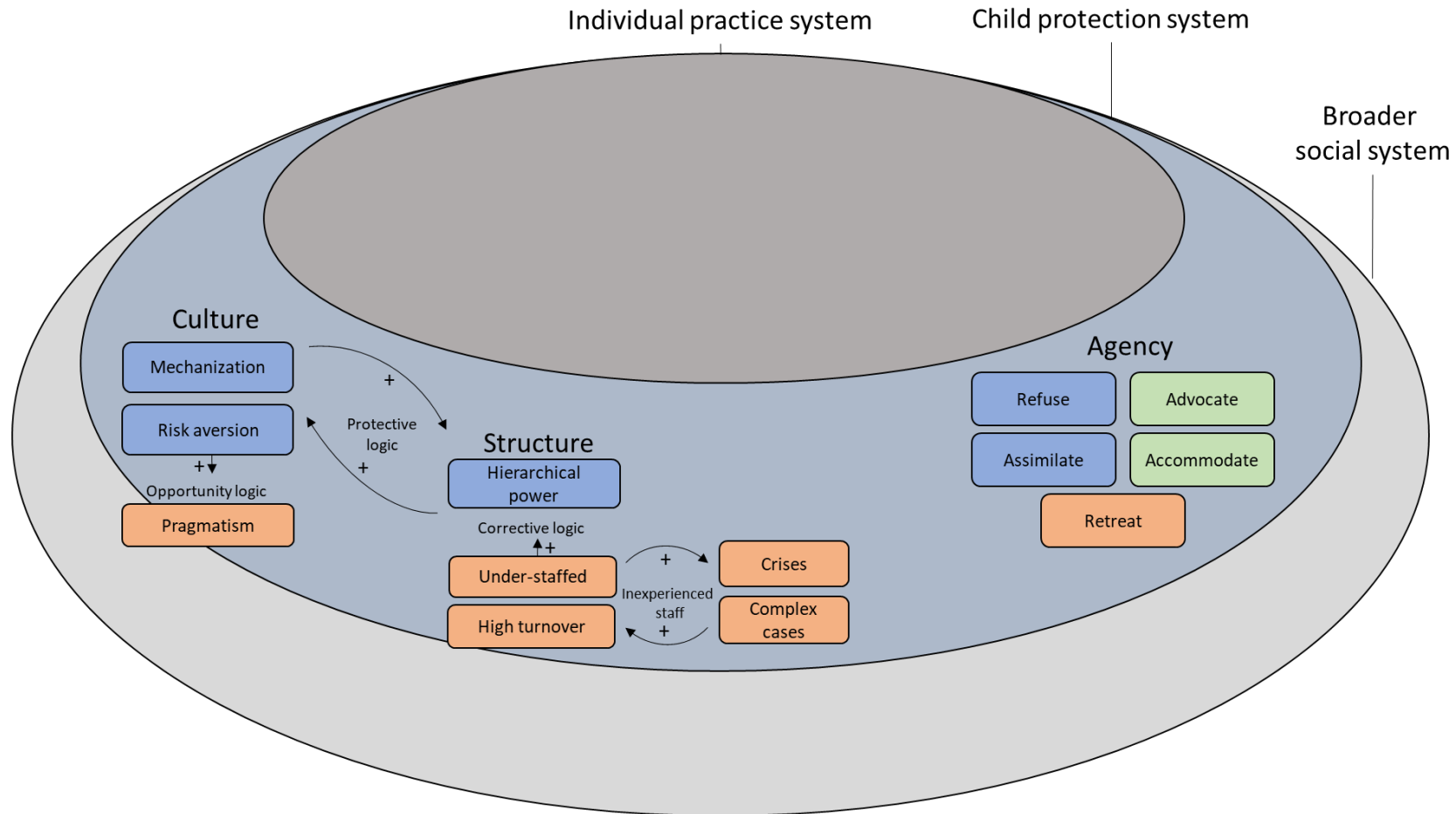
Note. + indicates a positive relationship. − indicates an inverse relationship. Orange = Chaos. Blue = Rigidity. Green = Adaptability.

Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative data provides rich representations of the structural and cultural nature of the child protection system. By analysing these entities separately, and their effect on practitioners' agency, they offer greater explanatory power than only listing the factors. The systemic diagrams accompanying the narrative show these relationships and interactions of the themes. The comparison of patterns across the different sectors, roles, and jurisdictions also provides a strong picture of the state of the national workforce. By highlighting themes across the diverse experiences of practitioners, the data shows greater validity. Clearly, even with the differences between jurisdictions there are national trends affecting Australian child protection practice.

There are also limitations to the qualitative phase of the study. First, the literature reviewed showed that studies of systemic reform are usually case based. That is, they study specific reforms in specific locations. In contrast, this study examined systemic reform as a concept. It asked practitioners for their observations of how the child protection system has changed over time. While this characteristic is a strength and fills a gap in the literature, there are also associated limitations. Because there was no single reform discussed, the data may be inconsistent. This could mean important patterns were missed because the subject lacked a clear boundary.

The second limitation relates to the first. The practitioners interviewed had a range of different roles and worked in different organisations. Therefore, the findings may also miss important contextual information. This relates to Munro (2019) who cautioned that evidence-based practice is not 'what works best' but 'what works best for whom and in what context'.

A third limitation was that the study did not use observational data. Practitioners self-reported on their response to systemic reform, but there was no way to check the accuracy of their reports. The literature review highlighted that observational data was more likely to find poor fidelity. This limited the current study's findings to the perceptions of practitioners.

Finally, there may have been bias in the practitioners who opted to be interviewed. The practitioners may have been more likely to speak about negative experiences and not representative of the population. I made attempts to address this limitation by noting discrepancies between practitioners in the findings. Chapter Seven shows the statistical tests conducted to examine the difference between the nested sample and the larger sample. These differences were considered when integrating the data.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the qualitative themes from the literature. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 practitioners in various roles in the local child protection systems across Australia. First, I created interview guide from literature and the principles of critical realist interviewing. Next, I analysed the data using a critical realist framework. Here I used both abduction and retroduction to find patterns indicative of causal mechanisms. I organised the data according to the M/M framework, presenting the structure, culture, and agency of the child protection systems in Australia. The data shows the presence of both chaos and rigidity as structural emergent properties influencing how practitioners use their agency. Psychological empowerment was critical in how practitioners navigated the system. The next chapter builds on both the quantitative and qualitative results. I integrate the findings to show how the structure, culture, and agency shaped the psychological empowerment of practitioners and their response to systemic reform.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PHASE 3: INTEGRATION

Phase 1: Quantitative			Phase 2: Qualitative			Phase 3: Integrated	
Relevant literature	Methods	Quantitative findings	Relevant literature	Methods	Qualitative findings	Methods	Integrated findings
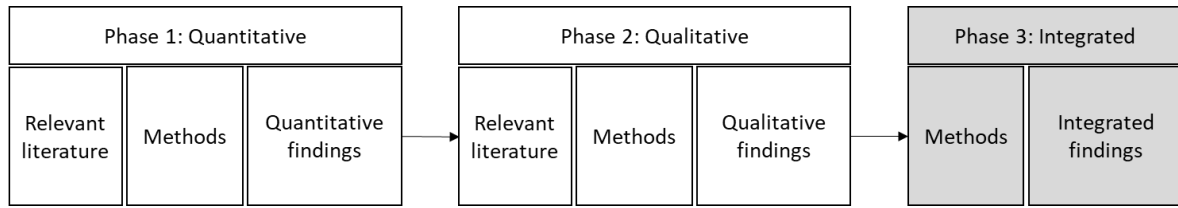
Introduction

This chapter brings together the quantitative and qualitative findings within the M/M framework. Rather than presenting descriptions of the data, this chapter is theory driven and searches for explanations to the findings of the previous two chapters. First, I present the methods, demonstrating how I integrated the data. I also show the statistical analysis conducted to determine any differences between the quantitative and qualitative samples. Finally, I present the major findings, explaining how structure, culture, and agency accounted for the quantitative patterns observed.

Methods

The integration of data is a critical step in mixed-methods studies. The way that data is connected can alter the findings, either missing important information or misinterpreting the data. This section briefly outlines how the data were integrated. It also describes the considerations made to enhance the validity of the findings.

The first step in data integration involved developing profiles for each participant interviewed. As described in the previous chapter, demographic data were linked to each interview, allowing a nuanced view of the participants. I then added in the quantitative data, recording the survey results of each participant. This showed their individual level of psychological empowerment and responsiveness to change. I then compared these different attributes across the participants using an Nvivo matrix. The matrix allowed me to examine different qualitative codes as compared against the quantitative data. I also compared the nested sample against the quantitative sample to see if there were statistically significant differences. These differences were considered during data integration.

Next, I viewed the results through the M/M framework to generate explanations. An example of this process is shown in Figure 23. I looked for the more nuanced elements of the M/M framework such as reflexivity and the impact of situational logics. I traced the propositions guiding practitioners reflexivity and behaviour. These propositions show how the structure and culture were influencing practitioners and how they in turn used reflexivity to respond. The interactions formed the bridge between the quantitative and qualitative results.

Figure 23

Retroductive Analysis to Integrate Findings
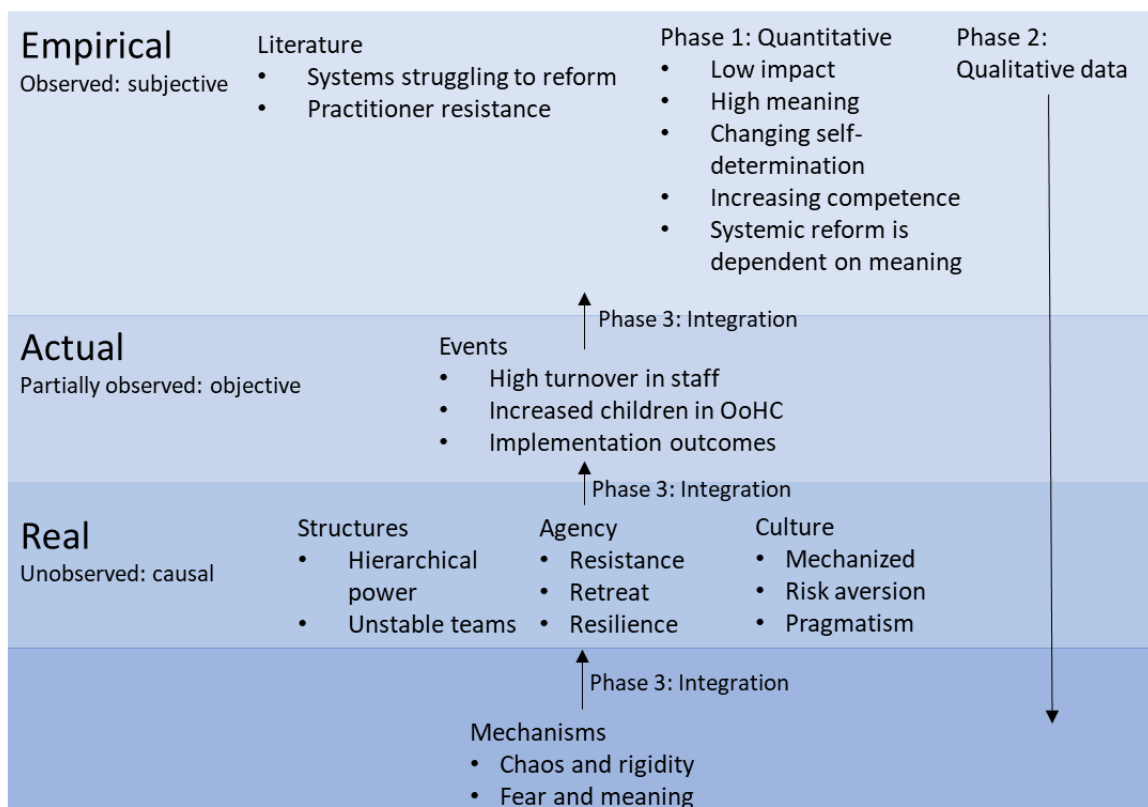
Phase 1: Examine the data and context
Phase 2: Propose structures, values, and motivations
Phase 2: Propose unstated causal powers and mechanisms
Phase 3: Formulate driving decisions as propositions

Note: Phases were based on Jackson and Richter (2017, p. 7)

Finally, I connected the results into different graphs as recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). These graphs contain the full set of quantitative data from Chapter Five. They

illustrate how the qualitative results of Chapter Six explain, interpret, and add value to the quantitative findings.

Comparison of the Nested Sample to the Quantitative Sample

It was important to determine if there were significant differences between the nested qualitative sample and the quantitative sample. The interviewed sample of practitioners comprised 18% of the total sample of the quantitative data. A Chi-Square Test for Independence showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups on length of experience ($p = .088$), education ($p = .175$), role ($p = .411$), or sector ($p = .667$).

A Mann-Whitney test showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups for levels of competence ($p = .997$), self-determination ($p = .202$), meaning ($p = .259$), or response to systemic reform ($p = .142$). There was a significant difference between the two groups for perceived level of impact ($U = 577$, $p = .003$). The interviewed practitioners had a median of 3.7 compared to the full quantitative sample with a median 2.0. This finding indicates that the practitioners who were interviewed had comparatively higher levels of impact compared to the quantitative sample. This difference was considered when integrating the data.

Integrated Findings

The integrated findings are presented in the same order as the quantitative findings. First, the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment are shown, explaining why the significant patterns were observed. Next, the results of the multiple regression are linked to the qualitative results, examining why meaning was the most significant predictor of change. In both sections, the situational logics (Archer, 1995) and reflexivity (Archer, 2003) are highlighted. A summary of these concepts is shown in Table 21.

Table 21

Summary of the Morphogenetic Situational Logics and Reflexivity

	Situational Logics
Protective logic	The structures in the system become highly **Integrated** and people feel a sense of **Solidarity** within the system. Ideas become **Systematized** based on a certain type of thinking. It is difficult for new ideas to enter the system as the people in it **Reproduce** traditional ideas, keeping them 'alive' in the system.
Corrective logic	Necessary structures contradict each other and cause tension. People try to **Compromise** by balancing priorities. This creates a feeling of the system being fragile and so any changes or disruptions are **Contained**. People use **Syncretism** to assimilate the ideas they find incompatible. This allows them to reinterpret how ideas fit together generating **Unification** in thinking.
Elimination logic	**Competition** arises between incompatible structures creating **Polarization** on which structures should remain in the system. New ideas compete with the current culture creating **Pluralism** and diversity in the system. People eliminate the ideas that do not fit with them, generating social **Cleavage** where they become divided on issues.
Opportunity logic	Rather than structures becoming integrated, there is **Differentiation** and choice, leading to **Diversification** of structures existing in the system. New ideas fit with the current structure and culture and offer people the freedom to grow in whatever way they choose. People develop **Specialization** in different ideas within the system. This can lead to **Sectionalism** where people become highly focused on a narrow set of ideas and loyal to their own groups.

	Reflexivity
Communicative	Thinking is done collectively by sharing ideas with others. This promotes conformity and contextual stability.
Autonomous	Thinking is independent and promotes autonomy. Autonomy occurs when there is a disconnection to the context.
Meta	Thinking is deep and reflects on values. This often leads to a search for meaning across different contexts.
Fractured	Thinking is fractured and causes more distress.

Note. Bolded terms identify the outcomes of each situational logic as defined by Archer (1995).

Psychological Empowerment Within the System

This section builds on the structure, culture, and feedback loops identified in the previous section. Here the socio-cultural interaction of practitioners is identified, examining how they are conditioned by cultural and structural entities and the effects this has on them—specifically their psychological empowerment. Each sub-dimension of psychological empowerment is discussed separately, integrating the data from the quantitative analyses.

Competence: A Steady Increase With Experience

The quantitative results showed that perceived competence for all practitioners was high (*Mdn* = 4.3 with 5 being the highest possible score). Perceived competence increased steadily across the length of employment, with a significant difference reported between expert practitioners (5+ years, *Mdn* = 4.5) with both novice (<1 year, *Mdn* = 4.0) and proficient practitioners (1-5 years, *Mdn* = 4.0), $H(2)= 13.39$*, p* < .001. Interestingly, even novice practitioners rated themselves as having competence above neutral. These results raised two main questions: (a) why did novice practitioners rate themselves so high on their competence, and (b) what factors contributed to competence increasing over time?

The first reason why competence may be rated high, even for novice practitioners, was the movement between sectors. The qualitative data showed that practitioners moved frequently and so may have significant experience which was not captured in the survey. For example, one practitioner who had worked for years in the domestic and family violence sector became a child protection case manager. Although the practitioner identified as a novice in child protection, she had many years of adjacent experience. The qualitative findings offer further insight based on the structure and culture of the system.

Practitioners described the structure and culture of the system as rigid, with clear decision-making pathways and tools to guide practice. In this setting, practitioners did not need high levels of competence because practice was less nuanced. This structure could create a sense of comfort or confidence for new practitioners, making them perceive higher levels competence using the protective logic of the system. At this point, practitioners' own beliefs and agency aligned with the culture and structure: *controlled practice is good practice.*

At the same time, more experienced practitioners identified that the training provided was 'shallow' and highly theoretical. The chaos of high turnover in the system's structure meant that practitioners quickly needed to gain experience and manage a caseload. Ultimately, the constant separation of theory from practice, led to an ideological gap for practitioners. Practitioners saw theoretical training as incompatible with practice wisdom, creating an elimination logic where they disregarded any incompatible ideas. Here the cultural system provided guidance, with more experienced staff offering mentoring and instruction through a pragmatic approach. In this position, practitioners no longer aligned with the structure of the system and instead shifted to: *pragmatic practice is good practice.*

Finally, practitioners used their own agency to develop their competence. They described seeking training and devoting their personal time to learning new information. The culture of the system supported this independent learning, where opportunity logic encouraged different styles of practice. Here practitioners again shifted their beliefs to: *personalised practice is good practice*. In this way, practitioners developed competence through different situational logics within the same system. Rather than practitioners being a unified group, their levels of experience put them in different ideological positions, based on their needs. I summarise this process in Table 22, illustrating the M/M framework with selected quotes from the qualitative findings.

Table 22

The Effect of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Competence

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Structure	But there are other practitioners, you can say that they're really not making any decisions themselves, they're having to report back all the time and have decisions made for them. (Participant 6)	The **protective logic** of the rigid system supported new practitioners to feel competent because they have limited discretion.
	It felt very much put up, you know, this is the information, you will squeeze it into your brain, and you will now take that down and put it in your work. (Participant 14)	The training provided was theoretical and disregarded in favour of local pragmatism using **elimination logic**.

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Culture	My very first supervisor, she encouraged me to go out with different people, and kind of take from my toolbox, what I want and leave what I wouldn't. (Participant 15)	More experienced practitioners mentored new practitioners, encouraging pluralism in practice and ideas because of the **opportunity logic**.
Agency	The system within itself doesn't support ongoing learning and development as things change. We need to be keeping up with that change at an internal level. (Participant 14)	As practitioners gained experience, they sought out their own learning. This meant turning away from the structure of the system and relying on themselves and others using **autonomous** and **communicative reflexivity**.

Note. Bolded terms highlight the components of the M/M framework.

The M/M framework can further explain how this process occurs by drawing on Archer's concept of reflexivity. Practitioners showed communicative reflexivity through their preference for mentoring through the system's culture, rather than receiving training through the system's structure. While the system's structure provided guidance through training, policies and role expectations, this was not sufficient. Practitioners needed more support to understand how to meet the function of the system: protecting children. Communicative reflexivity met this need, using experienced practitioners to guide thinking and self-development. The next quote illustrates a practitioner using communicative reflexivity to understand the culture of the system. While the system's structure provided training, the practitioner sensed competing cultural ideas in the system, particularly about risk. To make sense of these ideas, the practitioner spoke to others to clarify their own thinking.

> There were induction modules. And there was a lot of reading about Family Services. And I guess conversations with particularly the senior prac[titioner] of the service about what was our role, what was our responsibility, but I still felt like I had a lot of questions, and that there was still a lot of variability in between workers about how they conceptualized risk to children about what risk that they felt that they could sit with. And so, it was really sort of peer led to in terms of having lots of conversations about ways that they have managed and having supervision with the supervisor of

the program as well. And really getting clarity, probably more from on the job while I was doing things. (Participant 16)

This quote also identifies an aspect not shown in the quantitative findings: different interpretations of competence. When considering competence as a dimension of psychological empowerment, what matters is the individual practitioner's perception of their skills suffices to perform their role. However, this is not an objective measure of actual competence against evidence-based best practice. As discussed earlier, the high turnover, lack of adequate staffing, and complex case management left the child protection system in a state of instability. As a result, the mechanized culture also worked to reduce variability in practice by limiting practitioners' discretion. This affected the development of competence for practitioners as their role shifted to specializations in tools and procedural processes (e.g., Writing court reports) rather than holistic practice. In contrast, the more experienced practitioners questioned the type of competence being developed and were concerned that only a limited skill set was being established in novice practitioners. They felt rigidity took away the breadth of knowledge and skill required for holistic child protection practice. The next quote demonstrates this perception and its link to a mechanized culture. Here, skills are not simply lost but replaced by tools and 'tick boxes'.

> I think a lot of the practitioners within the department are becoming very skilled at writing court reports. Very skilled at statutory tick a box type work, but they're not terribly skilled in some of these assessments. And the department's becoming more and more risk averse. Workers don't have the skills to actually identify where change can be made, and keep kids at home or to find family to keep kids safely. So, a lot of really basic social work skills are being lost. And they're being replaced with sort of those statutory base[d] skills. (Participant 6)

The quote provides a direct link between the culture of the child protection system and the competence developed by practitioners. The connection does not end there however, and because skilled practitioners are no longer required, the data show that professional development became devalued. The system's culture continued to reinforce a separation between professional development and practice. Practitioners treated professional development as a goal to be achieved rather than integrated into their identity or daily

practice, reflecting the mechanized culture. Even when the system introduced models of best practice and evidence, the culture dismissed them as unnecessary and unhelpful for surviving the 'real world' of child protection practice. Consequently, training and new frameworks became the 'romantic' view of child protection, which clashed with the 'reality' of everyday work. The following quote shows how experienced practitioners encouraged new practitioners to dismiss the professional development provided.

