

# “The Art of the Possible”: Aligning Safe and Together and Systemic Approaches

S&T London Partnership Evaluation Briefing One

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In this briefing we explore the relationship between systemic practice frameworks in social work and the Safe and Together (S&T) approach to domestic abuse. During Year two of the S&T London Partnership project<sup>1</sup> evaluation, some clinical teams noted frictions for them between the two approaches. As a potential barrier to implementation the evaluation team explored this in Year three, through a cross-borough action learning set of CSC practitioners and a discussion with the clinical team in one of the six partnership boroughs. We explore the tensions as part of a broader, historical conversation. Rather than divergent or competing approaches, we highlight the points of connection which can, and are, beginning to align the two in practice.

## A Longer Conversation

The recent discussion about the relationship between the Safe and Together approach, systems theory and family therapy is the latest chapter in a long-standing conversation. In 2016 Virginia Goldner<sup>2</sup> noted that it was four decades old and has addressed: the family as a site of systemic injustice for women; the scale of familial child sexual abuse and domestic violence; and that families are affected and regulated by powerful external systems. As an early participant Goldner observes that the tenor and content has changed, as have families and their contexts, over this period. The intensity of the engagements diminished in part due to the recognition of feminist challenges within family therapy that familial child sexual abuse and domestic abuse required adapted approaches.

A particular strand in these debates has been whether the stance of neutrality was either possible or advised in these contexts, with many drawing on Paulo Friere’s point that neutrality in conditions of inequality is to side with the powerful. Building on this the danger of clinicians unintentionally

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.respect.org.uk/pages/safe-and-together-london-partnership>

<sup>2</sup> <https://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jsst.1991.10.3-4.118?journalCode=jsst>

becoming complicit in oppressive practices has been a core theme – that the power relations of gender and generation within family structures and between members cannot be magically suspended in therapy rooms. Goldner also reminds us that feminism and family therapy are parallel traditions both of which have been disrupted by internal and external challenges, and which draw on diverse methodologies. Several more recent participants, including Sylvia Walby<sup>3</sup>, have suggested that systems thinking needs to be linked to complexity theory if we are to have the tools to think intersectionally.

## Connections

In systems theory focus is given to relationships and how different parts of a person's life are interconnected to not only systems within families, but also systems around them. Rather than individualising problems, it is a relational approach, which attempts to apply a holistic perspective to complex difficulties. Working in this approach means a move away from 'safe certainty' to a more curious stance, considering multiple perspectives and possibilities through a recognition that there is no "single unified truth" in complex family dynamics<sup>4</sup>. That said, whilst the power relations of generation may be recognised, parents are frequently ungendered, meaning that the focus on power and control that is so central to S&T, and domestic violence informed approaches more broadly, can sit uncomfortably with systemic approaches. S&T principles have their roots in feminist responses to domestic abuse, a heritage which potentially converges more than departs with systemic principles, as illustrated by the summary of selected principles and values below from the editorial of a 2021 special issue of *Affilia*<sup>5</sup>, the longest standing journal on feminism and social work. feminist social work journal

- ❖ To be conceptual, holistic
- ❖ To embrace complexity and intersectionality
- ❖ To recognise contexts
- ❖ To question certainties and assumptions
- ❖ To reframe questions, problems and dilemmas
- ❖ To recognise own's own positionality

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<sup>3</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0048393107307663>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/media/nbtc2yui/cs-and-systemic-practice\\_08-03-22\\_final-1.pdf](https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/media/nbtc2yui/cs-and-systemic-practice_08-03-22_final-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08861099211043166>

Pilalis & Anderton (1986)<sup>6</sup> in an exploration of differences and commonalities also note areas of consensus between feminist perspectives and family therapy.

- ❖ Both recognise the importance of social context and power relations
- ❖ Both reject pathologisation of people
- ❖ Both seek an outcome of observable change
- ❖ Both use modeling and reframing as methods

These principles are points of connection to be built on. Our work has shown that practitioners as well as clinical teams are doing just this in implementing S&T in London.