> There have been quite a few case workers that have said to me, 'Well the expectation is in the office that people will say to me 'don't worry you can do a module of CPD [continuing professional development] in a day just sit down and smash it out.' And they say 'I don't work like that I can't just smash it out, I actually need to understand it, I need to connect with it, I need to hear people talk about how that actually works in practice in order for it to sink in for me.' (Participant 1)

This process also represents a balancing feedback loop. While initially mechanized practice supported practitioners in developing their skills, it later became constraining and reduced the effectiveness of their practice. Because of this, practitioners needed to develop their competence, even when unsupported by the system.

Overall, the results show that practitioners' perceived competence increased over time. The increase was not due to training, but practitioners first relying on tools and processes. Then they gained skills from others, before finally exploring their own ideas and values to guide their practice. Further, they described child protection knowledge as highly experiential. This required a deep conceptual understanding of how to translate ideas into skills for practice in diverse settings. As a result, more experienced practitioners were concerned that the increased mechanization of child protection practice enforced a narrow view of competence. This left practitioners unskilled to navigate complexity. In contrast, practitioners felt that focusing on professional identity, self-reflection, and critical thinking were important ways of improving competence. Together, these factors led to the trend of competence increasing overtime. I show this process in Figure 24 where the qualitative results are graphed onto the quantitative results.

Figure 24

The Process of Developing Competence Over Time

(Figure 24 plots Median score of Competence (y-axis, 1 to 5) against Practitioner level of experience (x-axis: Less than 1 year/Novice, 1-5 years/Proficient, 5+ years/Expert). Data labels: 4.0 at Novice, 4.0 at Proficient, 4.5 at Expert. Annotation boxes: "The rigid structure and culture created a sense of confidence"; "Communicative reflexivity led to professional development"; "Cultural pragmatism overrode structural training"; "Some practitioners had significant experience from other sectors"; "Expert practitioners questioned whether 'genuine' competence was being developed".)

Self-Determination: Shared Responsibility and Decision-making

The quantitative results showed a pattern of self-determination that started above neutral, dropped to below neutral, and then climbed above neutral again, depending on the experience of practitioners. There was a statistically significant difference between proficient practitioners (1-5 years), and expert practitioners (5+ years) $H(2) = 7.34$, $p = .025$. Proficient practitioners showed the lowest self-determination ($Mdn = 2.7$), with novice ($Mdn = 4.0$) and expert ($Mdn = 4.0$) practitioners having near equal perceptions of self-determination regardless of their role. This showed that, over time, perceptions of self-determination changed even when a practitioner's vertical position in the system's hierarchal structure remained the same (whether they were frontline or in management). Overall, the mean score of self-determination was only slightly above neutral identifying this as an area that practitioners perceived as lacking in their practice. These results raised two main questions: (a) why did proficient practitioners experience a decrease in their self-determination, and (b) what contributed to practitioners regaining a sense of self-determination over time?

The qualitative results showed that the structure and culture of the system did not give space for practitioners to have self-determination. Because the system was trying to reduce

variability, self-determination was a threat to control. To solve this, the system developed a high monitoring structure and a culture that idealised mechanized practice. Practitioners themselves also identified feeling threatened and scared of holding responsibility. This was because they perceived the system as punitive. Whereas the rigid structure and culture had previously created a sense of comfort, as practitioners increased their skills, they saw flaws in the system. Consequently, this led to a situation of corrective logic. Practitioners then tried to unify incompatible ideas through resistance or advocacy and create a sense of empowerment for themselves. When a practitioner perceived the system as too threatening, and that speaking out would cause negative consequences, they used assimilation. This allowed them to gain self-determination while avoiding reprisal by the system. In contrast, other practitioners used advocacy, voicing their opinions even if ultimately the decision was not in their favour. These practitioners gained self-determination not through the outcome of decisions, but by advocating for themselves. I summarise this process in Table 23.

Table 23

The Effect of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Self-determination

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Structure	My role at [statutory child protection] it was so, it was so procedural with 'you do this, you do this, we do this,' and it was such a streamlined way of working. (Participant 4)	Practitioners experienced the system as reducing their self-determination while holding them accountable for managing risk.
	… I suppose anxiety, and if we don't do this will we be in trouble? Because it'll go to court or to inquiry or something. (Participant 10)	
Culture	We don't want to tick boxes, we don't want people who are just automatons, we don't need robotics, in a space that is highly contentious social work like it is the hardest work you will ever do. (Participant 5)	The mechanized culture undermined practitioners' self-determination. The initial comfort of **protective logic** was replaced with frustration as practitioners' skills exceeded what the structured culture allowed.

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Agency	[We are] re-badging a lot of, you know, conversations, and documenting conversations in a different way. (Participant 14) I think, sometimes you've got to really put forward your case as to why you think a certain way. But I mean, ultimately, a lot of the time, I feel that although I might not have a decision, I can advocate as much as I can. (Participant 12)	Practitioners used either resistance (when the perceived threat was too high) or advocacy to create more self-determination under a situation of **corrective logic**.

Note. Bolded terms highlight the components of the M/M framework.

The system's drive to undermine practitioners' self-determination was due to the risk averse culture. Less variability in practice meant more control over the outcomes. Contrary to what the system was trying to achieve however, lowered self-determination increased risk for children and placed greater demands on an understaffed system. This was because practitioners could not rely on their own critical thinking and judgement. As a result, decisions became locked into the rigid hierarchy, placing supervisors and managers under pressure. The next quote from a manager describes the interaction between resources and decision-making, highlighting the negative impact on managers when practitioners have reduced self-determination.

> Which is really difficult because it's very difficult for supervisors to be making
> decisions like, really some basic decisions … [and it is] just so rigid and so controlled
> that there's not a lot of individual decision making, at all. (Participant 6)

To balance the competing needs through corrective logic, the system needed practitioners to practice independently while only making decisions within the hierarchy. In corrective logic, incompatible ideas are put together through syncretism, without critical reflection on the effects produced. This syncretism was shown in the concept of autonomy. The following quote illustrates how autonomy was expected in some parts of the system, but not in others.

> I think that they [front line practitioners] have a sense of autonomy in the sense that they are expected to get on with their work and do it, but I think it is so much more than that isn't it? Autonomy, kind of feeling like you have control over what is actually happening and I don't know that that's necessarily the part that is there. (Participant 1)

This type of autonomy had an inverse effect on self-determination. It left practitioners feeling isolated in carrying responsibility but unable to influence the outcomes of the children and families on their caseload. As a result, in some situations, they felt they had too much autonomy and in others not enough. This identified a more complex view of self-determination than previously considered in the quantitative results. The proposition created was: *I am powerless but responsible.*

When drawing on the M/M framework, the types of reflexivity and how practitioners thought about self-determination further enriched the findings. The PE instrument assumes theoretically that self-determination is a positive attribute, and that low scores for self-determination impact overall empowerment. In contrast, the qualitative data questioned this assumption for child protection practice. In fact, most practitioners identified they did not want to carry the responsibility for decision making and thought that shared decision making was best practice. They did not want complete self-determination, but instead wanted to feel they had a voice in their work and could influence final outcomes. Additionally, practitioners valued shared risk management and working collaboratively far more than autonomy. Because of the level of responsibility carried by child protection practitioners, no individual practitioner wanted or thought it safe to have high levels of self-determination in their work.

The quantitative data also showed that after the initial decrease, the longer practitioners remained in child protection, the greater their sense of self-determination. When exploring this pattern in the qualitative data, practitioners reinterpreted what self-determination meant to them. They underwent a process of 'coming to terms' with the structure and culture of the system, while still using their agency. Participant 19 reflected on the rigid structure of the system, explaining that self-determination is inherently limited. This was because of the legislative structures that underpinned child protection, requiring

practitioners to adapt to be successful in the system. They explained, "Because it's a very prescriptive job … we've got an Act we have to work under … some people find that very difficult to deal with."

This process of adaptation identified that the internal conversation and level of reflexivity held by the practitioner contributed to their perceived self-determination. However, the reinterpretation of self-determination did not happen immediately, and instead changed depending on the level of experience a practitioner had. While novice practitioners expected to have limited autonomy and felt comforted by the rigid structure, proficient practitioners became frustrated and felt the system did not value their expertise. As practitioners gained more competence, they disagreed with the mechanized culture of child protection. Additionally, they questioned the use of tools and rigid structure and wanted to find creative ways of working with families. These ideas clashed with the risk-averse culture of the child protection system, putting pressure on practitioners' sense of self-determination.

The quantitative data showed that the discrepancy between perceived competence and self-determination did not continue indefinitely. Instead, after some years in the child protection system, practitioners returned to their original perceptions of self-determination. A possible explanation for the increase in self-determination was the use of autonomous reflexivity by practitioners. With the high turnover, few practitioners remained in child protection while feeling disempowered. Those who remained used their agency to advocate for greater autonomy and for their voice to be heard. Consequently, the use of autonomous reflexivity helped practitioners advocate for their own views and take clear action about what they thought was best. The following quote directly links advocacy with increased experience and confidence.

> I think initially, it feels a bit like top down structure, because that would have been because I was new to the role. But as time has gone on, I've always been somebody to question something, or ask questions about why or do this or what's the issue or anything like that? What can't I do? [laugh] It's allowed me to get to a position where I feel quite confident to say, 'x equals x', or 'look at this differently', or 'who's got some ideas around this' … because I think staff members need to feel that they

are experts in their field to some extent, even though they may be new into the role. If they feel that they're just a bureaucrat, then they are not going to stay in the job. (Participant 10)

Although practitioners could not change the hierarchical structure that held power over decision making, they could voice their differing opinion. Practitioners who used this strategy gained empowerment by actively recording their views. This served to communicate to the child and family that they held a different view of the decision made by management. The driving proposition of practitioners shifted: *I am responsible and so I inherently have power.*

This use of autonomous reflexivity also protected the practitioner if action was taken against them in the future. The following two quotes highlight two different forms of protection. The first quote shows how the practitioner protected themselves against the perceived threat in the system that holds them accountable for the injury or death of a child. The second quote relates more to the practitioner's values and protected against the moral injury that occurs when acting against one's own views or beliefs.

> At the end of the day, they can do it that way. I made sure that's recorded because if I have to go to tribunal, I want to be able to say 'well I looked at this and this is what I was instructed to do' you've got to have that background thinking in mind all the time, how do you also protect yourself. (Participant 10)

> But ultimately, the manager has the final call, and then they decide differently, then that's going to sign off on that decision. But I always clearly document my view and if it differs ... And I always think that if a child goes back and looks at their file one day, I want them to see that I might have had a different view, and why I had a different view. (Participant 12)

These autonomous practitioners cared less about the outcome of the decision and more about voicing their opinion. This allowed them to act rather than being a helpless or passive recipient.

In summary, the main causal mechanism that may explain the pattern of self-determination was the relationship between the practitioners' expectations of autonomy and perceived competency. Both competence and self-determination related to practitioners' ability to perform successfully in their role and are linked theoretically. In contrast with competence, developing self-determination could not be achieved independent of the structure and culture of the system. The pattern of self-determination across time demonstrated the importance of how practitioners used reflexivity to navigate the structure and culture of the system. As they gained competence, practitioners struggled against the constraints of the culture and structure of the system. They faced the realization that the legislative nature of child protection limited their ability to be innovative and required them to adapt their expectations. Overall, most practitioners felt that self-determination should not be absolute and preferred collaboration and shared decision-making. They achieved this using communicative reflexivity to share their thinking with others and draw consensus. Additionally, as practitioners gained more experience, they used autonomous reflexivity to advocate for themselves. This reflexivity allowed practitioners to adjust their expectations and ensure the system heard their voice, even if the final decision was not what they recommended. I diagram these results in Figure 25.

Figure 25

The Effects of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Self-determination
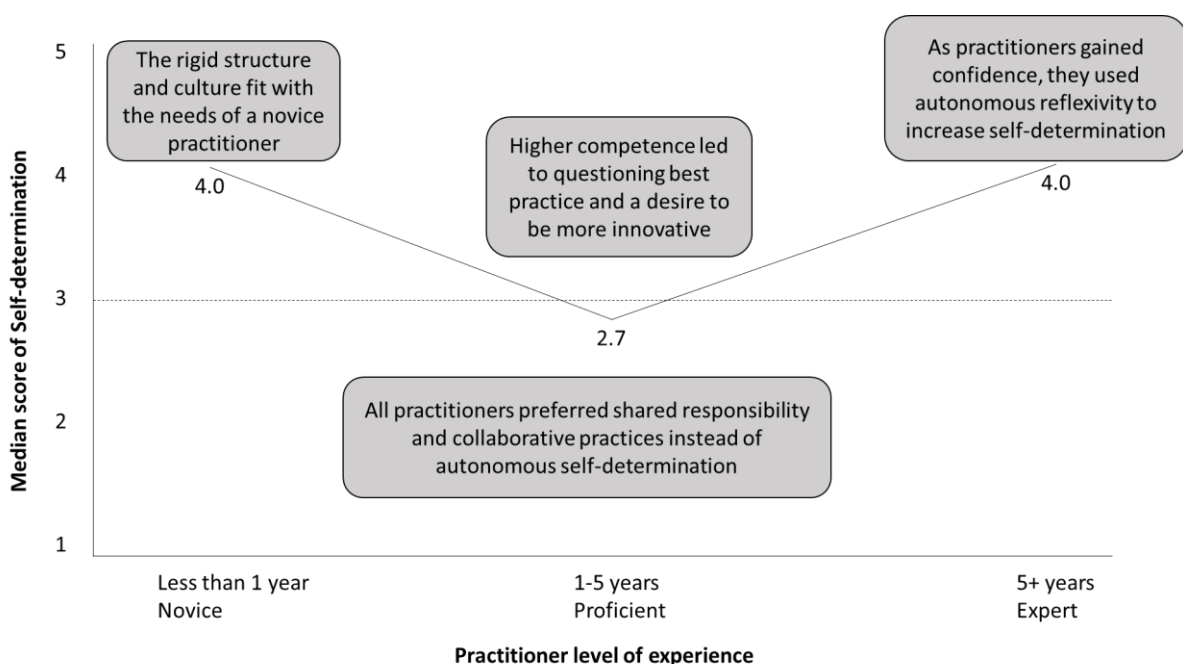
Meaning: An Ongoing Journey

The quantitative results showed practitioners' sense of meaning to be high (*Mdn* = 5.0 on a scale with 5 being the highest). While the pattern of meaning showed a slight drop for proficient practitioners, this was not significant. In fact, meaning remained high across all categories of practitioners regardless of their length of employment, sector, education, or role. One question was drawn from these results: (a) why did meaning remain so high across all demographic variables?

The qualitative data provided evidence that practitioners actively nurtured high levels of meaning. They felt passionate about their work and thought it brought purpose to their lives. Instead of this sense of meaning coming from the structure and culture of the system, practitioners sought out opportunities to enhance the meaningfulness of their work. This was especially needed when practitioners did not achieve 'successful' outcomes in their work. At times, practitioners felt they had to protect themselves, and their strong sense of meaning could leave them vulnerable. Practitioners also had difficulty sustaining their meaning in the rigid culture. They felt that the system was no longer relational with paperwork and procedures taking away from time spent working with children. Despite this, practitioners used a wide range of agency to cultivate meaning. These interactions are demonstrated by the quotes in Table 24.

Table 24

The Effects of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Meaning

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Structure	Because they're guarded and worried as well, in terms of if they did something wrong, and how could that be seen and the implications. (Participant 11)	The structure of the system placed high responsibility on practitioners who were closely monitored but left to protect themselves.
Culture	I just felt like I was just on a rat wheel just going through the motions and got to get these assessments done. And I didn't feel like I had the space to be creative or use any of the tools of social work ... (Participant 4)	The culture of the system reinforced the structure, but this clashed with the values of practitioners. A **corrective logic** was created where practitioners had to prioritise what they valued in the system.

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Agency	I had to leave the department … because I don't want to put kids in care because I don't think that the state makes good parents. I think kids who go into care are often probably no better off than they are [remaining at home]. Learning the system made me probably trust the system less and want to keep kids out. (Participant 6) I advocate very strongly for the people I work for, which is my clients, my carers, and the children in their care. (Participant 13	This corrective logic led to practitioners drawing on **meta-reflexivity** where they practiced according to their values and **autonomous reflexivity** where they held confidence in their own beliefs. When meaning could not be gained, **fractured reflexivity** developed. All types of agency had the same goal while achieving it in different ways. Practitioners resisted the system, left the system, or advocated for change. In this way they held true to their values and what gave them meaning in their work.

Note. Bolded terms highlight the components of the M/M framework.

The data show that the system and the practitioners held two different propositions about best practice. The system promoted the idea of risk aversion: *practice should be consistent, clearly documented, and failures to follow procedure are blamed on the individual*. In contrast, practitioners highlighted more creative and individualised ways of working: *practice should be tailored to the family, unique, and relational.* This strong contradiction led to a distressing situation for practitioners. While they tried to practice according to their values and the ways of working that gave them meaning, they often described the system as ineffective. This created a contextual incongruity where the practitioner functioned in a system that did not fit with their ideals. Once again, corrective logic applied, and encouraged practitioners to unify their ideals with that of the system. However, finding unity in a contradictory system is inherently unstable and left practitioners "seeking to survive amongst the incompatible cultural ideas" (Nuryatno & Dobson, 2015, p. 4). The following quote shows a practitioner's reflections on the competing cultural ideas and structures in the system. They highlight their ideal of a child centred system, but how the rigid structure and culture took precedence.

> It's not a simple solution, but I would like it to be fixed. I would like [the system] to be to be child centered. You know, we're talking about child protection, but it's governed by rules. It's governed by restrictions, rather than focusing on this child. (Participant 7)

To 'survive' in the system of contradictions, practitioners had to reframe their sense of meaning within their current context. When practitioners were successful, they could create meaning that was not solely dependent on good outcomes. This allowed them to weather difficult times while still feeling engaged with and connected to their work. However, reframing meaning was not a one-off task, and had to be repeated throughout a practitioner's career.

The use of values to reframe meaning highlighted a process of meta-reflexivity. Meta-reflexivity is willing to 'pay the price' of the system in order to practice in a way that aligns with values and ideas. Practitioners using meta-reflexivity were more likely to resist cultural ideas that did not align with their values. While meta-reflexivity helped practitioners to resist compromising their values, it also left them isolated and feeling that they were outsiders to the prevailing culture. The following two quotes show this isolation. The first quote, by participant four, describes their feelings while working in child protection, leading to their decision to resign. Participant four explained, "There's no way I could have survived there. Because I just, I just felt like I was alone." The second quote, rather than describing historical feelings, occurred during the interview. Participant 13 wanted to know if there were other practitioners like them working in the system, asking, "Are my views different to other people working in the child protection system?" This highlighted the practitioner's isolation through their questioning if they were 'the odd one out' in an otherwise unified system.

Despite the isolation, meta-reflexivity is associated with high levels of dedication, which was visible in the qualitative data. Even when practitioners found their work was unsatisfying, they considered the impact of their leaving on the children and families they worked with. This reflection on the needs of children and families helped practitioners remain dedicated to their work. The next quote demonstrates a practitioner using their reflexivity to question their context. They compared the ongoing stress of remaining in the child protection system against their own values to determine how best to use their agency. Ultimately, the personal sense of responsibility to others convinced the practitioner to remain. Participant 13 expressed their reasoning explaining, "Sometimes I wonder do I really want to do this. Is it worth it? But if I'm not going to advocate for these people, who will?"

The personal project that came out of practitioners' use of meta-reflexivity was an active and ongoing one. They described ways they reminded themselves of their values to keep dedicated; often by concentrating on single children or families rather than broader change. This allowed them to gain enough meaning from their work, even when faced with new challenges. The following quote shows a practitioner working hard to draw meaning out of their practice. They used their internal dialogue, signified by the phrase "kept saying to myself", to construct their perceptions. The practitioner was searching for "enough" meaning to remain within the child protection system and buffer them against the ongoing sense of trauma and threat.

> I just kept saying to myself, if it's one kid, if it's one kid that can walk out with a full history of who they are, and a sense of belonging, then we've done our job, you know, for that one person … and if it makes that little bit of difference for that person, or that young person, or that mom, or whoever it is then that's okay, that's enough, and they are enough. (Participant 14)

While practitioners using meta-reflexivity are dedicated, they have low tolerance for bureaucracy, organisational procedures, and constraint (Archer, 2007). When faced with these situations of contextual incongruity, practitioners using meta-reflexivity are likely to change organisations while remaining in child protection. This trend was seen in the data where practitioners regularly moved amongst different roles, departments, or organisations.

Overall, the high levels of meaning reported in the quantitative results showed the importance of practitioners being supported to develop sustainable meaning in their work. While high levels of meaning protected practitioners from work stress, they also left practitioners easily burnt out from a lack of success. To counter this, practitioners identified explicitly following their values, and re-defined what achievement meant for them. This was an ongoing process, starting from when practitioners first entered the child protection system. As they faced a culture and structure that did not always align with their values, they deliberately created new ways of gaining meaning from their work. The practitioners who were most successful focused on building relationships with children and families, and celebrated any small success. Consequently, the quantitative data showed persistently high

levels of meaning. However, not all practitioners could do this. When contextual incongruity was too high, practitioners changed roles, departments, or left child protection completely. I diagram this full process in Figure 26.

Figure 26

The Effects of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Meaning
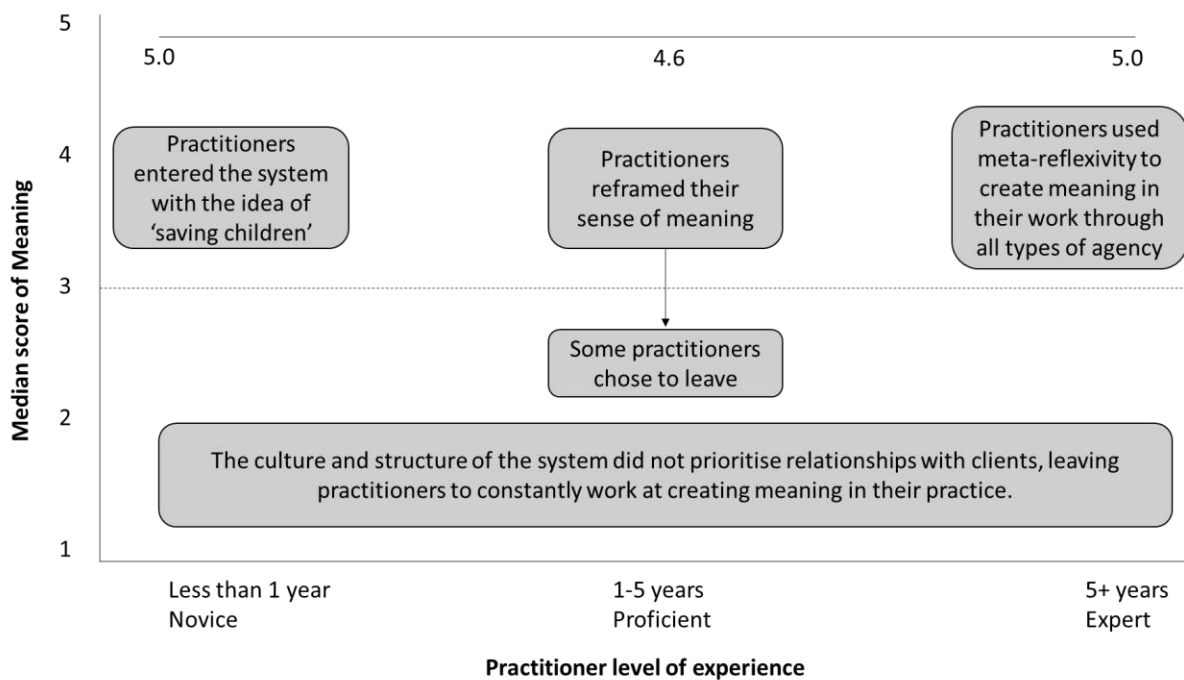
Impact: An Invisible Threat

The quantitative findings identified that practitioners had a low sense of impact (*Mdn* = 2.0 with 5 representing the highest score). Overall, they did not feel they could influence their respective departments or organisations. There was a significant difference between three types of roles within child protection, with frontline practitioners reporting the lowest perceived impact (*Mdn* = 2.0) compared to those in supervisory positions (*Mdn* = 2.3) and those in management (*Mdn* = 3.8), H(3) = 15.20, *p* = .002. No other factor was associated with impact, and it remained low regardless of the level of experience a practitioner had. These results posed the questions: (a) why were the scores of impact so low, and (b) why was the type of role the only factor associated with a higher sense of impact?

The statistically significance between the sample of practitioners in the qualitative phase and the quantitative phase was also considered. The interviewed practitioners reported

much higher levels of impact. When reviewing the qualitative data, the practitioners spoke both about their own impact and that of their colleagues and staff. In this way, practitioners were able to reflect on any apparent differences. Given the difference however, it is likely that the qualitative findings do not fully show the low sense of impact felt by other practitioners who chose not to participate in the interview.

The qualitative findings already discussed have provided a picture of practitioners' sense of impact. The perception of not being heard was common amongst the practitioners interviewed. In fact, practitioners felt that the structure of the child protection system created top-down communication channels that did not give them an opportunity to voice their opinions. Additionally, the culture reinforced these channels, with practitioners describing threats and the expectation that they do not show any emotions or vulnerability. These threats caused tension in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Some practitioners could not cope with the environment and left the system. In contrast, others built their resilience, but this was often only successful when they had a supervisor who was supportive, giving them greater leverage in the system. I show this process in Table 25.

Table 25

The Effect of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Impact

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Structure	You do not talk, you do not even look at, you do not even email anyone who is not your management case work or your manager client service. You do not even talk to the director in the kitchen. (Participant 3)	The structure of the system directly silenced practitioners by creating top-down only communication.
Culture	The toxicity of the workplace in that it was a space really only people who were had a very thick skin could work in as long as you kept your eyes only on your work. (Participant 5)	The culture reinforced the structure through **protective logic**. Practitioners were expected to not only be mechanized in practice, but in their emotional responses as well.
Agency	I left child protection because I recognized that it was going to impact my family, it was already impacting my contact with my children and wasn't a work-life balance. (Participant 5)	The lack of impact led some practitioners to **fractured reflexivity**, where they became frozen.

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
	I don't shut up that's my problem. I was lucky in that I had a team leader who was very supportive. (Participant 14)	Others used **communicative reflexivity** and drew on the support of supervisors.

Note. Bolded terms highlight the components of the M/M framework.

Although practitioners had strong views about how the system power over them, their negative descriptions were rarely about their immediate supervisors. Instead, practitioners identified a bureaucratic hierarchy that was separate from child protection practice. This hierarchy was invisible, disconnected from practice, and controlled managers, supervisors, and frontline practitioners through policies and mandates. The next quote describes the top-down communication channels connected to this hierarchy and how they restricted practitioners from being heard.

> If you had to get a message to them [directors] you would have to put it through your manager of case work who will then forward it to manager of client services who will then forward it to the director. (Participant 3)

Practitioners perceived this invisible hierarchy was a source of both threat and constraint. Practitioners even felt that this structure was replicated in interactions with families and caregivers. They highlighted a lack of transparency and that their leaders made decisions without comment or explanation. This demonstrates the transmission of cultural ideas and structures through the system, affecting the final outcomes. Each level of the system reproduced the structure and culture from the level above. This pattern is referred to as entrainment and creates a parallel process that is replicated on all levels of the system (Hudson, 2006).

Because of entrainment, practitioners who challenged the status quo were shut down. In this way the system self-organised for its own protection and reproduced the internal culture. While practitioners were successful in using their agency to build their competence, create self-determination, or enhance their sense of meaning, they felt ineffective when trying to impact the system. For example, participant 13 encountered barriers after they advocated for themselves stating, "There was pushback when I started

challenging the department … I got told stories about people that had challenged the department and, you know, it looks bad." In contrast, participant three felt pressured consistently, "… and feeling literally like someone standing behind you with a whip. And a lot of that came down from senior management where I worked." The quotes show practitioners trying to behave in ways that go against the structure of the system. They were unsuccessful and instead the culture of the system guided them back to acting in ways that were acceptable.

These responses demonstrate how the system kept itself stable through protective logic. The structure of the system limited communication and impact by reinforcing an authoritarian culture. While this protected the system, practitioners themselves were then left unprotected. The structure of policies and processes that provided accountability also left practitioners fearful of the consequences of their actions. As a result, practitioners identified that while their role was still the protection of children, they also had to protect themselves. This response showed how the mechanized culture, which attempted to reduce human error and create accountability, changed how practitioners worked.

Because the rigidity of the system managed threat and instability, there were periods when it became more constrained. Practitioners were aware of this dynamic and spoke about the system being reactive to threatening events. The next quote shows a practitioner reflecting on critical events, and the rigidity that consequently occurred.

> Different things that have happened at different times, a child death, the reviews, different inquiries that then informed recommendations that have come out of that… I think that, at times, there's been reactivity, more guarded in terms of approaches, when it's become more crisis driven, more directive, less inclined to hear from you as a practitioner, and to be able to value what your contributions are. (Participant 11)

During these times, practitioners described being expected to 'toughen up' and function as though they had no emotions. The dismissal of human emotions shows the cascading effect of a system trying to protect itself. One of the primary survival responses to trauma and threat is the loss of emotion and functioning in a robotic way (Porges & Dana, 2018).

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Because the threat cannot be eliminated (it is necessary but incompatible), the system instead tries to remove feelings and with it the emotional experience of the threat. Accordingly, it left practitioners carrying their feelings of vulnerability and highlighted the physical, psychological, and emotional impacts on their wellbeing. Some of these practitioners demonstrated fractured reflexivity, where thinking about a situation only generated more distress and so they remained frozen in their situation. Participant five described this freezing response clearly stating, "I know a lot of people stay in child protection, because they feel like if I'm not here, someone will die. And that's a really frightening and really disempowering space for a practitioner to be." Participant nine further described becoming "lost" and "stuck" stating, "I very much lost the sense of who I was, and what I was doing; I ended up having a bit of a mental breakdown." Both practitioners sensed they were in distress but could not act to improve their circumstances. They had lost their agency.

Additionally, practitioners identified a separation between structure and culture, with culture overriding any structural changes entering the system. Even when the hierarchy attempted to gather feedback from frontline practitioners, they did not view them as genuine. Although the structure was adapted for two-way flow of information, the culture dismissed the ideas and needs of frontline practitioners. As a result, practitioners became distrusting upper management and their intentions. For example, participant six stated, "I don't think there's a lot of scope for practitioners to be listened to at all, I think most of the consultation is for show, I think quite often that the result is preordained." A similar sentiment was echoed by participant five who stated, "I'll believe it when I see it … you're from the ivory tower, I don't believe a frickin word you say, you'll whip the mat out from underneath me."

The description of an 'ivory tower' demonstrated the social cleavage within the hierarchy of the child protection system. Practitioners identified two groups: *those who do the work of protecting children and those who manage the system of child protection*. As a result, practitioners could not rely on organisational support. While practitioners held onto their sense of meaning, they were guided by an additional proposition: *I must protect myself.*

To achieve this, practitioners described themselves as actively using communicative reflexivity. Here they sought others who were like them to talk through their concerns and ideas. If they found safe and trusted others, they were more likely to remain in their workplace, using their relationships as resilience against the other challenges. This is a common use of communicative reflexivity identified by Archer (2007). Communicative reflexivity reduced the isolation they experienced from holding onto values in a culture and structure that was contextually incongruous. Instead, practitioners could have conversations that reaffirmed their values, allowing them to renew their dedication to their work. Practitioners drew on their sense of meaning to supplement their low sense of impact. The next two quotes show the importance of the relationships formed in child protection. The first quote illustrates a practitioner purposefully seeking connections to promote resilience. The second quote comes from a supervisor who recognized the importance of social support and adapted their management style to become more available.

> I think what's kept me resilient is connect reconnecting with people, staying with people who have like values and ethics to me, even as they progress perhaps out of the child protection system. But also, keeping a strong sense of self. And recognizing when I need that help. (Participant 5)

> If somebody is struggling … if they are not coping, might have been around just meeting and talking through issues, for example, or being able to get with the staff member and identify what they are struggling with. Lead to somewhere where they can learn some of that or to do it differently or get support with it. (Participant 10)

This use of communicative reflexivity worked best when the trusted person was a supervisor. This was because feeling supported by someone that sat in a higher position structurally created a sense of protection for practitioners. Supportive supervisors noticed when a practitioner was struggling. Here, rather than leaving the practitioner alone until they burned out, they found creative ways of keeping practitioners connected to practice. Additionally, these supervisors scaffolded practitioners' confidence by offering belief and confidence in their abilities.

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Overall, the integrated data demonstrated how practitioners perceived themselves to have low impact within the child protection system. There was social cleavage between 'the hierarchy' and local offices, with the communication structure between them offering only one-way communication. The main causal mechanism behind this interaction was an underlying sense of threat. It caused everyone in the system to protect themselves in the event that a child die or the system undergo a review. Consequently, upper management functioned from a position of protective logic, shaping both the structure and the culture of the system to reduce any instability. This reinforced a rigid system with no opportunity for practitioners to be heard. In fact, even when structural elements were created for consultation or feedback, the culture remained distrusting. Ultimately, practitioners felt that the rigidity protected the child protection system but left them exposed. The culture encouraged them to develop a 'thick skin' and they could not be seen as weak. In contrast, practitioners felt differently about their immediate supervisors or managers, who buffered them from the system. They built communities of shared values where they felt safe and connected. While this did not let them impact the system, they felt valued within their local office. As a result, they drew on those connections as a form of resilience. Together these findings explain the overall low levels of impact shown in the quantitative data. Because the hierarchical structure was so important, if practitioners move in higher positions, they gain a greater sense of impact. I diagram these findings in Figure 27.

Figure 27

The Effect of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Impact
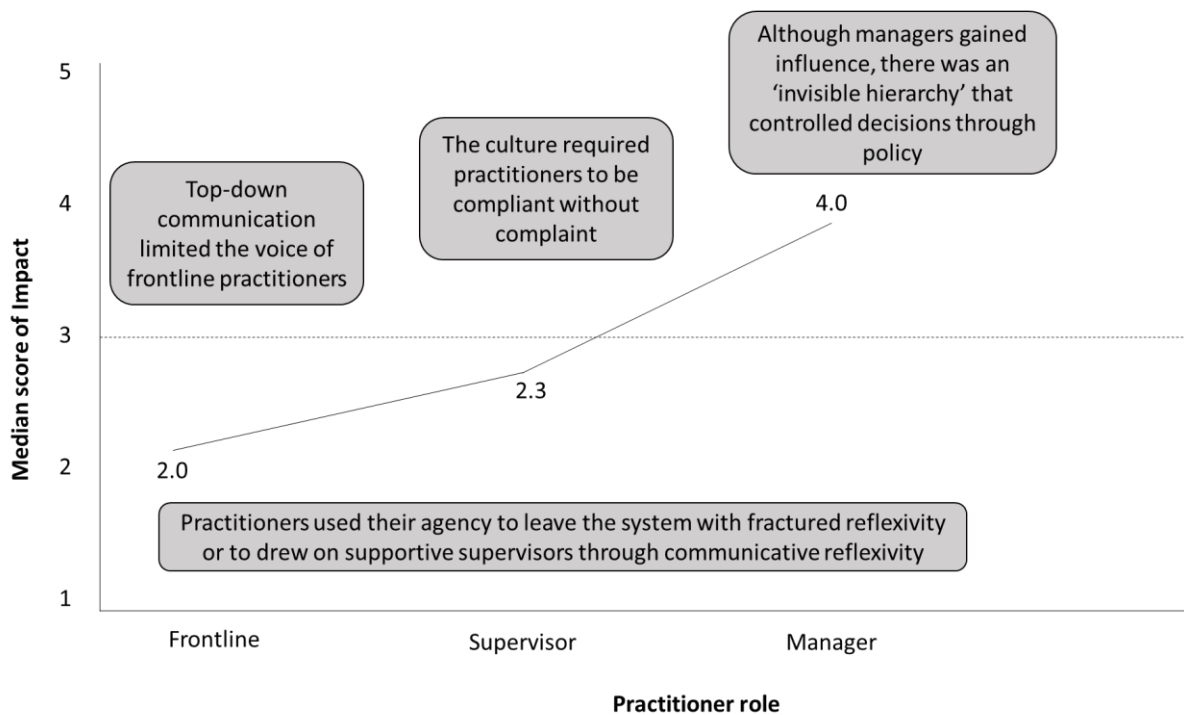
The integrated findings have now been added to the overall model, in Figure 28. The model shows how the culture and structure of the child protection system influenced psychological empowerment and how practitioners responded with their agency. The next section explores how these effects then influenced practitioners' response to systemic reform. Here, the agency that practitioners use contributed to the structure and culture of the system, either maintaining traditional practices through morphostasis, or evolving practice through morphogenesis. The next section completes the systemic diagram, showing the circular influences.

Figure 28

The Effect of Structure, Culture, and Agency on Psychological Empowerment
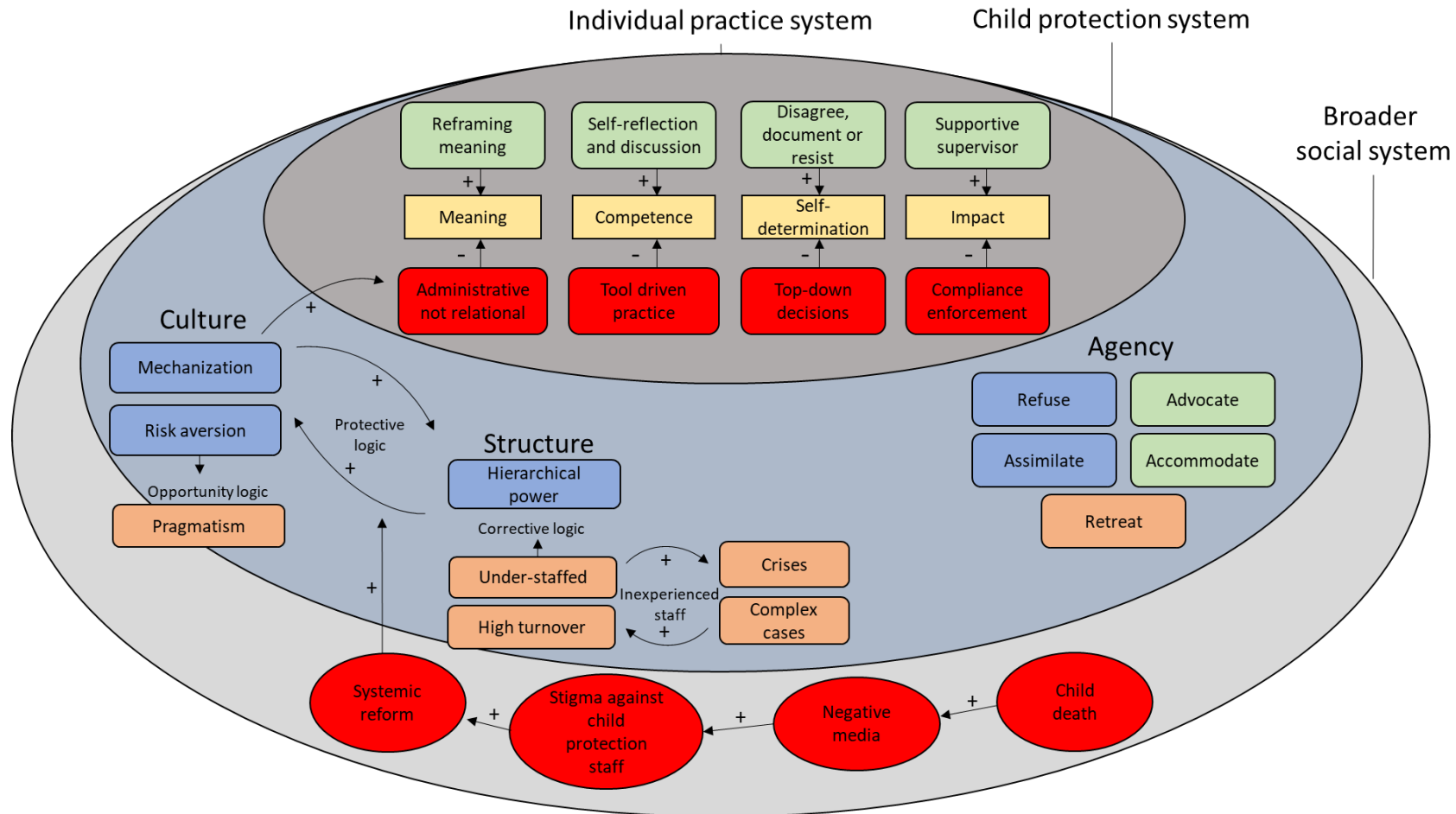
Note. + indicates a positive relationship. – indicates an inverse relationship. Orange = Chaos. Blue = Rigidity. Green = Adaptability. Yellow = PE. Red = Threat.

Response to Systemic Reform

The quantitative model identified that meaning (β = .28) was the most significant sub-dimension with total PE accounting for 21% (R^2 = .21) of the total variance ($F(5,69)$ = 6.9, $p <$ .001). This highlights that psychological empowerment is related to systemic reform through practitioners' sense of meaning. Here, practitioners were more responsive to systemic reform when they held high levels of meaning. These quantitative results posed the question (a) why was meaning the only sub-dimension associated with systemic reform?

The qualitative data showed practitioners used three types of agency to enhance their psychological empowerment within the child protection system: resistance, retreat, and resilient adaptability. These three types of agency influenced how practitioners moved through the system. Their agency not only affected their psychological empowerment but also contributed to either morphogenesis or morphostasis in the system. In this way, practitioners' psychological empowerment became connected to their response to systemic reform via their choice of agency. Their choice created three different pathways, affecting the structure and culture of the system. The three types of agency and their effects on practitioners' response to systemic reform are tabled in Table 26 with quotes illustrating the qualitative data.

Table 26

The Effects of Agency on Practitioners' Response to Systemic Reform

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Resistance	… some of the old timey practitioners that look at it and go, 'Oh, Signs of Safety we worked with that we can do that, you know, we can make it fit… let's just take it on the chin and wear it and we'll make it fit to the way we want to make it fit.' (Participant 14) I think some organizations are very much this is how we do things. This is how we've always done things. And this is how we're going to continue doing it. (Participant 15)	Practitioners who used resistance drew on **autonomous reflexivity**. They had confidence in their ideas but functioned separately from the system. Any changes introduced as part of systemic reform were assessed for **their meaningfulness** and either accepted, rejected, or adapted through assimilation. The final result was **morphostasis** of the system.

Entity	Example quote	Theoretical explanation
Retreat	If you were looking at other people's work, you would get very down and feel very hopeless about well, what's the future of child protection? Do we really actually work towards children staying with parents or are we just you know further you know, it's creating this, intergenerational abuse and neglect. (Participant 5) And it wasn't until a very, very good friend said to me, you need to get out, this is killing you. And I said, 'I don't want to, I don't want to leave this. It's too important'. (Participant 14)	Practitioners who used retreat drew on **meta-reflexivity**. They compared the systemic reform to their own sense of **meaning** and searched for roles and organisations that fit with their values. If the difference was too great, they developed **fractured reflexivity** and left the system. The final result was **morphostasis** of the system.
Resilient adaptability	And not seeing yourself as the expert, you're one of a team. That's always helped me to get through some difficult cases and difficult situations. (Participant 10) I do really try. And I'm very critical of myself as well. Once I've noticed I need to do something different. I will do it different. (Participant 13).	Practitioners who used resilient adaptability combined **autonomous, communicative, and meta-reflexivity**. Drawing on all three types of reflexivity made them adaptable and gave them a sense of confidence to challenge the system. When encountering systemic reform, practitioners embraced new ideas, challenged practices what went against their **values**, and advocated for their views. The final result was **morphogenesis** of the system.

Note. Bolded terms highlight the components of the M/M framework and psychological empowerment.

I discuss these three types of agency next. I use additional qualitative data to show the process of how agency influenced the structure and culture. I then conclude with how each form of agency led to either morphostasis or morphogenesis.

Resistance

Practitioners identified that resistance was common in child protection and was most clearly seen in response to systemic reform. Resistance halted attempts to change the system, with practitioners practicing according to their own values and traditions rather than those prescribed by the system. Given the rigidity of the structure and culture of the system, outright resistance for a practitioner would be difficult. Practitioners described how the

system simply did not tolerate independent actions and tried to promote uniformity. This meant they needed to comply with the system while still practicing how they wanted. Consequently, they used assimilation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, assimilation occurs when new practices are reshaped or re-badged, creating the appearance of change with no actual change occurring. Without additional data, it cannot be determined whether the changes introduced into the system were similar to prior practices or if this was simply the perception of practitioners. When change is implemented only on the behavioural level and there is no conceptual understanding of the differences, practitioners may inaccurately believe their current practice is already sufficient. It may also be that the changes these practitioners discussed were in fact re-badging. In fact, Chapter Two identified that issues with licensing, cost saving attempts, and political agendas can lead to 'pseudo systemic reform' where the appearance of change is more important than the outcomes of change.