## The Art of the Possible

*What within our remit is possible to achieve? What we're striving for, is to be responsive to the experiences of the violence, responsive to the position of families, responsive to the traumas... and recognising that those traumas won't just be internal to the family. They will be system traumas as well, because we construct systems that constrain women into relationships as well as afford women the chance to get out of relationships. (Focus group)*

Children's social care is a system which can constrain or open 'space for action'<sup>7</sup> for victim-survivors. Many research studies have shown that children's social care (and other professionals) made them responsible for their own and their children's safety and failed to recognise coercive control and its impacts<sup>8</sup>.

The principles of the S&T approach are to understand domestic abuse as a harmful parenting practice which requires a 'pivot to the perpetrator' as the source of harm, accompanied by 'partnering' with the non-abusive parent. This both moves away from a failure to protect approach and recognises, following the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, how children are directly harmed by living with domestic abuse. Since implementation began in 2020 across twelve London Boroughs<sup>9</sup> S&T has improved worker confidence and capacity to practice in congruence with the legal framework and the recommendations of the Safeguarding Review Panel in 2022<sup>10</sup>. Shifts in practice have been

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<sup>6</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1046/j.1986.00708.x>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Costs\\_of\\_Freedom\\_Report\\_-\\_SWA.pdf](https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Costs_of_Freedom_Report_-_SWA.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See previous footnote

<sup>9</sup> Six as part of the East London, now London, Partnership, and six as part of RESTART.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-safeguarding-and-domestic-abuse-paper>

recorded, with more focus on patterns of perpetration and more partnering with non-abusing parents<sup>11</sup>.

In contrast to 'failure to protect', S&T seeks to locate, name and record abusive patterns of behaviour through a set of tools and a vocabulary of harm, victim and perpetrator – echoing law and recent guidance. Moreover, the strength-based approach to victim-survivors invites a re-framing of their parenting as protective in a context of constraint and control. This shift in focus has been welcomed by most of the social workers doing the S&T training. At the clinical level, for some 'pivoting to perpetrators', and specifically naming those causing harm was perceived as creating barriers to relationship building and therapeutic intervention, since it risks evoking shame and defensiveness. Similarly, the S&T practice tools, which have been welcomed and embraced by social workers, at clinical level were considered by some as too manualised and at odds with the curiosity that underpins systemic approaches.

Whilst recognising the unease around the term perpetrator, it is an invitation to language which can and is being used strategically: in most direct engagements social workers focus on behaviour and harm and only use 'the p word' in a context of denial and resistance. The most likely place it will be encountered is in case files, but even here people's names are also commonly used. The language of S&T may also have a role in clarifying and building connection for a victim-survivor in early engagement through a recognition of the constraints that limit their space for action, and the expectation of behaviour change from their partner. At social work practice level, clarity of language has represented 'an invitation to responsibility', a way to disrupt denial, minimisation and defensiveness. But such intervention is contingent on pace and agility, how and when to use the term perpetrator and draw on a systemic framework. Similarly, social workers have used mapping tools to explore 'what sits underneath the word perpetrator' which then offers a space to reflect on parenting, a potential 'in road' to work with experience and complexity.

Perceived tensions are being addressed systematically in one partnership borough where the implementation lead, clinical team and principle social worker have co-produced practice guidance and tools which weave S&T principles into the borough's systemic practice framework. Piloted with a small number of social workers in the Assessment and Intervention services with a view to making necessary revisions for broader implementation, this work reflects the iterative alchemic potential of advancing perceived tensions into connections.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://cwasu.org/resource/green-shoots-of-change/>

## Reflections

The S&T London Partnership model of implementation is unique, the support of implementation leads has made possible a more contextual application of the approach which draws on the existing creativity and skillset of social workers whilst paying attention to potential tensions between practice frameworks. This is enhanced through forging links and partnerships across different parts of the children's social care system including at clinical level to 'build bridges' by threading and weaving S&T principles and practice into a broader systemic framework. What these processes have documented is that an agile and contextual blending of the S&T approach and principles of systems thinking is an emerging aspect of implementation, offering potential for cross borough learning and development. It suggests that S&T can be aligned with other practice frameworks if the frictions are explored openly and in a spirit of co-production.