In this study, practitioners did not view their use of assimilation as negative. Instead, they thought it allowed them to do the 'real work' of child protection which upper management could not understand. This again highlighted the sense of disconnection or social cleavage between 'us' and 'them'. Practitioners considered those making high-level decisions to be outside of the child protection system. Therefore, they scrutinised systemic reform for compatibility with their frontline practice and rejected any reform that did not align. The proposition guiding resistance became: *This is not how I want to practice.*

When refusal or assimilation was present, practitioners rarely changed their thinking or actions. Instead, they found ways of practicing similarly to how they had before. Sometimes this was an intentional choice, and sometimes this was because the 'new' practice was not that new at all. In both situations, practitioners reproduced the system resulting in morphostasis. At times, this was beneficial, allowing practitioners to weather ineffective political changes while still working in a way that achieved good outcomes. At other times, the lack of change caused a sense of 'stuckness' with practitioners becoming static in their way of thinking. In addition, practitioner's use of resistance not only impacted their growth but also that of the child protection system. It formed a reinforcing feedback loop with the structure of the child protection system as both came into conflict with each

other. As practitioners resisted change, monitoring by management increased, and the structure reinforced compliance.

Resistance was mainly driven by autonomous reflexivity. Autonomous reflexivity is more likely to occur when there is contextual discontinuity. Here, the practitioner does not feel obligated to conform to the system. Instead of following mandated changes, the practitioners prioritised what they felt was best. When relying on their autonomous reflexivity, practitioners were guided by their personal experiences determining how they wanted to practice, shown in the next quote.

> I was really aware of personal experience and how that impacted on people, on the way that they would respond to certain things. I think that really stuck out to me in terms of my conversations with people and understanding and people, workers would kind of share their background, because I think that they were aware that that sort of explained how they were responding to certain risk factors, or what they identified as not being a risk potentially. Because it's such an individual thing as well, you know, there's, you would go out, initially in the first meeting with another worker and a senior prac[titioner], particularly, but from there on in, it was a very individualistic kind of process. (Participant 16)

The above quote references variations of the word 'individualistic' several times. This idea of individualism is a strong characteristic of autonomous reflexivity, which Archer (2006) described as using the 'lone conversation' to make decisions.

As these practitioners became experienced and influential, they then influenced other practitioners. The qualitative data identified that guidance from experienced practitioners formed the foundation of child protection knowledge. As a result, it was hard for new ideas to enter the system. This process illustrates how communicative reflexivity also influences resistance to systemic reform, despite it appearing to be the opposite of autonomous reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity aims to create consensus. While it can support new practitioners to learn from those more experienced, it also reinforces morphostasis. Here, the dominant cultural ideas of the group override any new ideas entering the system. The next quote comes from a participant in a supervisory position involved in the training of new

staff. The cultural indoctrination processes were so strong within local offices, that structural attempts to reform them failed. Even when new processes or policies were created, traditional ideas remained 'alive' in local offices and were resistant to change.

> So, it's interesting to see where they've [new staff] got their knowledge from. And it is it's primarily from people that have been doing the job for a long time. And sometimes those aren't always right, or they're not always useful anymore, because things change and that kind of stuff... And we're almost having to undo some learning. (Participant 14)

This process can be clearly seen during the process of systemic reform. When the system introduced new knowledge through training, the prior knowledge perpetuated by experienced practitioners replaced it. This prior knowledge was viewed as directly applicable to daily work, as opposed to the training developed by upper management who 'did not understand real child protection'. Here, the underlying philosophy for practitioners was pragmatism, leading them to reject abstractly theoretical knowledge. This meant the social cleavage between frontline practitioners and upper management put the structure and culture of the child protection system in opposition. While the structure attempted to shape practitioners through training, these experienced practitioners instead reproduced the existing ideas in the system. Consequently, as each new practitioner entered the system, they were culturally trained in traditional practice. Here, the proposition expanded: *This is not how we want to practice.*

When the structure of the system responded by generating more training, these ideas were rejected. Rather than taking the time needed to examine the perceived incompatibility, new trainings with new ideas were increasingly layered onto the system. This was pointless as the ingrained pragmatic culture diffused new ideas without systematically using them. The following quote illustrates this diffusion, with the practitioner explaining how training was provided but not integrated into practice.

> I feel like it's business as usual I think there's an expectation that our practice will shift. In terms of an actually shifting, I don't really think that it does happen, I think it would be better to have, I guess, training that focuses on these different aspects and

having that refreshed constantly so that it's not just a flavour of the month. (Participant 12)

In summary, the outcome of resistance was keeping the child protection system in morphostatis. Any attempts to introduce change into the system were actively or passively resisted and practice continued 'as usual'. This resistance then prompted more monitoring which reproduced the rigid structure and culture of the system. Additionally, the mechanized culture encouraged tools and checklists to be used to monitor and 'ensure' change was occurring. Despite this, practitioners worked to find ways of appearing compliant while still practicing differently. As the number of tools and checklists increased, practitioners became less skilled, and were less able to manage risk. Using resistance as a process within the system is shown graphically in Figure 29.

Figure 29

Resistance Creating Morphostasis
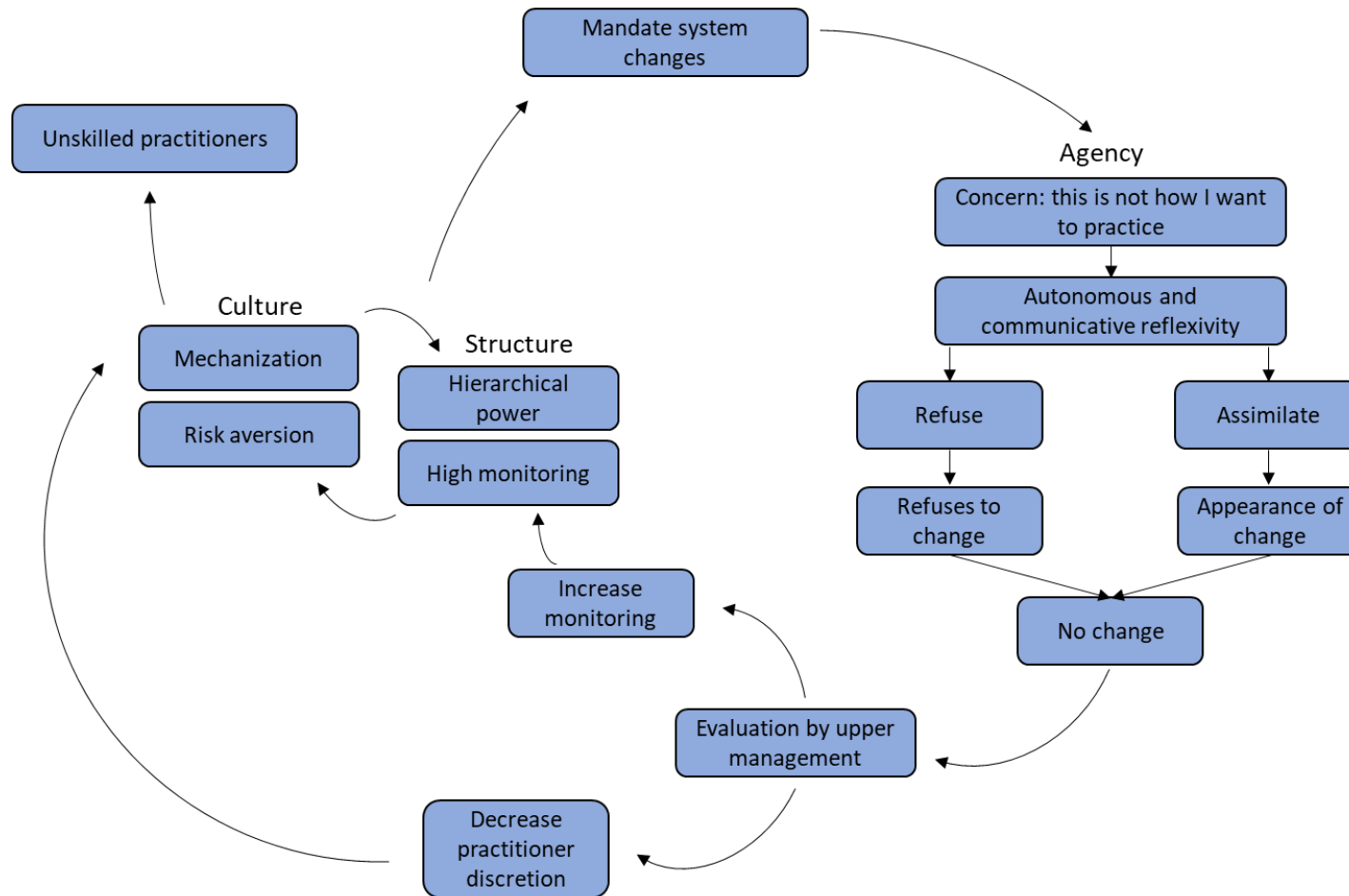
Note. Blue = Rigidity.

Retreat

Using retreat as a form of agency had an indirect relationship with systemic reform. All types of retreat (change of role, organisation, or system) contributed to the child protection system being unstable and the emergent property of chaos. As a result, turnover remained high and impacted overall staffing. This contributed to the initial factors that made systemic reform difficult.

The data also showed that meaning was strongly associated with practitioners' choice to retreat from challenges in the system. Using values highlighted meta-reflexivity. Archer (2006) identifies that meta-reflexivity is inherently critical and seeks to compare the world to the ideological standards of the individual practitioner. Most practitioners spoke negatively of the structure and culture of the child protection system, describing it as far from the ideal. The most common answer was to call the system "broken". Practitioners were also asked to describe their wish for the child protection system. They identified a focus on children, more relational practice, and greater transparency. Participant seven wanted the system to be "child centred" explaining that children did not seem to be the focus of many of the policies. Participant 19 elaborated on the desire for collaboration and communication stating, "I'd like it to be more engaging with both the families and the children in care, and foster parents, foster families. I'd like the child protection system to be listening to its staff." These practitioners welcomed systemic reform but were also disillusioned by it. An example is shown by participant five who was hoping for greater reform:

> But the reality is that it didn't change much at all. It just kind of moved responsibility around and led to a lot of people getting slaps and some people getting fired. But it didn't, I think a lot of people were disheartened by what we hoped was a watershed moment, but it wasn't.

Rather than resisting changes, practitioners using meta-reflexivity felt that the changes were never enough. For these practitioners, contextual incongruity was too high, and they would never realise their ideals. Accordingly, practitioners could not gain meaning from their work and could not resolve the issue except by leaving. This type of response is common to people who use meta-reflexivity (Archer, 2007). Losing hope appeared to be the critical

factor for whether practitioners left the child protection system. In fact, practitioners only left when they felt no actions could address their concerns. This sometimes occurred after a period of fractured reflexivity, where practitioners became unable to reflect on their work because it only intensified their distress. Fractured reflexivity felt hopeless and overwhelming, leaving practitioners unable to act on any personal projects. The practitioners caught in fractured reflexivity found no way forward and so stopped thinking about their situation to cope with their distress. This was even illustrated in the consent process for this study. Some, practitioners while initially wanting to speak about their experiences, found that thinking about their situation caused further distress and so they left the study. For practitioners using these types of reflexivity, the guiding concern was: *I cannot meet my needs.*

Both fractured and meta-reflexivity contributed to high turnover in the system. High turnover is frequently a challenge to implementing systemic reform in child protection systems and further strains the limited resources of the system. Therefore, although retreat was not directly related to systemic reform, it indirectly influenced the capability of the system. The next quotes show the intensity of high turnover as expressed by participants.

> [In of office of] maybe fifty staff and you may find only two or three that have been around for ten years or longer. There are quite a few that have been there about two to three years and they sort of end up getting into a more senior role because they are, in inverted commas, seen as more senior workers because they have had about two- or three-years' experience. When in reality they are actually still quite new. (Participant 1)

Turnover also affected leadership, as illustrated by Participant 12 who stated, "I've had three different team leaders in the past 12 months." This instability ruptured the capacity for practitioners to use communicative reflexivity as there were no consistent relationships.

This process was illustrated further in the demographic data. When examining the interviews conducted, most participants (n = 9, 47%) remained in the statutory child protection system with one participant (5%) only having practiced in an NGO. The rest transitioned away from statutory work to the NGO sector (n = 5, 26%), or left child

protection work entirely (n = 4, 21%). For practitioners who moved to NGOs, they identified improved work conditions, fewer cases, less responsibility for risk management, and more capacity for creativity. Practitioners also felt it important to find the right role for them, one that aligned with their values. The following quote illustrates a practitioner reflecting the importance of meaning for their role.

> I think I have, you know, certainly have a sense of meaning and the work that I do. I think it's very much fits in with where I am at the moment, I think if I was in a different team, I might struggle with that sense of meaning. Again, I think just my own personal values and beliefs fit better with the team that I'm in now, rather than the more frontline teams. (Participant 12)

These quote shows how practitioners assessed their context for congruency with their values. Practitioners found organisations and roles that gave them a sense of meaning, even if this meant a period of trialling various roles.

In summary, the result of practitioners retreating from their roles, organisations, or the system as a whole contributed to the emergent property of chaos. As discussed previously, a balancing loop formed which aimed to meet staffing needs by recruiting and promoting less experienced staff. These practitioners were not competent enough for the role and could not manage complex cases. Accordingly, this influenced the other components of the system. It reinforced the structural and cultural rigidity and reduced the support available for remaining staff. Although practitioners' choice to retreat seemed to generate change, it instead created morphostasis in an unstable system. Practitioners could not grow and change while the system was unstable and so it remained stuck in traditional practices. The data also highlighted that for practitioners, meaning was essential to deciding whether to stay in the system or retreat. The greater the difference between a practitioner's ideal system and their experience, the more tension was placed on them. This tension led to them either changing the system or finding a better fit with their values. I demonstrate this process in Figure 30.

Figure 30

Retreat Creating Instability

Agency

Concern: I cannot meet my needs

Meta-reflexivity

Retreat

New role

Fractured reflexivity

Lateral move to an NGO

No relationships with children and families

Culture

Risk aversion

High turnover

Crises

Under-staffed

Leave system completely

Complex cases

Inexperienced staff promoted

Moderate turnover

Fewer Crises

Staffed

Manage complex cases
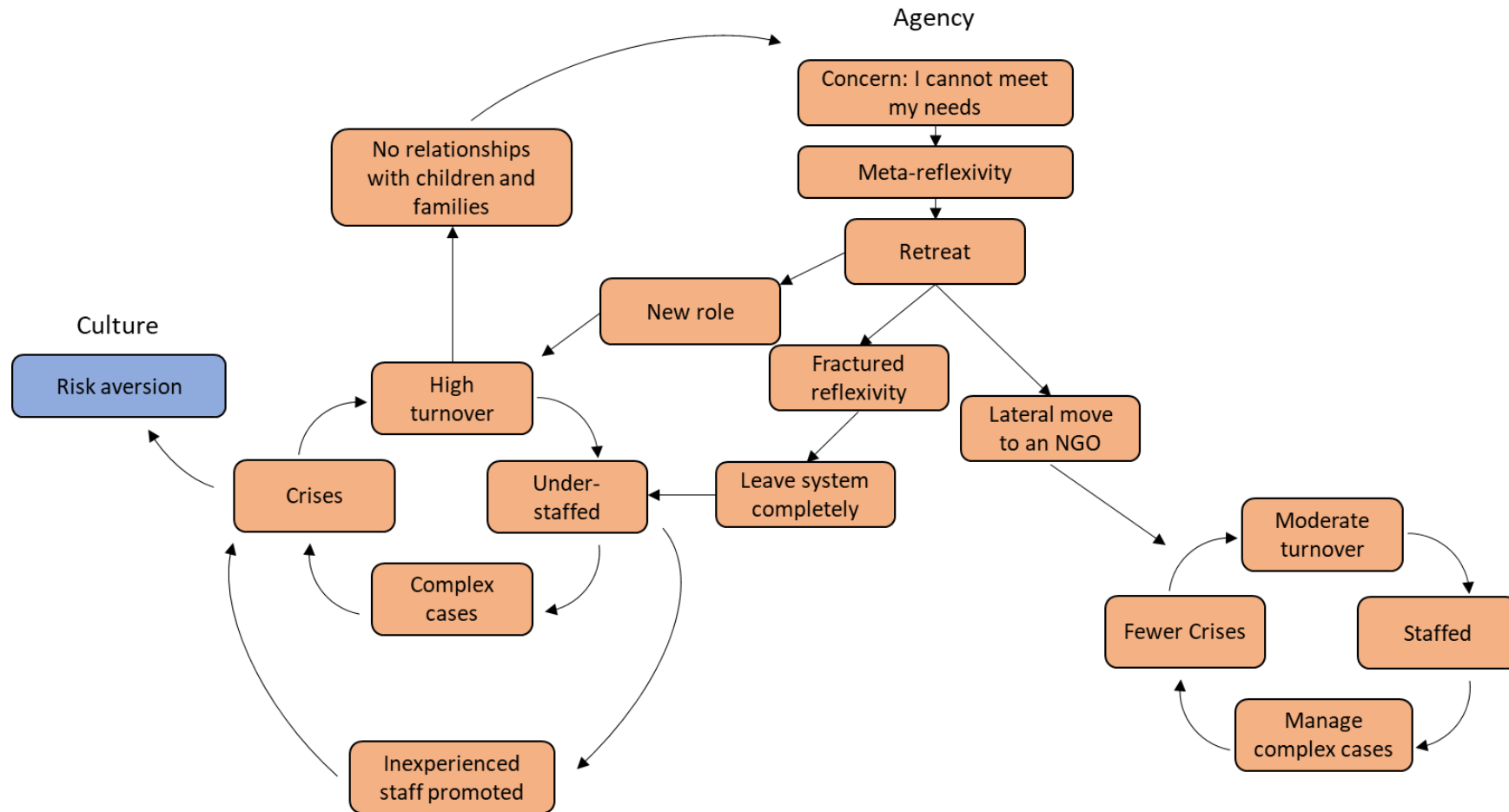
Note. Blue = Rigidity. Orange = Chaos.

Resilient Adaptability

The final type of agency was that of resilient adaptability. Unlike the prior two types of agency, resilient adaptability used all three forms of reflexivity and resulted in morphogenesis rather than morphostasis. This meant practitioners were open to changing themselves but also challenged the system. Practitioners who only used resistance challenged the system but at the cost of their own personal growth. Similarly, practitioners who used retreat were self-critical and open to change but could not tolerate a system that never met their ideals. Instead, resilient practitioners balanced both, advocating for changes where they saw better ways of meeting the needs of children, young people, families, and carers. The following quote illustrates the adaptive nature of resilient practitioners as they underwent change in response to systemic reform.

> And my caseworkers went out there and were feeling a bit sceptical as well, because it was really, it was a really different way of practice than what we ever had. So, we were used to a quite typical investigative interview. Whereas this was about really listening to families, and so not having that preconceived idea … I remember [the practitioners] ringing me and being like, 'Oh, my God, like, Dad actually did a worry statement with us.' And so, it was that moment that I was like, 'Oh, hang on, this could work.' (Participant 15)

The quote shows how these practitioners successfully integrated change, even when initially sceptical. Additionally, their response contributed to their sense of meaning when they saw a good outcome with the family.

Overall, practitioners felt that meaning-making was not supported by the structure and culture of the system. They wished for the personal journey of practitioners to be embraced and explored in supported supervision. Practitioners acknowledged that practice cannot only be values driven and felt that supervisors should encourage practitioners to reflect on their values. Essentially, practitioners argued for a meta-reflexive supervision style. The next quote shows a practitioner describing the inadequacy of training provided for systemic reform. The practitioner highlights how the transformation of knowledge into practice is highly individual and dependent on the personal experiences of the practitioner.

It's not as simple as there's this funnel of knowledge and when you actually pour it into everyone, it ends up looking the same. We are very different … [practitioners have their] own upbringing, their own values and beliefs, their own ideology and how they see that sort of working in practice. And I think that's the beauty of it because then you can have a lot of creativity as well about how to do things because people do come from such different areas such different strengths, really. But I don't know if a lot of the time we necessarily even have the time to get to know that because we get so focused on just doing the work that we forget about working with the people who do the work. (Participant 1)

This open attitude to variable practice, and seeing variability as a strength, also highlighted the resilient adaptability of practitioners. They were open to change within themselves, within the system, and amongst practitioners, all provided it met the needs of children, young people, children, and families. They concluded that change was about supporting the practitioners, not introducing more training or procedures.

When practitioners did not feel the system was promoting best practice, they spoke out. As identified in Chapter Six, advocacy was important to resilient practitioners who fought to have their voice heard. Rather than resisting change, these practitioners would accept doing things differently, but not without clearly stating their case. Again, meaning was important in this process. For example, participant 13 stated, "I'll take a stand for what I can see is right or what is legislated or what I've been taught." The quote shows the practitioner choosing to speak out, despite not having the support of others, because of the strong beliefs held. This process drew on autonomous reflexivity, where practitioners felt confident in themselves, their knowledge, and their skills. This reflexivity was based on meaning, as shown by the practitioner clearly stating, 'what I can see is right'. For this practitioner, they anchored their advocacy in their values and their knowledge of legislation and practice.

Finally, practitioners also drew on communicative reflexivity to compare their thoughts with those of others. Unlike the communicative reflexivity described in practitioners who resist, this reflexivity was again open and curious. Practitioners talked through challenging cases, shared self-determination, and learned through the experiences of others. Participant 16

illustrated using communicative reflexivity to explore their own value system, their own practice, and to regain a sense of empowerment. They explained, "Things that sustained me were really having the ability to actually talk through things with just from a different perspective with other practitioners." This process not only clarified their thinking but provided a sense of emotional sustenance.

Overall, practitioners felt that resilient adaptability not only empowered them but also best served the needs of the children, young people, families, and carers they worked with. They described working in a way that allowed them space to reflect on their practice, to tailor interventions to meet the needs of clients, and work collaboratively. The next series of quotes show practitioners rejecting the rigid system and embracing openness in practice.

> Because to me, I think it's that role modelling, and that, you know, being open to vulnerability, and being open to critique and creating that culture where, you know, we are all in this together, and sometimes we're not going to get it right. (Participant 15)

> I've noticed that you know, when you really work show the clients that you know, that you're working alongside them that their actions and their own and not us imposing our own beliefs and values and how they should work. (Participant 18)

> I think I'm definitely a lot more mindful of the power imbalances. And really trying to give more power back to my families like, I've tried to write notes alongside them, give them copies of what I written, just trying to work alongside the person and not be so scripted. (Participant 4)

These quotes also show a strong ethical foundation and beliefs that were present across the practitioners interviewed. Despite the challenges faced in the structure and culture of the system, practitioners engaged with children, young people, families, and carers firmly believing in their capacity to change. The guiding concern for these practitioners was: *I want to grow as a practitioner and practice in ways that align with my values*.

In summary, practitioners who used resilient adaptability combined meta-reflexivity, communicative reflexivity, and autonomous reflexivity successfully. As a result, they held

firm to their ideals and values in the face of pressure and threat. They also kept their capacity to grow and change. This balanced approach offered the system the best opportunity for morphogenesis as it embraced change within the current culture and structure. Systemically, the resilient practitioners avoided the reinforcing and balancing loops that promoted morphostasis in the other types of agency. I show the impact of resilient adaptability on the child protection system in Figure 31.

Figure 31

Flexible System Morphogenesis

Agency

More willing to change

Embrace compatible systemic reform

Concern: I want to grow as a practitioner and practice in ways that align with my values

Combined use of communicative, autonomous and meta-reflexivity

Practitioners feel empowered

Advocate for ethical practice

Practitioners remain in the system

Moderate turnover

Stable staffing

New culture

Practitioner discretion

Risk management

Shared power

Supportive monitoring

Enhanced meaning

Better outcomes for children and families

Best practice in complex cases

New structure

Fewer crises

Note. Blue = previous Rigidity. Orange = previous Chaos. Green = Adaptability.

Summary of Findings

The integrated data analysis revealed that both cultural and structural factors influenced practitioners' sense of psychological empowerment, with different sub-dimensions experienced differently. Where the system promoted administrative tasks, practitioners instead worked to reframe their sense of meaning. Similarly, as the system promoted tools to create uniform practice, practitioners instead engaged in reflective discussions with colleagues to build their competence. When practitioners could not change the outcome of top-down decisions, they documented their point of view, gaining a sense of self-determination. And finally, when the system felt punitive and forced their compliance, practitioners sought safety in supportive supervisors or colleagues. These responses had implications for systemic reform. Some practitioners resisted change, instead creating a pragmatic local culture. Other practitioners changed roles or left, resulting in further instability. Both responses indirectly contributed to greater monitoring and rigidity in the system rather than change. Finally, some practitioners were highly responsive to change. They were self-reflective and sought new learning. When the system changed, they remained open and curious. These practitioners also advocated for practice that aligned with their values. They actively challenged practice that was not in the best interests of children, young people, or their families. In addition, throughout the findings, meaning stood out as a key mechanism. In each type of response, practitioners used their personal sense of meaning to evaluate systemic reform. These findings complete the diagram of the child protection system. Now, the relationship between the three types of agency are connected to the structure and culture of the system show in Figure 32. The diagram is cyclical, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the concepts and the relationship between psychological empowerment and systemic reform.

Figure 32

The Relationship Between Psychological Empowerment and Systemic Reform
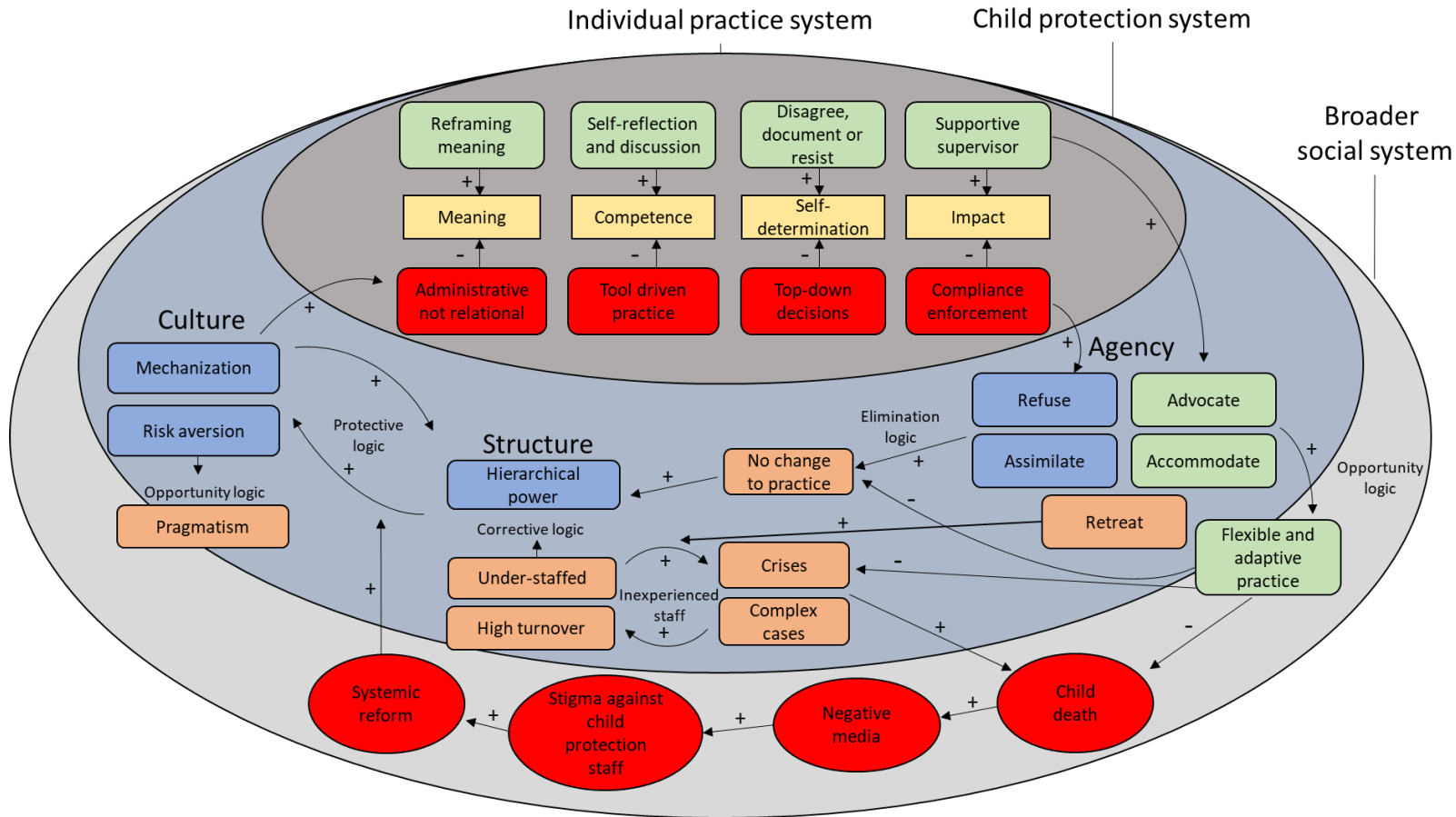
Note. + indicates a positive relationship. − indicates an inverse relationship. Orange = Chaos. Blue = Rigidity. Green = Adaptability. Yellow = PE sub-dimensions. Red = Threat.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the integrated findings through the theoretical lens of the M/M approach. My goal was to take both the quantitative and qualitative findings and deeply analyse them through focusing on situational logics and reflexivity. I integrated the data graphically, summarised the findings of each component of the study, and created a systems diagram showing the interconnected relationships. The findings show that practitioners' responses were notable in influencing systemic reform.

Overall, practitioners' sense of meaning was the most significant finding. They used their values as a protective factor against the challenges of working in child protection, and the feelings of threat generated by the system. Despite the structure and culture of the child protection system negatively influencing their sense of meaning, practitioners used their agency to thrive. Practitioners with a strong sense of meaning embraced changes resulting from systemic reform, but this only happened when the changes aligned with their values. The next chapter discusses these findings in relation to the extant literature.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings. First, I answer the research question and compare the findings to the extant literature. Next, I provide a set of implications of this study for systemic reform. I also outline recommendations for further study and directions for future research. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the strengths and limitations of the study.

The overarching goal of this study was to explore the relationship between psychological empowerment and systemic reform. This was done by examining the interaction between individual practitioners and the child protection system. Social systems are complex phenomena that are inherently robust and resistant to change. While systems are created by people, populated by people, and perpetuated by people, their development of emerging properties allows them to exist in their own right – separate from people. This requires systems to be studied from a position of analytical duality. Here, the separate entities of structure, culture, and agency are examined independently and in interaction with one another.

To support this analytical duality, the study comprised three stages. Phase one explored the quantitative patterns of psychological empowerment within a sample of national child protection practitioners. Psychological empowerment was then explored as a predictor variable relating to practitioners' perceived responsiveness to change. Phase two provided qualitative data describing the structure, culture, and agency of the system. This allowed for a closer examination of the situational logics that shaped practitioners' responses. Finally, phase three integrated the results. Strongly theory driven, the data was analysed using the M/M framework to determine the underlying mechanisms and explain the observed patterns found in phases one and two.

Answering the Research Question

The research question asked:

What is the relationship between psychological empowerment and practitioners' response to systemic reform in Australia's child protection systems?

The findings show that PE and practitioners' self-identified response to systemic reform were linked in a circular relationship. The current system, and the way it has changed with the latest reform efforts, impacted practitioners' sense of PE. The qualitative results highlighted that practitioners were worried about their professional judgement and skills being eroded, did not believe they were valued by their organisations, and that administrative work replaced relationship-based practice. These impacts occurred because of the changes to the structure and culture of the system. In response, practitioners sought out ways to enhance their PE. Of the four sub-dimensions of PE, the quantitative results showed that meaning was the most influential. The qualitative results concurred, highlighting the instrumental role of meaning-making for how practitioners navigated the constraints of the system. Based on their own values and needs, practitioners responded to systemic reform in different ways.

In the literature, the responses of child protection practitioners to systemic reform have often been classified as either conform or resist. However, this does not account for the variety of interactions and responses seen in child protection systems. My findings show that practitioners' responses fell into three broad categories: resistance to change, retreat from the system, and the development of resilience. Each of these helped practitioners protect their psychological empowerment while also trying to meet the needs of children and families.

Comparing the Findings to the Extant Literature

Critical realism aims to search for the underlying mechanisms generating the observable patterns seen in empirical data. As stated by Bhaskar, "the production of the knowledge of those enduring and continually active mechanisms of nature that produce the phenomena of our world" (Bhaskar, 1975, p.47). The goal therefore is to not only find the patterns but to theorize explanations for their existence. In this section, I compare the findings to the literature presented in Chapters Two and Three, highlighting the causal mechanisms that contribute to the body of knowledge.

Structural Conditioning

Structural emergent properties are identified by their organisation of human and material resources. The control and distribution of these resources creates a set of relationships that determine the power within the system. Archer (1995) identifies the following sequential propositions for structural conditioning and their influence on systemic reform:

    i.   There are internal and necessary relations within and between social structures (SS);

    ii.   causal influences are exerted by social structure(s) (SS) on social interaction (SI);

    iii.   there are causal relationships between groups and individuals at the level of social interaction (SI);

    iv.   social interaction (SI) elaborates upon the composition of the social structure(s) (SS) by modifying current internal and necessary structural relationships and introducing new ones where morphogenesis is concerned. Alternatively, social interaction (SI) reproduces existing internal and necessary structural relations when morphostasis applies. (p. 168-169)

Based on these propositions, a key component for change in the structural system is the level of social interaction where the "parts and the people" interact to create variable outcomes. The importance was echoed in Chapter Three, where structural change was a critical aspect of systemic reform found in the literature.

Limited Resources

The findings showed that the system experienced high-turnover and large caseloads due to under-staffing. These factors caused an internal tension in the system that drove all other interactions. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine any system improving with all its resources being used to maintain 'good enough' practice. This sentiment was poignantly expressed by the practitioners interviewed for this study. They described being ask to 'do more with less' after each reform. Because of the resource scarcity, their personal projects focused on finding ways to enhance meaning within the structural constraints. The relationship that formed was one of necessary incompatibility. Practitioners were required

to reform their practice and internally driven to practice in meaningful ways without the necessary resources. Archer (1995) identifies that this form of necessary but incompatible relationships creates the situational logic of correction.

These findings align with the workforce issues identified in Chapter Two and demonstrate their influence on systemic reform. The national surveys taken over the last decade (Lewig & McLean, 2016; McArthur & Thompson, 2012; Russ et al., 2022) all highlighted understaffing and chronic stress for practitioners. Two key reasons for this are burnout and high turnover, which are common to child protection both in Australia and internationally (Chan et al., 2021; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). The implementation literature in Chapter Three further highlighted that burnout and turnover had a reciprocal relationship, each increasing the other. Both then influenced systemic reform by reducing practitioners' passion and commitment. Rather than simply echoing these barriers, I offer an analysis of why the workforce issues continue.

The findings highlighted that one of the key forms of agency used by practitioners was retreat. They changed roles, moved to the NGO sector, or left child protection practice when they could no longer cope with the demands. At times, this was a proactive response, where practitioners recognised they needed change to reinvigorate them. At other times, this response was reactive, only happening after no other options seemed appropriate. These responses provide a better view of how staff movement influences human resources and systemic reform. Practitioners chose to leave, not only due to burnout, but as a way of sustaining themselves in child protection or to seek out more meaningful work opportunities. All three, and not just burnout, contributed to the chaos impacting systemic reform. Regardless of their reason for leaving, a loss of practitioners meant new staff had to be trained, increasing workloads in the interim.

This interaction has important implications for child protection. While it is well known that child protection practitioners are under-resourced in a challenging environment, there is less understanding about how this affects the practitioners who stay in practice. As a result, they remain overwhelmed despite systemic reforms focused on reducing the number of children requiring protective services (VAGO, 2018). The findings of this study provide

further evidence of the relationship between PE and systemic reform by highlighting the role of meaning in under-resourced environments.

On the structural level, correction logic means that the system must compromise. The allocation of resources becomes a 'balancing act' between serving the children and families already seeking support and investing resources in reform. On the social interaction level, practitioners themselves are pressured towards containment. Archer (1995) states that as internal contradictions heighten, practitioners are likely to advance their vested interests as far as possible within the constrained context. The influence of containment can be seen in the findings from the practitioners interviewed. They clearly outlined the limits of their time and resources but still prioritised practice that aligned with their values. The competing pressures meant that any systemic reform that did not resonate with the vested interest of practitioners was ignored.

The findings also contribute to the PE literature. Multiple studies showed that both competence and meaning were the critical sub-dimensions affecting burnout (Boudrias et al., 2012; Hochwälder & Brucefors, 2005; Schermuly et al., 2011). Ahmed Mohammed Sayed (2017) provided further evidence to suggest that competence may be the most influential in building resilience in government staff. These findings were not replicated in my study. Although no quantitative tests were performed to associate the sub-dimensions of PE with a measure of burnout, the competence scores for child protection practitioners were high. Given that burnout is common in child protection, it is therefore unlikely that there is a strong association. The qualitative findings further support this position. Practitioners experienced burnout when their sense of meaning was affected, rather than competence. This finding suggests that the emotional dimension of PE may be more important in building resilience in child protection, concurring with the findings of Lee et al. (2011) on emotional exhaustion.

Practitioners who left child protection experienced strong emotions. They described themselves as feeling isolated, worried about the safety of children, and hopeless about the child protection system. These feelings then spilled over into their home life, increasing their risk of burnout. The determining factor about whether they remained or left their role was hope, generated through their sense of meaning. High levels of meaning both

protected practitioners and left them vulnerable to burnout. When practitioners felt their work was meaningful and saw results in the lives of children and families, they felt rejuvenated. In contrast, when practitioners held high levels of meaning but did not see positive results, the discrepancy caused them distress. Another critical factor was their trust in the system. Practitioners who did not trust the system felt hopeless were more likely to leave because they had no emotional reserves to buffer them against stress. Here, the contextual factors of structure and culture affected their perceptions.

Hierarchical Power

The findings also identified the rigidity of the system's structure as a barrier to systemic reform. The structure contained multi-layered bureaucracies that controlled communication and decision-making. This meant reform was disconnected from practice and disempowered practitioners. These findings again concur with literature. One of the key findings by Munro (2011) was a loss of practitioner discretion caused by inflated bureaucracy. Munro stated that bureaucracy negatively impacted the system's capacity to respond to children. In a more recent study, Munro et al. (2020) described how bureaucracy can force practitioners to duplicate their work rather than transform their practice. My findings further show that these impacts not only increase practitioners' workload but reduce their sense of meaning.

Practitioners sought to establish meaningful relationships with children and families in their work but were constrained by rigid bureaucracy. Together, these factors impacted practitioners' sense of meaning and increased the internal contradictions within the system. To cope, some practitioners subversively resisted, introducing elimination logic. Archer (1995) identifies that elimination logic leads to social cleavage and internal conflict. There is competition between the two competing groups and polarisation at the interactional level. The frontline practitioners identified themselves as in competition with upper management, sometimes referred to as 'the hierarchy'. While management could not eliminate the practitioners themselves, they did attempt to eliminate any variability in practice. This interaction offers some explanation for the prevalence of New Public Management (NPM) and other managerialism practices.

As identified in Chapter Two, NPM practices have influenced how child protection practice is governed. Wise (2017) stated that most child protection reforms have been reactive and based on 'quick fixes'. I argue these are representative of elimination logic. Rather than recognising the professionalism of practitioners, these recommendations are based on the most efficient allocation of human and material resources. Lonne and Thomson (2005) describes how this type of structure encourages the superficial appearance of compliance rather than genuine accountability. Munro (2020) further states that it guides practitioners to behave in rigid, risk averse ways, or hide their errors. These responses will not change until the elimination logic is resolved.

My findings show that the structure, culture, and use of resistance by practitioners are all connected in a reinforcing feedback loop. While elimination logic leads to the system using NPM approaches, it is protective logic that sustains it. Here, the structure and culture of the system reinforce one another, making the system difficult to change. However, the findings of this study identified a structural resource that could shift this cycle: middle managers. The practitioners I interviewed felt protected by supportive managers who could greatly influence their work satisfaction. They were able to tolerate the other difficulties of their role because the manager created a 'buffer' against the strain in the system. Middle managers also had higher levels of PE which influenced their leadership. These managers may model PE behaviours and support PE in practitioners. The role of middle management improving implementation is strongly supported in the literature.

In Chapter Three, the causal loop diagram (Figure 9) showed that collaborative relationships, supportive leadership, and the use of champions all contributed to systemic reform. A middle manager can embody all these factors, driving organisational change (Weeks, 2021), promoting engagement with systemic reform, building enthusiasm, and creating a supportive environment (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2016; Akin et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2019; Gentles-Gibbs, 2016; Rønningstad, 2018). Further, supportive leadership was one of the key facilitating factors of the Signs of Safety implementation (Baginsky et al., 2020) and the Tulsa systemic reform (Canavan, McGregor, et al., 2021). Clearly, leadership is well recognised in the implementation science literature.

Many studies highlighted the benefits of a transformative leadership style on PE (Afsar & Badir, 2016; Fuller et al., 1999; Javed et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Morin et al., 2016; Pradhan et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2000; Sagnak et al., 2015). Javed et al. (2019) described the key components of this leadership style as communicating a clear rationale, providing feedback to practitioners, and opening up a constructive dialogue to problem solve. Although these factors were not explicit in my study, they align closely with the meta-reflexive supervision style described in the findings. This indicates that transformational leaders may use meta-reflexivity as a component of their leadership. Future research would benefit from exploring this connection.

Cultural Conditioning

The cultural system contains the ideas that underpin the functioning of the system. Cultural emergent properties generate out of the logical relationship between ideas and the way that they guide people's behaviour. Archer (1995) identifies the following sequential propositions of cultural conditioning:

   i.   There are internal and necessary logical relationships between components of the Cultural system (CS);
   ii.   causal influences are exerted by the Cultural System (CS) due to Socio-Cultural interaction (the S-C level);
   iii. there are causal relationships between groups and individuals at the Socio-Cultural (S-C) level;
   iv.   there is elaboration of the cultural System (CS) due to Socio-cultural Interaction (S-C) modifying current logical relationships and introducing new ones, where morphogenesis is concerned. Alternatively socio-cultural Interaction (S-C) reproduces existing internal and necessary cultural relations when morphostasis applies. (p. 169)

In this study, the cultural system reinforced structural system, creating a protective logic. The findings show that the distribution of resources and control of power on the structural level were based on ideology.

Mechanized Culture

The child protection system in this study created a mechanized culture that dismissed emotions and prioritised tool-based practice. This culture not only reduced practitioners' professionalism but even their own humanity. The practitioners described the culture as demanding they develop a 'thick skin' and carry the emotional and psychological burden of the work without showing distress. This culture has been recognized in other literature. For example, in Oates (2019), Australian child protection practitioners were held responsible for managing their own wellbeing and any attempts to seek support were seen as a sign of weakness. Further, in some systems, experiencing traumatic experiences and being able to 'brush them off' is seen as an inherent part of the child protection practitioner role (Hunt et al., 2016). The presence of a this culture may explain why a study of the national workforce (VAGO, 2018) found that practitioners are less likely to disclose concerns about their mental health for fear of retribution. My findings further show an additional connection, linking to the literature on dataism.

Devlieghere et al. (2022) discussed the influence of dataism on social work practice globally. They highlighted how dataism assumes the superiority of data over professional judgement. The consequences are an increase of data-based tools in practice and high surveillance of practitioners. While these tools have shown some benefits in predicting risk (Munro, 2019), they are not well equipped to handle the complexity and diversity of children and families. Practitioners may disagree with the tool, feeling that their expertise is not considered valid (Bosk, 2018). Additionally, these tools are not free of bias, and without practitioner discretion they may perpetuate systemic racism and inequality (Feely & Bosk, 2021; Keddell, 2019). In fact, Bosk (2018) highlighted that practitioners in the USA are instinctively aware of this bias, and may feel morally injured by following the recommendations of tools. As a result, this strains practitioners' maintenance of meaning and purpose in their work, which is strongly values driven.

While the toxic culture of child protection systems and dataism sit separately in the literature, my findings show how they are connected. Both follow the ideological proposition that *'being human' is the problem*. Accordingly, the logic tries to replace human judgement, emotions, and responses with neutrality. Together, these represent a mechanized culture. The practitioners I interviewed spoke about the effects of this culture,

highlighting de-professionalization of the workforce, a loss of relational based practice, emotional bullying, and distrust of the system. These responses again concur with the literature. Walsh (2019) reviewed the literature on child protection training and argued that achieving a public health approach requires practitioners to reconceptualise their professional identity. This is an intimately human process. In addition, human emotions cannot be removed from practice. The public health model uses data to support and inform the clinical judgement of practitioners. The purpose is to be aware of and reflect on emotions and bias, rather than eliminate them. Emotions are also embedded in the nature of child protection practice. For example, Wise (2021) modelled the causal mechanisms in recurrent child removals from the same mother in an Australian dataset. The key findings of the study identified emotive factors, such as grief and loss, as influencing behaviour. The findings of Wise tie together with my study on practitioners. Emotions and identity are clearly driving forces in systems that cannot be eradicated by dataism. Documentation, risk assessment, data gathering, and tools are vital to effective child protection practice. But they should support rather than supplant the professional judgement of practitioners. Further, the way that practitioners are affected by the mechanised culture influences their ability to carry out the intent of systemic reform.

Reforms will only be successful when practices embody intent. This was one of the critical findings of the evaluation of the previous national framework (Families Australia, 2020). Academics have recognized this need and called for an ideological shift in future reforms (Bromfield et al., 2014; Gillingham, 2014; Lonne et al., 2020). I propose that reflexivity is a key process by which practitioners carry intent through to action. My findings demonstrate practitioners using multiple forms of reflexivity, which determined their response to systemic reform. Other studies support this assertion. Cavener (2017) studied English child protection practitioners and showed that their reflexivity guided their behaviour through personal biographies, knowledge, experiences, values, beliefs, concerns and their professional practice contexts, approaches and relationship. Later work (Cavener & Vincent, 2021), examined the main internal concerns of social work students in England. The study found that reflexivity influenced how students navigated contextual constraints. My study is the first to examine reflexivity in relation to systemic reform and offers important knowledge for practice. Targeting practitioners' reflexivity may enhance the 'thread of

intent' that is critical for policy and practice to be effective. These findings also contribute to theory.

One significant way I build on the work of Archer (2007) is by showcasing the varied use of reflexivity. Archer proposes that individuals hold a dominant reflexivity that guides their behaviour. Instead, my findings highlighted the combination of reflexive modes to promote resilience in the system. It was this flexibility that helped practitioners adapt to various structural and cultural constraints. However, as I did not use Archer's Internal Conversation Indicator (Archer, 2007) to methodologically assess practitioners, these findings need further study.

Pragmatic Culture

The previous sections show how Australian child protection practitioners sit in tension amongst the culture and structure within the system. In response, practitioners developed their own pragmatic culture which stood in contrast to the mechanised culture just discussed. This culture was developed at the local offices, often resulting in wide variability in practice. The pragmatic culture was strong and, when training new practitioners, learning often had to be 'undone' because the local culture perpetuated practices that the system was trying to change. The findings showed that practitioners embraced an opportunity logic. Their cultural ideas about child protection practice were shared amongst each other and practitioners were encouraged to find ideas that fit with them. Archer (1995) describes this process as having "substantial freedom to survey or to ignore the broader horizon" (p. 244). While tradition and habit might limit change, practitioners are not bound to certain cultural practices and instead explore new possibilities. The literature also recognises the importance of local culture.

Organisational culture was one of the strongest influences on systemic reform found in the child protection and implementation science literature. A meta-analysis across 84 different studies showed that organisational culture was linked to factors such as quality services, innovation, staff turnover, and positive responses to systemic reform (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018). The literature review in Chapter Three also showed that organisational culture was connected to practitioners' passion and commitment as well as the structure of

the system. This places culture in an important position where it influences behaviour. The M/M approach also supports this.

Archer (1995) states that addressing culture is vital to systemic reform as it "wears a deeper and deeper groove in which thoughts and deeds become enrutted" (p. 153-154). The longer culture remains unaffected, the more embedded it becomes in child protection practice, regardless of the other changes implemented. Additionally, change is often expected as a consequence of learning, but this is rarely reflected in practice (Fixsen et al., 2005). Instead, learning may best be integrated by addressing the culture of the system, where change is made an explicit cultural expectation (Munro, 2011). This is not easy however, and even recent attempts at systemic reform show the ongoing difficulty of influencing culture during implementation (Munro et al., 2020). My findings further demonstrate that there are competing cultures within the child protection system. The intersection of these cultures also influences systemic reform.

The contrast between the practitioners with their pragmatic culture, and the mechanised culture of the system created social cleavage. The practitioners I interviewed distinguished between administrative management and local child protection practitioners as two opposing groups. Referred to as the 'invisible hierarchy', directors, executives, and chief executive officers were seen as disconnected from 'real' child protection practice. The social cleavage in my findings contributes to understanding the reason that culture has such strong effects. For example, in the large implementation of SofS in England, the local culture of organisations influenced outcomes (Munro et al., 2020). Baginsky et al. (2020) evaluated the implementation, concluding that culture 'trumped strategy' and was not changed by simply mandating the reform (p. 64). A similar process was seen in Gillingham (2019). In the UK study, frontline practitioners in a child protection system were the last to be consulted during systemic reform. They then responded to changes with confusion, resistance, or even hostility.

The ARC model (Glisson et al., 2006) also discusses social cleavage. Hemmelgarn and Glisson (2018) found that the more disconnected practitioners feel from management, the more they fear being held accountable for poor outcomes. The ARC model further links social cleavage and culture through the concept of mental models. Similar to the

propositions highlighted in my findings, mental models are internal representations of the world that guide behaviour. Because of these mental models, even when tools are introduced to try and change practice, cultural norms may undermine the intent behind the tool. This results in simply 'more paperwork' with little change to practice (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018, p. 92). Overall, the ARC model of management was coherent with many of the findings of this study. It recognised the influence of cultural ideology behind systemic reform and responded with support that enhanced meaning-making. Based on my findings, this model offers valuable guidance for shaping management in child protection systems.

Agency Response

Practitioners use their agency to respond to the structural and cultural conditioning of their environment. Their capacity to influence the system depends on the personal emergent properties which define their power. Archer (1995) identifies the following sequential propositions about agency:

     i.   All agents are not equal and the initial distributions of structural and cultural properties delineate Corporate Agents and distinguish them from Primary Agents;

     ii.   Corporate Agents maintain or transform the socio-cultural system whereas Primary Agents work within the system;

     iii.   all agents are not equally knowledgeable because of the effects of prior interaction upon them;

     iv.   all change is mediated through the agents: Corporate Agents alter the context in which Primary Agents live and Primary agents alter the environment in which Corporate Agents operate;

     v.   the categories of Corporate and Primary Agents are redefined over time;

     vi.   actions by Corporate and Primary Agents constrain and enable one another;

     vii.   actions by Primary Agents are generally reactive and uncoordinated depending on the extent of their participation in the context;

     viii.   the interaction of Corporate Agents generate emergent properties whereas the interaction of Primary Agents produce aggregate effects;

ix. the transformation of social agency occurs when Primary Agents become Corporate Agents;

x. social change is the result of aggregate effects produced by Primary Agents in conjunction with the emergent properties produced by Corporate Agents. (p. 264-265)

Both Corporate and Primary Agents mediated change. Corporate Agents were the 'invisible hierarchy' generating the emergent properties in the structure and culture of the system. The Primary Agents were the practitioners and their response to the structure and culture. The social cleavage discussed in the previous section created three forms of agency based on two competing concerns: self-protection versus meaningful agency. Practitioners straddled the competing concerns, trying to find a way to survive within the child protection system.

Self-protection orientation

The rigidity and chaos of the competing structure and culture created a threatening environment for practitioners. In these environments, practitioners became concerned with danger and self-protection. This concern was present throughout the findings of my study. In fact, that data showed each level of the system, from the frontline practitioner to high level directors, took self-protective action due to perceived threat. This ongoing strain invariably affected the practitioners interviewed in this study. While some showed a remarkable ability to maintain their sense of psychological empowerment, others were significantly affected to the point of physical and mental deterioration. The pervasive sense of threat and trauma created two primary situational logics that drove the response of the system. The first was corrective logic, which required people to 'cope' with the strain of practicing in a system built on contradictions. The second was protective logic, which sought out stability by systematising ideas and eliminating diversity. Both of these logics aided the self-protection of the system at the expense of flexibility, adaptability, or innovation. My findings show that the Australian child protection structure and culture align with the trauma-organised system identified by Bloom (1997).

Bloom's work in the USA found that mental health organisations sometimes mirror the trauma responses of individuals. Collectively, these responses cause the organisation to

become trauma-organised in an attempt to deal with the ongoing stress. Trauma-organised systems typically do not feel safe, have poor communication, feel unjust, and encourage obedience to authority (Bloom & Farragher, 2013, p. 21). In these environments, the system does not provide any buffering against chronic stress and trauma. In fact, the system may even become punitive as trauma-organised systems often use rigidity to control outcomes. Here, "the leadership of such systems is likely to be strictly authoritarian, where deference and submission is given to one's place in a rigidly enforced hierarchy" (Bloom, 2017, p. 501). These systems become self-protective and organised around the constant trauma (Balu, 2017). Further, they may generate effects such as misalignment between frontline practitioners and management, de-humanized practices (Bloom & Farragher, 2013), and fragmented service delivery (Balu, 2017). Ultimately, because the system has become organised to respond to trauma, its function changes. Rather than exclusively focusing on children's safety and wellbeing, the system acts to protect itself from scrutiny.

The Sanctuary Model similarly views resistance to change through a trauma lens. Bloom and Farragher (2013) state, "The more a behaviour is used in the service of survival, the more likely it is that the behaviour will be repeated and will resist change" (p. 7). The authors theorise that resistance to change is actually resistance to loss, highlighting that change is unpredictable and fear inducing. I contribute to Bloom's work by examining not just resistance, but three forms of agency used by practitioners. The forms of agency mimic typical responses to trauma, broadly showing fight, flight, and resilience. In my study, two types of resistance were found: active and passive. No practitioners interviewed identified themselves as actively resisting change, although they noted that other practitioners in the child protection system did. More frequently, practitioners subverted systemic reform by 'making it fit' with the practice that they thought was best for children and families. Where my findings differ from the dominant literature is in the nature of the resistance. I argue that some practitioners were not resisting change but rather gate keeping practice and protecting their psychological empowerment.

Practitioners resisted change when it was not seen as meaningful to the role of protecting children. In this way they served as gate keepers of practice. In fact, practitioners saw their resistance as positive and part of their ethical mandate. This finding offers an additional perspective to the implementation science literature. The review in Chapter Three found

that resistance was a reported factor in two studies (Salveron et al., 2015; Santens et al., 2020) and linked in a contingent relationship with trust. Here, resistance was reduced through trust in leaders and the implementation process. In Salveron et al. (2015) SofS was implemented throughout Western Australia. The authors found that resistance was strong in the first two years of implementation, noting practitioners were "hesitant, reluctant, cynical, defensive when challenged and were more likely to fall back into 'old' ways of working with families" (p. 131). The study considered change scepticism, mistrust, and an embedded risk averse culture as the main reasons for resistance. In Santens et al. (2020), an attachment-based therapy was implemented in Belgium. The top-down implementation strategy created dissention amongst practitioners and, in combination with limited resources, led to resistance. Neither study identified values nor meaning-making as significant, however, my findings show that they were likely present. In fact, some of the quotes in Chapter Six referred to the implementation of SofS in Western Australia. By viewing these responses through the lens of agency and reflexivity, they are more purposeful than mere resistance. This interpretation fits well with the studies using Street-level Bureaucracy (SLB).

SLB views resistance as necessary to balancing completing priorities when implementing complex policy (Lipsky, 1980). Practitioners may reject or adjust instructions given by management to better fit their values and the needs of their clients (Høiland & Willumsen, 2018; Shdaimah & McGarry, 2018). Their motivation is not resistance, but rather an attempt to bridge contradictory demands. In fact, when faced with rigid organisational cultures and structures, practitioners may find themselves forced go against their values or judgement (Shdaimah & McGarry, 2018; Smith et al., 2017). To cope, practitioners may 'ethically resist' practices that they do not feel uphold the values and integrity of their profession (Wastell et al., 2010; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). A good comparison with my findings can be seen in the study by Fleming (2020). Fleming examined pro-social rule breaking in child protection practitioners in the USA. Practitioners often violated rules or policies in an attempted to improve client services. My findings show this same process but in response to systemic reform. Ultimately, resistance is influenced by many factors. My findings aligned with the literature and offered the consideration of 'ethical resistance' as an additional motivation.

Meaningful agency

Despite the constant threat felt by practitioners, they also described an internal drive to practice meaningfully. When systemic reform was implemented in a top-down manner, practitioners were hesitant to engage. In this study, as each layer of management became further distanced from frontline practice, it lost credibility. Rather than accepting the reform, child protection practitioners compared new practices against their individual and collective practice wisdom. This 'way of knowing' may sit in tension with political or administratively driven agendas (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Akin et al., 2016; Akin et al., 2014; Atkins & Frederico, 2017; Michalopoulos et al., 2012). As demonstrated in this study, when changes did not fit with practitioners, they found creative ways to subvert practice. The main way practitioners decided their response to reform was through their sense of meaning.

Practitioners gained meaning by practicing in ways that aligned with their values and produced good outcomes. Meaning is known as a critical factor to systemic reform in other literature. Greenhalgh et al. (2004) identified meaning as a 'powerful influence' on an individual's choice to embrace change. Further, the relationship of meaning to systemic reform may reflect the key implementation factors associated with successful implementation. This was demonstrated by practitioners' passion and dedication forming a connective hub in the literature review in Chapter Three. Consequently, practitioners who find their practice meaningful also desire to improve their work, making them likely embrace change that prioritises client outcomes. Changes that align with their values will promote a sense of relative advantage, encouraging systemic reform. This is because an internal perception of empowerment may support practitioners to overcome structural barriers in systems that otherwise limit change (Ahmed Mohammed Sayed, 2017). Recognizing this process is an important avenue for morphogenesis. In my study, practitioners who were resilient and adaptable challenged the system but did so by advocating for their clients and documenting disagreements. These methods allowed them to effectively use their agency for self-protection without undermining systemic reform.

Psychological empowerment and meaning cannot be considered in isolation, however. The characteristics of individuals, the process of change, and the context for change all interact to create the final result (Weiner et al., 2020). Change is slow, and even years after an

inquiry there may be few changes observed, especially by frontline practitioners. For example, the Carmody inquiry occurred in Queensland from 2012 to 2013 yet challenges remain, such as limited funding and service fragmentation (Zuchowski, 2019). These contexts constrain practitioners. When preparing for change, practitioners assess their physical, emotional, and psychological resources. In a review of interventions to change the organisational culture, Ouellette et al. (2020) found that when psychological resources are low, practitioners are much less likely to judge the change as positive or engage in it. Additionally, each systemic reform further depletes these resources leaving practitioners fatigued with constant demands for new practice (Higgins et al., 2019). An approach that supports PE, and especially practitioners' sense of meaning can buffer practitioners as they face these challenges.

The need for meaningful engagement with work was one of the primary findings of the 2016 study on the wellbeing of Australia's child protection workforce (Lewig & McLean, 2016). In Lewig and McLean's study, practitioners who found their work meaningful reported higher levels of wellbeing. Similarly, Chan et al. (2021) examined how child protection practitioners in Australia managed their high workloads and protected themselves against burnout. The authors found that practitioners who felt their work was meaningful had more personal resources to dedicate to their role. Their resources then generated enhanced professional expertise and satisfaction. Consequently, this helped to buffer practitioners against the time pressures of a demanding role, ongoing crises, the effects of secondary trauma, and 'learning-on-the-job'. My findings also show that practitioners engaged in external as well as internal meaning making, through advocacy and personal reframing. Having multiple avenues for generating meaning may create more resilience in practitioners.

The importance of meaning demonstrates the relational nature of systemic reform. Because factors are interconnected in complex ways, the system might respond with unpredictability. For example, frequent monitoring and evaluation of systemic reform is one of the key drivers in implementation literature (Lambert et al., 2016). However, the findings of this study caution how practitioners are monitored. When they already perceive themselves as scrutinized by a rigid culture and structure, they may feel undermined and choose to leave child protection. Consequently, the idea of monitoring *change* should not be conflated with monitoring *practitioners*. Balancing monitoring with support for

practitioners requires leaders who are able to critique practice without undermining practitioners' self-determination. To avoid ongoing reactive reforms, the practice of child protection systems and their outcomes need to be reframed. Here systems should be evaluated for their complexity and interconnected challenges before making decisions about how they should change, as advised by Cullin (2022). Further examples of these connections have been shown in both Chapter Three and Chapter Seven, where the relationship between components are diagrammed. These systemic diagrams offer a good starting point for any consideration of reform.

At the start of this thesis I identified that the seminal work of Munro (2011) was one of my motivations for exploring systemic reform and psychological empowerment. Most of my findings show similar patterns to those Munro found in the English child protection system. As already discussed, the influence of managerialism, dataism, and NPM have shaped both systems. Rather than being oriented to children's safety, they have become focused on self-protection by attempting to eliminate variability, discretion, or any risk to children. This type of system is not only a detriment to children but also unsustainable. My findings built on Munro's review by focusing not only on the current system but its capacity to change. I examined systemic reform as a construct, exploring it in many iterations across different jurisdictions. My findings also strengthened the knowledge of practitioners as key players in the child protection system.

Munro described the deterioration of discretion for practitioners in the English system. One of the major findings was that rigid systems reduced practitioners' sense of satisfaction, self-esteem, and personal responsibility in their roles. Here, the system affected their psychological empowerment negatively and the review recommended increased practitioner discretion. I found some similar results, but also notable differences. While practitioners' sense of satisfaction was impacted by the rigid structure and culture, the quantitative results also showed that practitioners' sense of meaning remained high. Meaning does not equate to satisfaction but does indicate that there are more factors influencing the practitioner than simply feeling content with their work conditions. The practitioners interviewed in this study were active in how they created meaning for themselves. They reframed sources of potential meaning to ensure they connected relationally with children and families. This enhanced their satisfaction despite the negative

work conditions they described. Practitioners also advocated for ethical practice. The experience of taking action reduced any feelings of being powerless. As a result, they felt resilient in their work.

Practitioners also advocated for their values, pushing back on the system's inflexibility. This process combined their sense of meaning with self-determination. Here, practitioners wanted to see the effect of their values on practice. Additionally, the empowerment practitioners gained was not in the outcomes but in the process of advocacy. They acknowledged that they could not control all outcomes but still wanted to be heard. Their desire pointed towards a collaborative form of self-determination. Practitioners did not want to feel they were individually responsible for decisions and instead preferred shared decision-making and discussion with colleagues. This painted a more complex picture of decision-making and self-determination. These findings show the importance of recognising human agency as the best opportunity for systemic reform.

Morphogenesis or Morphostasis?

This section draws conclusions about the capacity of the system to change, drawing on the theories identified in Chapter three. To determine whether the system is moving towards morphogenesis or morphostasis, the 'results of the results' must be analysed (Archer, 1995, p. 302). From the generative mechanisms identified above, both structure and culture trended towards morphostasis. Two main groups were apparent within the child protection system, the 'invisible hierarchy' and frontline practitioners. Each of these groups had different vested interests causing tension within the system. Archer (1995) highlights that containment and solidarity encourage vertical stratification whereas polarisation and diversification encourage horizontal stratification. Both of these effects are seen in the findings. The 'invisible hierarchy' represent Corporate Agents with the power to influence the system. The Corporate Agents increased vertical stratification, trying to create a unified system with hierarchical power. In contrast, the frontline practitioners represented Primary Agents. As Primary Agents, they had little power to directly influence the system but did produce aggregate effects within the system's environment. Specifically, the practitioners pushed for horizontal stratification where there was pluralism and specialisation in cultural ideas and ways of practicing. Together, these effects best describe structural morphostasis

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and cultural morphogenesis. Static structures with a changing culture create tension in the system as the internal cultural dynamics of the system refuse to unify (Archer, 1988). Because the cultural system is independent from the structural system, it generates social cleavage. Some groups may "stick to the old ideas as their source of legitimation" while others join in the pluralism of new ideas (Archer, 1995, p. 318). The theory of Organisational Readiness also contributes to understanding these findings.

Organisational readiness examines the capacity for an organisation to change based on how psychologically prepared its members are. Readiness is influenced by (a) what is being changed, (b) how change is implemented, (c) the circumstances of change, and (d) the characteristics of those being asked to change (Weiner et al., 2020). This broader view better examines the person within the environment, and the interaction of multiple factors leading to readiness for change. It is also important not to conflate readiness for change with attitudes towards change (Weiner et al., 2020). Someone may be willing to change but not ready to do so, and both factors are important when considering how individuals respond to change. A key factor in change efficacy is practitioners having shared beliefs that collectively they can perform the actions involved in change implementation (Weiner, 2009). The data clearly show that the social cleavage reduced practitioners' sense of empowerment and ability to impact their organisation. Many expressed hopelessness in the system and its capacity to change. Without this collective change efficacy, practitioners are both less likely to change and less likely to believe change will happen. One potential avenue for enhancing this belief is through meaningful change.

Meaningful change is a key factor in the Availability Responsiveness Continuity (ARC) implementation framework by Hemmelgarn and Glisson (2018). The generative mechanisms identified in the framework are being mission driven, relationship centred, and participatory (Williams et al., 2017). Mission driven refers to supporting practitioners to practice in the best interests of children rather than relying on bureaucratic rules that restrict individualized practice (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018). By highlighting the 'mission' behind change, the cultural system is directly targeted. This approach is also more empowering. While it is easy to blame frontline practitioners, my study highlights how the interactions of the system shape the actions of practitioners within. As a result, they are predisposed to act in certain ways. When organisational structures are top-down and highly

monitored, practitioners become locked into rigid practice and are less likely to change (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018). In fact, practitioners who feel controlled may exert resistance against change to prove that they cannot be controlled (Rønningstad, 2018). Additionally, it is difficult for people to change without a clear change in the system's structure, which overrides any personal factors (Ungar, 2017). In essence, my findings showed how the system discouraged practitioners to change. These findings can be diagrammed onto Figure 33, now updated from Chapter Four.

Figure 33

Critical Realist Summary of the Findings
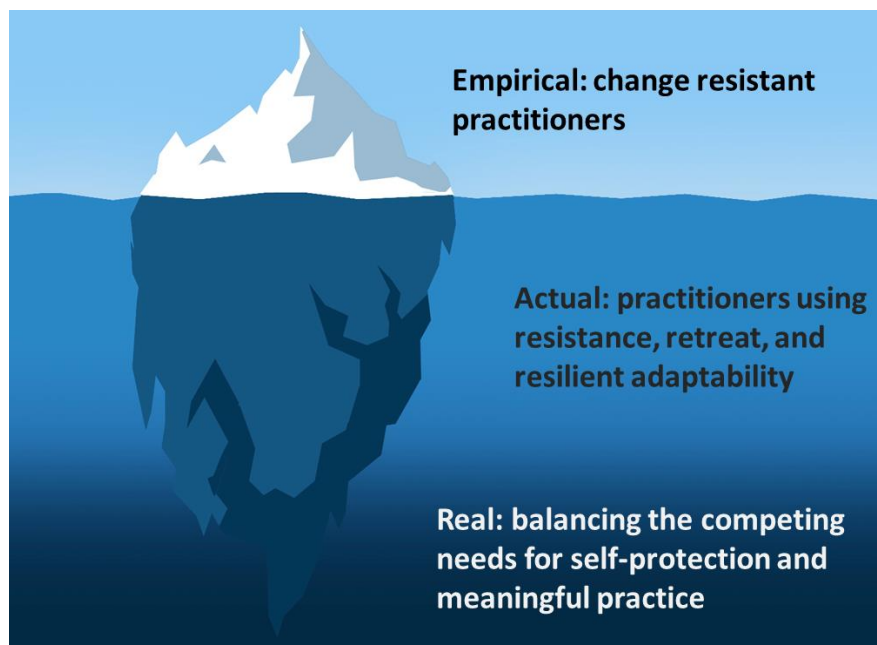
Overall, the literature supports the main findings of this study. Many of the factors identified by Munro (2011) as barriers to effective practice were highlighted in the findings. Inquiries, reviews, and studies in Australian settings have similarly identified the influence of rigid structures, risk averse culture, mechanized practice, and NPM agendas for systemic reform. The findings showed that the system itself is structured to resist change, focused instead on stability and self-protection. These well-known factors have implications for practitioners working in the system, their psychological empowerment, and their ability to respond to systemic reform. The very nature of the work, and emphasis on accountability, can be threatening and create feelings of vulnerability for practitioners. Despite this,

practitioners worked hard to create a sense of psychological empowerment for themselves and practiced according to their values. This resulted in different types of agency. Practitioners resisted change, advocated for different ideas, or retreated from the system. None of these responses showed ready compliance to systemic reform. This shows that resistance to change is not always negative. In fact, some practitioners highlighted resistance and challenging the system as an important part of their role to protect children. The more distrust between frontline practitioners and upper management, the more often practitioners resisted.

The literature also supported the importance of practitioners' sense of meaning when using their agency. Meaning is connected to implementation science through practitioners' assessment of the reforms and its contribution to their values. Changes that met both their needs and those of children, young people, and families were more easily integrated into their work. Practitioners' passion for child protection drove them to engage in new practices that were beneficial for children and families. It was also this sense of meaning that kept practitioners engaged in their work and resilient despite the many challenges.

Contribution to Knowledge

My findings provide valuable evidence for understanding and supporting systemic reform. I argue that the current implementation approaches used are reductive and ineffective for complex systems. Chapter Three highlighted the numerous implementation models that typically focus on a range of factors classed as either facilitators or barriers. My findings show that this approach is inappropriate. Instead, I illustrate how the interaction of a single factor can result in multiple behaviours seemingly opposite in nature. The child protection practitioners in my study constantly sought out a sense of meaning within the child protection system. Their response to systemic reform resisted change, contributed to turnover, or embraced change all while pursuing a sense of meaning. This one factor led to variability, not cohesion.

On a shallow level, the extant literature recognises the importance of meaning. The systemic diagram in Chapter Three showed that practitioners' commitment and passion was a clear hub of connection that promoted systemic reform. Yet if passion is merely treated as a factor, and not a complex process based on reflexivity, it may reduce the effectiveness

of reform. My findings show that high levels of passion can lead to fractured reflexivity, where practitioners become overwhelmed by their commitment to an under-resourced system. Alternatively, practitioners may feel deflated after yet another reform that did not live up to its promise, generating resistance. Attempting to enhance practitioners' sense of passion in these instances may only generate a disillusioned workforce, distrusting any top-down reform. Additionally, the culturally embedded messages in each reform attempt are constantly communicating to practitioners: *you are the problem that needs to change.* Instead of using these linear approaches, my systemic and reflexive approach shows how practitioners can be nurtured towards meaningful change.

This study also enhanced the wider field of knowledge. Both implementation science and psychological empowerment have large bodies knowledge that have remained only loosely connected. This study drew on both, connecting them in a way that contributed to both. It stepped beyond the dominant positivist paradigms typically associated with both fields and instead delved deeply into the observable patterns in the data. This involved an examination of 'person in environment' and the transactional relationship that occurs in systems. There were no findings that directly contradicted well-known literature. Rather, this study contributed to the knowledge by focusing beyond the content of reform to the processes and reasons behind the visible patterns. These patterns increased knowledge of causation rather than repeating the well-known list of implementation barriers. By contributing this way, the findings addressed two of the long-standing criticisms on systemic reform literature by Proctor (2012).

The literature also identified a gap in the study of complex systems and reform. Many current methodologies downplay theory and privilege quantitative studies. This skews our understanding of complex systems (Frost & Dolan, 2021; Munro et al., 2020). To address this gap, each element of this study, such as interview procedures and the data analysis, was crafted to uphold a critical realist methodology. The result was layers of findings, each becoming more distilled with further analysis. This continued until causal mechanisms could be derived that would be most beneficial for understanding the whole system. Further, research needs to embrace the complexity of social problems and use sophisticated methods to deepen our understanding of them (Gehlert et al., 2017). Rather than trying to

reduce the complexity, this process embraced it. As a result, it drew together different facets into a relational diagram, where the relationships were the main finding.

Finally, this study highlighted the importance of meaning, and how practitioners sustain meaning in their work. Practitioners in the social services have lost trustworthiness (Healy, 2017) and need to rebuild practices that are relational, respectful, and ethical. In a field often focused on outcomes, this study upheld the importance of values and the process of child protection practice. Child protection will always be influenced by human nature. Rather than trying to eliminate our practice wisdom, we must create humane systems that draw on both evidence and intuition to build expertise (Munro, 2020). The practitioners in this study provided rich accounts of how they navigated complexity, upheld their values, advocated for children, and build their competence. This knowledge creates a pathway for envisioning how reform could be humane and values driven, building expertise rather than just controlling practice.

Implications for Systemic reform

This small study could not hope to solve all the challenges of systemic reform in child protection. Instead, it offers some key knowledge that could bring professionals one step closer. Five key practice implications are presented based on the findings of this study.

Flexibility Instead of Rigidity

Reform cannot occur through rigidity. Decades of trending towards managerialism have created systems that are rigid and controlling of practice (Gillingham, 2019; Morley, 2021; Munro & Turnell, 2018). While this is a common response when trying to create change (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018), it generates a range of unintended consequences. This study highlighted how perceptions of rigidity influenced practitioners' responses to systemic reform. The feeling of being forced into compliance encouraged resistance, subversion, or burnout – all reducing the effectiveness of change. Furthermore, rigid systems may not actually reduce discretion but instead leave practitioners hiding their discretionary powers, making evaluations of change difficult.

In contrast to rigid systems, resilient systems are flexible and able to thrive in variable environments. Rather than becoming rigid and brittle, these systems use feedback loops to

adapt to the environment, making them dynamic and purpose driven (Meadows, 2008). The sub-dimension of psychological empowerment that best reflected this recommendation was that of self-determination. Practitioners wished for a shared sense of self-determination, where decisions were not made in a top-down manner but collaboratively. They expressed a desire to 'sit with the discomfort' and talk through best practice in open and collaborative ways.

To become a resilient system, child protection reform should focus on promoting fidelity by identifying principles (List et al., 2021) and becoming mission driven (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018). This study showed that culture often overrides structure. Consequently, instead of controlling practitioners through organisational structure it is the culture that needs to be influenced. Proficient cultures encourage norms of growth, self-reflection, and the expectation that practitioners are working towards better practice (Williams & Glisson, 2020). Cultures that constantly encourage self-reflection and improved practice resist stagnation and allow for a conceptual understanding of change. To achieve this, practitioners should understand the reason and purpose behind new knowledge (Pacchiano et al., 2021). This type of professional development gives practitioners greater flexibility by allowing them to adapt to the unique contexts of children, young people, and families. When practitioners understand the rationale for reform, they can better implement changes to achieve the intent behind them and not just demonstrate compliance. Accordingly, it is only by introducing changes that are relationally centred, rather than compliance driven, that we can change trauma organised systems (Balu, 2017).

Recommendations Connected to Frontline Practice

Frontline practitioners need to be heard. Systemic reform should be based on the actual work being done with families and must be grounded in the reality of frontline practice (Munro et al., 2020). This is because problems do not exist on their own and every stakeholder may hold different views of what the 'problem' is (Jones, 2014). This study showed that when there are differences between what frontline practitioners and managers perceive as problematic, true systemic reform is unlikely. Here, practitioners not only felt neglected by upper management, but actively distrusted them and their intentions. Systemic reform attempts were coloured by this same perception, often made worse by the

way reforms were implemented. The sub-dimension of psychological empowerment that best reflects this is 'impact'. Practitioners did not feel that they were heard or valued in the system, creating social cleavage.

Truly understanding frontline practice and the experiences of practitioners requires more than tokenistic attempts at listening. Changes made to the system must be based on the needs of children, young people, families, carers, and practitioners. It is only by being deeply immersed in frontline practice that recommendations can be effective rather than superficially imposed. Additionally, we first have to understand our traditional culture before any real changes can be made (Fussell, 2019). Practitioners in this study spoke about their advocacy and how important it was for their voice to be documented. They acknowledged that final decisions may not be in their control, but there is power in being heard. These offer a starting point for increasing psychological empowerment.

Relational and Values Driven Change

Change needs to be relational and based on values. Any reform should enhance the relationships between children, their kin, and practitioners. Too often evaluations focus on fidelity and may not fully appreciate relationship building that occurs during interventions (Frost & Dolan, 2021). In fact, relational practice is the key to effective child protection, yet it is often undermined by reforms that aim to control and coerce practitioners (Morley, 2021; Munro, 2020; Reimer, 2017). In this study, practitioners identified the sub-dimension of meaning as highly valuable to their work and best associated with a positive response to systemic reform. Change that did not align with the values, ethics, or best practice views of practitioners were resisted or subverted. This point is critical as the trustworthiness of child protection practitioners has been undermined. A history of poor practices and human rights violations that have harmed generations of families (Healy, 2017). Therefore, it is important for practitioners to be critical of changes and remain as gatekeepers who uphold the best interests of children. By reinforcing his role, rather than reducing it, practitioners are encouraged to develop a culture of proficiency. Here, their advocacy is an expected part of their practice.

Practitioners also identified that having opportunities to build relationships with children and families helped them to feel energized by their work. They explained that they

reframed what gave them meaning – shifting their focus from outcomes to interpersonal connections – as a way of building their resilience. Practice that emphasizes relational health for practitioners, children, young people, and families, is far more likely to be embraced by practitioners. Additionally, it has many positive effects on the system. This relational practice can help create a trauma informed culture, counteracting vicarious trauma (Strand, 2018). Further, relational practice builds resilience and helps practitioners remain engaged in child protection practice (Russ et al., 2020). As a result, reforms that build relationships offer many benefits to the system.

Investing in Quality Leaders

Leaders need to be identified, nurtured, and protected. The process of implementing systemic reform also needs to be relational. Too often, changes are envisioned that do not realistically account for human nature. The practitioners in this study felt that they were no longer being treated as people, but as objects expected to comply. Because of high levels of change fatigue in child protection systems, the way systemic reform is implemented is important. When implementation is poor, it may increase turnover, placing additional pressure on the system and remaining practitioners (Williams & Beidas, 2018). The key point for this is middle management. Many of the practitioners interviewed in this study had exceptional leadership skills and spoke about their strategies for supporting staff through systemic reform. In fact, leadership is one of the strongest implementation factors in literature across the world in a range of organisations (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Bernotavicz et al., 2013; Cahn, 2003; Gentles-Gibbs, 2016; Weeks, 2021).

Because of the high turnover in child protection, it is difficult to build and retain leaders. In this study, practitioners identified frequent changes in leadership, some of which led to practitioners themselves choosing to leave the system. Many of the same organisational challenges apply to leaders, with the additional tension of being in the middle of two other stakeholder groups. Consequently, leaders need specialised support. Training in transformational leadership skills and clear career pathways may help build stability and expertise across the system.

Evidence-Based Practitioners Rather Than Evidence-based Practice

Systems don't protect children – people do. This final implication builds on all the prior issues discussed. With the rise of managerialism and loss of professionalism, there is the sense that the 'right program' will somehow protect children. Ultimately, it is the work of practitioners, entering homes, building relationships, and assessing risk, who are at the heart of any services provided to children. When supporting the system to change, encouraging the discretion of practitioners may produce better results than managerialism (Zhang et al., 2020). This can be done aligning practitioner values, attitudes, and beliefs with systemic reform. Additionally, supervisors must act as attitudinal role models (Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2020). They can engage with practitioners about their values, biases, implicit theories, and what brings them meaning in their work. Here, practitioners are not controlled, but guided, shaped, and influenced into highly competent professionals. As a result, they can critically use evidence-based interventions to best meet the needs of the child or young person they are working with. However, this requires a change in how competence is built. Workforce development needs to move beyond just the development of skills and involve a reconceptualization of ideology about protecting children (Lonne et al., 2013).

To achieve this, systems must focus on fidelity to principle. Rather than prioritising fidelity to content, practitioners must understand the boundaries of their autonomy and feel confident voicing dissenting opinions. Further, organisations should adopt time for problem-solving, presenting new ideas, or discussing innovative approaches (Lewig & McLean, 2016). Adaptation then becomes explicit and part of implementing new practices. Here, training addresses how interventions can be tailored while upholding the core principles that have been found to make them effective (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2019). By doing this the focus changes from enhancing practitioners use of evidence-based practice, to helping practitioners themselves be evidence-based. They can draw on theory, interventions, and their own practice wisdom to reflect on the outcomes of their practice. This helps create a results-driven style of thinking that supports proficiency culture (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018).

This broader way of engaging in practice can counteract the narrow forensic focus identified by practitioners in this study. The sub-dimension of competence becomes expanded to not only skills but full 'use of self', including analytical thinking, intuition, relationship building, and advocacy. This highlights that practitioners have the capacity to conceptualize problems and solutions, while placing them in historical and social context (Healy et al., 2009). Consequently, they can draw on a range of evidence to meet the needs of children, young people, families, and carers. Practitioners themselves, become the key ingredient of change.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

It is critical that the limits of any study be identified so that the conclusions can be taken in context. The use of specific statistical techniques, the sample size, cultural context, and interpretation can lead to dramatically different results. Historically, research has been used punitively by asserting power over the population studied (Gillies et al., 2017). Further, the methodological quality depends on the researcher's skills and their ability to address the 'interplexity' of the social phenomena studied (De Jong & Schout, 2018). Considering these facets, this study had both notable strengths and limitations.

A strength of the study was the strong underpinning of the critical realist methodology. It is important not to 'pick and choose' incompatible methodological components (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014; Edwards et al., 2014; Olsen, 2007). Instead, in this study, all phases of the research were designed to draw on the ontological depth of critical realism. To ensure rigour and validity across the analysis, I used a guide by Mullet (2018) to measure quality in critical realism research, attached in Appendix D. Here, I briefly outline how I addressed these measures of quality.

This guide helped addressed bias. This research arose out of my experiences working in child protection. This meant I needed careful reflection to note how much personal experience was driving the interview and analysis. Much of my research design was a priori and based on literature. This attempted to limit bias by creating a strong foundation of evidence from the start. While this could not eliminate the bias, it ensured that all stages of the research built on other literature.

The interviews conducted in this study used a critical realist methodology informed by Smith and Elger (2014). These interviews were driven by theory and saw the participant as a collaborator in developing, enhancing, and refining that theory. Questions to practitioners were framed in a way that highlighted their expertise and lived experience, supporting their role in educating the researcher while also learning about the theory being explored. This involved defining terms such as the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment and commenting on possible causal connections.

An analytical framework was developed for this study based on Danermark (2019) and Flick (2014). This framework was clearly articulated, defined prior to the data collection, and based on best practice recommendations. The multi-layered framework also helped to ensure other forms of rigor. Interviews were read multiple times allowing immersion in the data. Both theoretical and data driven themes were explored, limiting researcher bias while also allowing new information to emerge that may not have been in other literature.

Disconfirming evidence was sought throughout the study, sometimes in the different perceptions of participants and sometimes through other literature. Any data that disconfirmed pre-conceived notions prior to analysis were also noted and evaluated. At times this was difficult, much of child protection practice is communicated informally and not available academically. Similar themes were heard in everyday conversations amongst child protection practitioners or through professional networks. This made it important to separate out the actual findings in the data from the common rhetoric of the child protection system. At times themes appeared 'louder' than they were in the actual data collected because of the constant discussion I heard about the child protection system.

This study also aimed to be fair, promote social justice, and show respect for the practitioners who participated. Attempts were made to show quotes from all participants and to communicate their main views. The writing of the thesis also tried to be accessible regardless of educational background. Metaphors, reminders, and explanations were provided throughout to help translate the dense M/M approach into a digestible format. Finally, the aim of the implications for practice was to redistribute power, to present useful findings for effective change, and, while no children were interviewed in this study, to ensure their wellbeing was held at the centre.

Despite these strengths, there were also limitations. This study was limited to the perceptions of the sample child protection practitioners. The study was likely to attract practitioners who felt strongly about psychological empowerment, potentially biasing the sample studied. Particularly in the quantitative sample, statutory child protection practitioners were overrepresented compared to other sectors. No observations were sought in this study, which relied only on the perceptions of those interviewed, and at times practitioners spoke about others in the system who did not have the same opportunity to voice their views. Despite this, it is the shared perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that do create the organisational context of the system (Hemmelgarn & Glisson, 2018). Even observations of practice would only add the researcher's perceptions to the analysis rather than presenting the 'true' reality. Where the diversity of the sample made data validation difficult in the quantitative phase, it represented a strength in the qualitative phase. Practitioners were based in different states, with different years of experience, in different sectors, and held different roles, yet there were remarkably strong themes in the data. At times, during the presentation of these findings, some indication was given about the diversity and percentage of coding onto a theme to highlight the significance of the finding.

There were also limitations specific to the phases of the study. The quantitative phase was limited by a small sample size that reduced the power of the statistical analyses performed. The sample also came from a large and diffuse population, with practitioners in many different organisations and across different states. The diversity of the sample likely influenced the validity of the quantitative instruments used, particularly the Implementation Behaviours Instrument. The instrument was designed to measure a single implementation, and without this focus point the data was not well aligned into factors. This limitation was somewhat managed using qualitative findings to bolster the quantitative findings. Where they were in harmony, the findings were likely more valid, using triangulation to support the final conclusions as explained by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

There also could have been modifications to the demographic variables collected. The sample had higher years of experience that were expected for the population. The demographic data only measured an upper category of 5+ years which reflected a large portion of the sample. Because length of experience was an important factor when analysing the patterns of psychological empowerment, the results were not clear about how

experience in child protection was related to psychological empowerment. It may be that the sample contained practitioners with well over ten years of experience. As a result, the 5+ category would not only be unhelpful, but underestimate the time needed for practitioners to mature. Further, while this study was not focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, some data could have been collected about cultural identity. This data could have served future research by identifying any differences in the data amongst cultural identities.

Another limitation of this study was that the quantitative phase did not include an instrument measuring the organisational culture or structure. All information about those factors was instead gathered through interview, which while offering rich accounts, were low in number and from diverse organisations. The use of a quantitative instrument, such as the Organisational Social Context measurement (Glisson et al., 2008) would better validate the findings.

There were also limitations in the qualitative phase of the study. The qualitative phase was based on a standard sample size for qualitative research. Although, this size was still less than ideal for the identification of latent themes and deeper analysis as described by Vasileiou et al. (2018). The concept of data saturation is typically used to determine sample size, but this has been criticized. This is because meaning is interpretive and based on the analysis rather than just the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, meaning saturation (where the researcher feels well versed in the meaning of the data) is more important than thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For this study, the maximum number of practitioners who consented to the study were interviewed. Because consent for interviews was obtained as a component of the first phase of the study, additional interviews were not sought. However, this did mean that all interviews were connected to the quantitative data, better integrating the methods as recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

Overall, there were both strengths and limitations to the study. Many of the strengths mitigated the limitations, however some remain. The results should be understood within these limitations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I answered the research question and situated it amongst the extant literature. I then highlighted my contribution to knowledge and provided recommendations for future research and child protection practice. The findings showed a struggling system filled with practitioners trying to survive. Practitioners interacted with the system in complex ways, impacting the outcomes of systemic reform.

It can be easy to lose the depth of this complexity when trying to make sense of systemic reform. A factor may be labelled as 'two-way communication' and seem like a simple process to implement. A survey could be sent out to staff so that they 'have their say'. But change is never that easy. Two-way communication cannot account for the sense of trust that needs to develop between a leader and a frontline practitioner. Communication where both the supervisor and practitioner hold each other accountable but safe within this vulnerable space filled with risk and uncertainty. Additionally, child-centred practice cannot be captured in a new form to be filled out. No structured, decision-making tool will grasp the complex life of child that can only be understood through quality interactions, deep listening, and empathy. As a result, change cannot be transformative without this relational depth and humane practice.

Instead, practitioners must be valued. Far from being pieces on the chess board of systemic reform, practitioners, children, and families are human beings who deserve to be heard. When changing systems, professionals must not forget the power held to shape the lives of children. They are living beings who every day are forming a sense of self, connecting to others, and developing their beliefs about the world. The child is not just a member of a family, or a case on a caseload. Rather, they are people and deserve respectful relationships from all the adults in their lives. Accordingly, changes to child protection systems need to prioritise those relationships. Society must support practitioners to build relationships, and nurture the values held by practitioners. When change is meaningful and relational, our systems stand the best chance of reform.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Date published	State	Name	Scope
2012	VIC	Protecting Victoria's vulnerable children	Full system
2013	QLD	Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (Carmody)	Full system
	VIC	Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations	Historical abuse perpetrated in religious institutions
	NSW	The Ombudsman's 2014 review: Are things improving?	Full system (follow up to 2011 inquiry)
2015	National	Senate Inquiry into Out-of-Home Care (OoHC)	Out of home care
	NSW	Independent review of Out-of-Home-Care in NSW (Tune review)	Out of home care
	VIC	As a good parent would	Sexual exploitation in residential care services
	VIC	Child's Best Interest	Compliance with the Aboriginal child placement principle
	SA	Death of Chloe Valentine (Coronial) Inquiry	Child death review
2016	SA	The life they deserve: Child Protection Systems Royal Commission (Nyland)	Full system
	National	Royal commission into child sexual abuse	Sexual abuse in institutions
	NSW	Legislative Council child protection inquiry	Children leaving care
	VIC	Always was always will be Koori children: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria	Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care
	ACT	Review into the system level responses to family violence in the ACT	Family violence
	VIC	Neither seen nor heard—Inquiry into issues of family violence in child deaths	Family violence
	TAS	Strong families, safe kids Progress Report	Progress report
2017	NT	Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory	Out of home care and detention

Date published	State	Name	Scope
	National	Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse	Five year inquiry into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and related matters
	VIC	Safe and wanted: Inquiry into the implementation of amendments to the Children Youth and Families (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014	Permanency arrangements
	NSW	General purpose standing committee: child protection	Full system
2018	SA	Select Committee on Statutory Child Protection and Care in South Australia	Full system
	SA	Residential and commercial care (DCP) audit	Residential care
2019	NSW	Family is culture: Independent review of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care	Out of home care and Aboriginal children
	VIC	In our own words': Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system	Out of home care
	VIC	Lost, not forgotten: Inquiry into children who died by suicide and were known to Child Protection	Children who died by suicide
2020	VIC	Keep caring, Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care	Transition from out-of-home care
	ACT	Inquiry into Child and Youth Protection Services	Full system
2021	VIC	Out of sight: Systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care	Children missing from residential care
	TAS	Coronial inquiry into the deaths of six infants and one child	Child death review
In progress	NSW	Inquiry into the child protection and social services system	Full system
	TAS	Commission of inquiry into the Tasmanian government's responses to child sexual abuse in institutional settings	Sexual abuse in institutions

Appendix B

Author (year)	Mandated	Passion/commitment	Funding	Collaborative	Structural change	Champions	Relative advantage	Workload	Managing risk	Skilled staff	Politics	Staff turnover	Competing	Compatibility with	Trust	Adaptation	Observing impacts	Organisational culture	Feedback	Complexity	Rushed	Complexity of work	Change agent	Staff resistance
1. Aarons et al. (2016)	x	x	x	x	x	x																		
2. Agner et al. (2020)							x	x	x															
3. Bartlett et al. (2016) and Fraser et al. (2014)		x	x	x	x			x		x	x	x	x											
4. Blome et al. (2010)		x	x	x	x	x	x		x					x	x	x	x			x				
5. Glisson et al. (2006)				x				x					x						x					
6. Gopalan (2016)		x		x		x		x		x	x	x				x			x					
7. Albers and Shlonsky (2020)					x	x		x					x	x		x		x	x	x	x			
8. Greeson et al. (2015)				x	x	x	x						x									x		
9. Leathers et al. (2016)							x												x				x	
10. Metz et al. (2014)					x														x					
11. Myers, Garcia, Beidas, Trinh, et al. (2020)	x			x				x					x				x	x				x		
12. Salveron et al. (2015)		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			x	x	x				x					x
13. Santens et al. (2020)				x	x				x					x		x	x		x	x	x	x		x

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Appendix C

24 June 2020

HUMAN ETHICS LOW RISK PANEL

APPROVAL NOTICE

Dear Ms Amy Bromley,

The below proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application and its attachments.

Project No: 2078

Project Title: A critical realist study of the influence of psychological empowerment on statutory child protection practitioners' engagement with systemic innovation

Primary Researcher: Ms Amy Bromley

Approval Date: 24/06/2020

Expiry Date: 01/06/2022

Please note:*Due to the current COVID-19 situation, researchers are strongly advised to develop a research design that aligns with the University's COVID-19 research protocol involving human studies. Where possible, avoid face-to-face testing and consider rescheduling face-to-face testing or undertaking alternative distance/online data or interview collection means. For further information, please go to* https://staff.flinders.edu.au/coronavirus-information/research-updates.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

1. Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.

- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialing codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.

2. Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the approval anniversary date for the duration of the ethics approval using the HREC Annual/Final Report Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system.

Please note that no data collection can be undertaken after the ethics approval expiry date listed at the top of this notice. If data is collected after expiry, it will not be covered in terms of ethics. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that annual progress reports are submitted on time; and that no data is collected after ethics has expired.

If the project is completed *before* ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please either submit (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request (using the HREC Modification Form).

For student projects, the Low Risk Panel recommends that current ethics approval is maintained until a student's thesis has been submitted, assessed and finalised. This is to protect the student in the event that reviewers recommend that additional data be collected from participants.

3. Modifications to Project

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Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such proposed changes / modifications include:

- change of project title;
- change to research team (e.g., additions, removals, researchers and supervisors)
- changes to research objectives;
- changes to research protocol;
- changes to participant recruitment methods;
- changes / additions to source(s) of participants;
- changes of procedures used to seek informed consent;
- changes to reimbursements provided to participants;
- changes to information / documents to be given to potential participants;
- changes to research tools (e.g., survey, interview questions, focus group questions etc);
- extensions of time (i.e. to extend the period of ethics approval past current expiry date).

To notify the Committee of any proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted _prior_ to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

4. Adverse Events and/or Complaints

Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 08 8201-3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au immediately if:

- any complaints regarding the research are received;
- a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants;
- an unforeseen event occurs that may affect the ethical acceptability of the project.

Yours Sincerely,

Hendryk Flaegel

on behalf of

Human Ethics Low Risk Panel
Research Development and Support
human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au
P: (+61-8) 8201 2543

Flinders University
Sturt Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics_home.cfm

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Ethics & Biosafety

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Title: A critical realist study of the influence of psychological empowerment on practitioners' engagement with systemic innovations in the statutory child protection system

Chief Investigator
Ms Amy Bromley
College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 0490 771 006

Supervisor
Dr. Helen McLaren
College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 08 8201 3025

Supervisor
Dr. Michelle Jones
College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 08 8201 2756

Description of the study
This project will investigate the psychological empowerment of child protection practitioners and its influence on how practitioners engage with systemic innovations. Psychological empowerment refers to an individual's sense of meaning, impact, self-determination and competence in relation to their work role. These factors may impact how practitioners respond to changes introduced into the system, such as state reforms. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project aims to find out the level of psychological empowerment within Australia's child protection practitioner population and how it influences practitioners' response to systemic changes or innovations.

Benefits of the study
The sharing of your experiences will help us understand to what degree statutory child protection practitioners feel psychologically empowered in the workplace. You will also help us understand how feelings of empowerment influence the thinking and behaviours of practitioners when a change is

introduced into the system. This will support leadership during times of system reform to help these changes integrate in practice and improve the lives of children while supporting practitioners' wellbeing.

Participant involvement and potential risks

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to:

- respond to survey questions regarding your engagement with a change to your practice
- respond to survey questions regarding your feelings of empowerment in your workplace

You will be offered the option of also participating in a telephone interview. The interview will take about 45 minutes and participation is entirely voluntary and separate from your participation in the survey. If you agree to participate in the interview, you will be asked to:

- respond to questions regarding your experience of practice change in your workplace
- respond to questions regarding your sense of empowerment in your workplace

The researchers do not expect the questions to cause any harm or discomfort to you. However, if you experience feelings of distress as a result of participation in this study, please let the research team know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14, www.lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636, www.beyondblue.org.au
- 1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732 www.1800respect.org.au

Withdrawal Rights

You may, without any penalty, decline to take part in this research study. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you may, without any penalty, withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator or you may just close the internet browser and leave the online survey. The information you have already completed will not be withdrawn immediately, but this data will not be used by the researcher.

If you choose to participate in the interview and later change your mind, you may, without any penalty, withdraw at any time prior to data analysis without providing an explanation. To withdraw during the interview, you may state you wish to withdraw and disconnect from the phone conversation. To withdraw after completion of the interview, please contact the Chief Investigator. You may withdraw any time up until data analysis, the date of which will be provided to you when scheduling the interview appointment. You will have an opportunity to review your transcript prior to data analysis. If you choose to withdraw from the interview, any data collected from the interview process will be securely destroyed.

If you would like further information on the interview process prior to deciding to participate, please contact the Chief Investigator.

My decision not to participate or to withdraw from this research study will not affect my relationship with Flinders University and its staff and students.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by me. Privacy and confidentiality will be assured at all times. The research outcomes may be presented at conferences, written up for publication or used for other research purposes as described in this information form. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will be protected at all times. I will not be named, and my individual information will not be identifiable in any research products without my explicit consent.

No identifiable data will be shared or used in future research projects without my explicit consent.

De-identified data, including data sets, may be used in future research projects. Consenting to participate in this study gives consent to de-identified data being used in the future.

Data Storage
The information collected may be stored securely on a password protected computer and Flinders University server throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least seven years after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to university protocols.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be published on Flinders University's website. You are welcome to contact the Chief Investigator for direct feedback on the outcomes.

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee under project ID 2078.

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and if you accept our invitation to be involved, please sign the enclosed Consent Form.

CONSENT FORM

Consent Statement

☐ I have read and understood the information about the research, and I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study and that de-identified information may be used in future studies. I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study.

☐ I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and that my withdrawal will not affect my relationship with Flinders University and its staff and students.

☐ I understand I will have an opportunity to review my interview transcript prior to data analysis.

☐ I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study.

☐ I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

I further consent to:

☐ completing a survey questionnaire
☐ participating in a telephone interview
☐ having my information audio recorded during the telephone interview

If you consent to participating in a telephone interview, please provide a contact number or email address and a name by which you would like to be called when contacted by the Chief Investigator. Alternatively, you may call the Chief Investigator to arrange an interview time and obtain more information about the interview process.

Telephone number: _____   Email: _____

Name by which I would like to be identified when contacted: _____

Signed: [Tick box identifying an electronic signature]

Date:

Appendix D

Thank you for taking interest in this survey. Please read the [Information sheet](#) to learn more about this study, confidentiality and your participation. The sharing of your experiences will help us understand what it is like working in systems that are changing. We want to understand if you feel empowered in your work and how you are impacted when the system undergoes a reform or a new framework or tool is introduced in your work. Practitioners in both government agencies and NGOs are welcome.

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to respond to survey questions regarding your engagement with a change to your practice and your feelings of empowerment in your workplace.

Confidentiality

Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided. Privacy and confidentiality will be assured at all times. The research outcomes may be presented at conferences, written up for publication or used for other research purposes as described in this information form. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will be protected at all times. You will not be named, and my individual information will not be identifiable in any research products without your explicit consent.

Queries and Concerns

The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee under project ID 2078. Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this

study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Research team

Chief Investigator

Ms Amy Bromley

College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work

Flinders University

Tel: 0490 771 006

Supervisor   Dr. Helen McLaren

College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work

Flinders University

Tel: 08 8201 3025

Supervisor   Dr. Michelle Jones

College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work

 Flinders University

Tel: 08 8201 2756

Q3

I have read and understood the information about the research project.

I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study and that de-identified information may be used in future studies.

I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study. I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and that my withdrawal will not affect my relationship with Flinders University and its staff and students. I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study. I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

○ I understand the information provided and consent to participate in the survey (1)

○ I do not wish to continue (2)

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Demographics

Q8 Where are you currently practicing/have most recently practiced?

○ SA (1)

○ NSW (2)

○ NT (3)

○ ACT (4)

○ WA (5)

○ QLD (6)

○ TAS (7)

○ VIC (8)

Q9 How long have you worked in a child protection role ? (any role with the main aim of improving the safety of children)

○ Less than 1 year (1)

○ 1 to 5 years (2)

○ 5+ years (3)

Q10 In what role are you currently practicing/have most recently practiced?

○ Frontline practitioner (direct work with clients) (1)

○ Supervisor of frontline practitioners (2)

○ Management (3)

○ Other (4) _____

Q46 In what sector are you currently practicing/have most recently practiced?

○ Public role (e.g. police child protection unit or department of child safety) (1)

○ NGO role (e.g. reunification support worker) (2)

○ Private sector (e.g. private foster care assessor) (3)

○ Other (4) _____

Q13 What is the highest level of education you hold?

○ Bachelor's degree (1)

○ Master's degree (2)

○ Diploma/certificate (3)

○ Other: (4) _____

Q50 For the following questions please consider your time as a child protection practitioner and answer accordingly:

All responses contain a 5-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)

Q1 I am confident about my ability to do my job

Q14 The work that I do is important to me

Q15 I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job

Q16 My impact on what happens in my department is large

Q17 My job activities are personally meaningful to me

Q18 I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department

----

Q19 I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work

Q20 I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job

----

Q21 I have mastered the skills necessary for my job

Q22 The work I do is meaningful to me

Q23 I have significant influence over what happens in my department

End of Block: Psychological Empowerment

Start of Block: Block 6

Q53 Thank you for making it this far! Only one more section to go. Answering this next section lets us learn even more about how our system works. Think about the times a change has been introduced into your work. This might be a new tool or a whole change of framework (eg. Signs of Safety). We are calling this a 'practice change'.

Your answers are highly appreciated!

End of Block: Block 6

Start of Block: Styles of engagement

Q26 The practice change is compatible with all other aspects of my work

----

Q27 The practice change is well integrated into how I do my work

----

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Q28 The practice change fits well with what I want to achieve in my work

Q29 The practice change fits with my own style of working

Q30 I straightforwardly follow the guidance of my supervisor in using the practice change

Q31 Through this practice change I have developed a new way of thinking related to my work

Q32 I put effort into adapting and applying the practice change to my work

Q33 Through using the practice change I not only experienced changes to my way of working but also put effort into creatively using the practice change in new and different ways

Q34 This practice change has had no impact on how I perform my work

Q35 I have never tried to adapt the way I use the practice change

Q36 I have changed the content of my work (what I do) according to the practice change

Q37 I always search for new ways to improve the practice change in my work

Q38 This practice change has led to changes in my work, but I have also created my own ways of doing things different from the practice change

Q39 Although some things are different since the practice change was introduced, my work role mostly functions the same as before

Q40 I try to adhere as much as possible to the original instructions of how to use this practice change

---

Q41 I have changed my work procedures (how I work) due to the practice change

---

Q42 According to different circumstances, I flexibly apply the practice change in conducting my tasks, as it does not always fit my work

---

Q43 Because of this practice change, I experienced many changes in how I work, but I also adapted how I use it so it fits better with my work

---

Q44 Despite using the practice change, my main way of working has not changed

---

Q48 This practice change was strongly promoted by organisational leadership

---

Q49 Using this practice change was a priority for my organisation

Q4 Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. We would love to speak to you and hear about your experiences in child protection and your views on how you'd like the system to be. If you would like to participate in a 45 minute telephone interview, please provide your contact details below. Alternatively, you may contact the Chief Investigator Amy Bromley on 0490 771 006 or amy.bromley@flinders.edu.au to find out more information about the interview.

Q6 I have read the Information sheet and further consent to:

☐   my details being obtained for a follow-up interview (1)

☐   participating in a telephone interview (2)

☐   having my information audio recorded during the telephone interview (3)

Q7 Please provide the **NAME** you would like to be called and your best **CONTACT DETAILS** for the follow-up interview.

_____

Q45 We would love to hear from as many practitioners as possible! Please consider inviting your colleagues by forwarding them the link.

https://qualtrics.flinders.edu.au/jfe/form/SV_aXKj38UxcJlqm4R

End of Block: Interview Consent

Appendix E

Results of exploratory factor analysis testing

Test one: Removal of Mechanical Implementation items

SUMMARY OF MODEL FIT INFORMATION

Model	Number of Parameters	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value
1-factor	9	64.943	27	0.0001
2-factor	17	46.422	19	0.0004
3-factor	24	20.736	12	0.0544
4-factor	30	4.177	6	0.6528
5-factor	35	0.530	1	0.4664

Models Compared	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value
1-factor against 2-factor	22.051	8	0.0048
2-factor against 3-factor	26.594	7	0.0004
3-factor against 4-factor	14.515	6	0.0244
4-factor against 5-factor	3.478	5	0.6267

Geomin rotated loading of the four-factor model (* significant at 5% level)

	1	2	3
Reinvention 1	0.014	0.451*	-0.274*
Reinvention 2	0.644*	-0.008	-0.338*
Reinvention 3	-0.002	0.696*	0.399*
Mutual change 1	0.646*	0.312*	-0.005
Mutual change 2	0.968*	-0.001	0.808*
Mutual change 3	0.216	0.571*	0.069
Learning 1	0.604*	0.066	-0.217
Learning 2	0.14	0.348*	-0.127
Learning 3	-0.101	0.784*	-0.022

Test two: removal of Learning items

SUMMARY OF MODEL FIT INFORMATION

Model	Number of Parameters	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value
1-factor	9	106.197	27	0.0000
2-factor	17	29.993	19	0.0519

Geomin rotated loading of the two-factor model (* significant at 5% level)

	1	2
Mechanical 1	0.617*	-0.071
Mechanical 2	-0.079	-0.281*
Mechanical 3	0.810*	-0.002
Reinvention 1	0.593*	0.278*
Reinvention 2	0.474*	0.483*
Reinvention 3	-0.104	0.558*
Mutual change 1	0.306*	0.800*
Mutual change 2	-0.21	0.751*
Mutual change 3	-0.001	0.645*

Test three: Removal of Reinvention items

SUMMARY OF MODEL FIT INFORMATION

Model	Number of Parameters	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value
1-factor	9	74.140	27	0.0000
2-factor	17	31.880	19	0.0322
3-factor	24	13.212	12	0.3538
4-factor	30	6.592	6	0.3603

Models Compared	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value
1-factor against 2-factor	40.664	8	0.0000
2-factor against 3-factor	18.077	7	0.0116
3-factor against 4-factor	6.912	6	0.3290

Geomin rotated loading of the three-factor model (* significant at 5% level)

	1	2	3
Mechanical 1	0.002	0.533*	0.397
Mechanical 2	0.098	0.003	-0.418*
Mechanical 3	0.646	0.933*	0.001
Mutual change 1	1.101*	0.012	-0.007
Mutual change 2	0.353*	-0.303*	0.102
Mutual change 3	0.013	-0.321*	0.665*
Learning 1	0.345*	-0.022	0.365*
Learning 2	-0.116	0.108	0.687*
Learning 3	0.054	-0.009	0.562*

Test four: Retention of only the Mutual Change items

MODEL FIT INFORMATION

Number of Free Parameters   3

Chi-Square Test of Model Fit

      Value   0.000*
      Degrees of Freedom   0
      P-Value   0.0000
      Scaling Correction Factor   1.0000
      for WLSM

Geomin rotated loading of the one-factor model (* significant at 5% level)
            1
B1   0.935*
B2   0.608*
B3   0.610*

Test five: Final confirmatory factor analysis

MODEL FIT INFORMATION

Number of Free Parameters   53

Chi-Square Test of Model Fit

      Value   36.412*
      Degrees of Freedom   32
      P-Value   0.2707

*   The chi-square value for MLM, MLMV, MLR, ULSMV, WLSM and WLSMV cannot be used
    for chi-square difference testing in the regular way. MLM, MLR and WLSM
    chi-square difference testing is described on the Mplus website. MLMV, WLSMV,
    and ULSMV difference testing is done using the DIFFTEST option.

RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error Of Approximation)

      Estimate   0.043
      90 Percent C.I.   0.000 0.099
      Probability RMSEA <= .05   0.536

CFI/TLI

      CFI   0.994
      TLI   0.991

Chi-Square Test of Model Fit for the Baseline Model

	Value	769.651
	Degrees of Freedom	45
	P-Value	0.0000

SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)

	Value	0.053

Optimum Function Value for Weighted Least-Squares Estimator

	Value	0.15299050D+00

MODEL RESULTS

				Two-Tailed	
		Estimate	S.E.	Est./S.E.	P-Value
B	BY				
	B1	1.000	0.000	999.000	999.000
	B2	0.507	0.109	4.646	0.000
	B3	0.589	0.096	6.128	0.000
F	BY				
	F1	1.000	0.000	999.000	999.000
	F2	0.968	0.099	9.765	0.000
	F3	1.242	0.102	12.154	0.000
	F4	1.174	0.092	12.777	0.000
N	BY				
	N1	1.000	0.000	999.000	999.000
	N2	0.994	0.160	6.201	0.000
	N3	1.034	0.193	5.356	0.000
F	WITH				
	B	0.425	0.078	5.427	0.000
N	WITH				
	B	-0.365	0.104	-3.513	0.000
	F	-0.003	0.063	-0.046	0.963

Appendix F

Criterion	Addressed in this study
Reflexivity	Reflexive questions were developed as part of the interview framework. Clarifying by the researcher with participants.
Subjectivity	Research journal kept during analysis including questioning, noting of bias, and emotional responses to data
Adequacy of data	Data was limited by the response rate. Additional interviews may reveal new data however a redundancy in themes was noted.
	Sampling was not purposeful however quantitative data placed the interviews in the context of a larger sample allowing it to be compared to potentially missing interviews.
	Quantitative data was used to assess the participants for interviews. The result was a range of practitioners with different experiences.
Adequacy of interpretation	An analytical framework was clearly defined prior to analysis
	Transcripts were reviewed five times as part of the iterative analysis.
Deviant case	Data was examined within the context of quantitative data collection – exploring gaps in data collection where there may be disconfirming instances.
Authenticity	The interview was bi-directional with the researcher offering information to the participant and asking for their views.
	Participants reflected on the benefits of the interview and their sense of being empowered. The final discussion advocates for the redistribution of power.
	The participants were grouped to offer different constructions on the child protection system.
Consequential validity	The final discussion highlights the voices of the participants, raising consciousness of their perspectives.
Accessibility	Participants who consented were sent the research results. Attempts were made to make the results accessible to practitioners within the child protection system.
Theoretical triangulation	The levels of context were incorporated into the data analysis framework.

Note. From "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research", by Mullet. D., 2018, Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, Vol. 29, Issue 2, p. 121.