

CHILDREN

Ecology of judgement in child welfare and protection

Seminar held 19.10.10 at Stirling University

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Introduction

The full day seminar entitled “The Ecology of Judgement in child welfare and protection” was held at the University of Stirling on the 19th of October 2010. The event was part funded by the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) and organised by the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN).

The aim of the event was to bring together practitioners, policy makers, managers and researchers to discuss some emerging ideas about the impact of context, environment and systems on decision making practice in child welfare and protection and to identify future points of action for policy, practice and research.

A deliberate communication strategy was employed to promote representation from across a range of professional roles and identities. The event was attended by eighty professionals, with a good mix of representation from managers, practitioners, policy makers and researchers. A variety of different agencies including statutory social work, education, the voluntary sector and national inspection agencies attended.

Three speakers gave presentations on different aspects of the ecology of judgement. Duncan Helm spoke about the ways in which professionals make sense of information about abused and neglected children and young people. Autumn Roesch-Marsh drew on her recent research into secure accommodation to examine factors that influence group performance in decision making. Dr Sheila Fish provided an overview of the Multi-Agency Systems Serious Case Review approach developed by the Social Care Institute of Excellence. She also highlighted findings from the recent pilots of the approach in North West England. Copies of the three presentations are available on the SCCPN website (www.sccpn.stir.ac.uk/) following the tabs 'About' and 'Past Events'.

Presentations were followed by workshops with participants. There were seven facilitated workshops with twelve participants in each workshop and an allocated scribe to take detailed notes on the discussion.

Workshop participants were asked to address one key question relating to each of the three presentations. These questions were:

- 1.** In your experience, what are the factors which have contributed to effective, child-focused analysis in assessment?
- 2.** In the light of the findings on group decision making presented this morning, what might support improvements to group decision making in your practice setting?
- 3.** What benefits and challenges would you foresee to using the systems approach for case reviews?

Facilitators encouraged participants to consider the relevance of the findings to policy and practice and to identify at least one action point that they might like to see taken forward after the seminar. This report provides a summary of participant views about the material presented, its relevance for practice and policy, and identified points for action.

Feedback from workshop discussions

Individual judgement and decision making: barriers to child-focused analysis

Participants across the seven workshops identified the importance of theory in assessment. It was suggested that assessments can be undermined in particular by practitioners not having a sufficient understanding of developmental theory. This lack of theoretical underpinning to analysis could result in ill-formed judgements and a failure to recognise the significance of particular information. Training was strongly advocated for at both qualifying levels and in continuing professional development. Participants were concerned at the potential impact of further budget cuts on such opportunities for training and development. Given that much theory in child welfare and protection is in itself contestable, participants also noted that meaningful supports are required for practitioners to rationalise their intuitive thinking and develop analytical capacity. A systems approach was viewed as an opportunity for more effective learning from mistakes and a more realistic view of professional judgement in complex situations.

Participants reflected upon difficulties in maintaining a focus on the child in their assessment practice. The environment in which practitioners operate was thought to be a crucial barrier in this respect. Anxiety and a culture of blame were felt to restrict child-focused practice and thinking as workers could become pre-occupied with their own safety, leading to defensive procedure-compliance and a need to be seen to “do the right things” rather than “do things right”. Comments reflected the feeling for many practitioners that deviation from guidance was viewed as a dangerous act for which practitioners must expect “consequences”. It was felt that a balance needed to be held between ensuring that procedural adherence is maintained but does not sacrifice critical thinking and the appropriate exercise of professional judgement.

Analysis in assessment was a subject which many participants had attended the seminar to find out more about and the presentations provided opportunities for learning and reflection. In the workshops it was noted that many assessments continue to contain very high levels of narrative writing and there may be a number of factors inhibiting good analysis in assessment. A lack of experienced workers within some services meant that capacity and support for analysis was limited. Also, newly qualified workers might benefit from further learning and development in using theory as a framework for analysis. As a consequence, participants advocated further opportunities for training and development in critical thinking, analysis and presentation skills.

There was recognition that analysis is a complex task in relation to child welfare and protection and that developing analytical capacity requires attention to a number of variables. Some participants identified individual factors in the practitioner themselves, such as understanding of the task of analysis and an ability to communicate concepts and thresholds across professional identities. Some inter- and intra-professional variables were also identified, such as difficulties making full use of a range of professional knowledge and a lack of clarity about time lines (both for agencies and in terms of children and young people’s developmental timescales). Finally, some wider organisational issues were identified, including significant pressures on time. The continuing need for services to operate in a crisis-response mode was felt to reduce the amount of time required to gather sufficient information in assessment and could be a contributor to weaknesses in critical, analytical assessment. A focus on case management in supervision was seen as significant barrier to analysis as task-focused supervision did not support analytical thinking and the emotional content of work was not routinely recognised or managed.

Improving group decision making practice

Participants across the seven workshops reflected on good and bad experiences of group decision making in child care and protection. They identified that when they are well run groups can be crucial for developing the confidence and skills of staff. Positive experiences in groups were characterised by a sense of shared goals, responsibility, trusting relationships and time for reflection. Clearly defined aims and functions for decision making groups were seen as crucial to keeping the focus of the group on the needs of the child.

The role of the chair

The role of the chair was identified as being absolutely critical in group decision making forums such as child protection case conferences, core groups and reviews. It was felt that chairs could benefit from more training in how to manage group dynamics and group processes and that this training should be underpinned by theory and research evidence. Firstly, it was felt that chairs could play a crucial role in setting the ethos of the meeting and fostering an atmosphere where frank discussion and mutual respect were the norms.

Secondly, the behaviour of chairs was seen as central to facilitating the process of information sharing at meetings. To illicit information from all members of the group it was felt chairs needed to have an awareness of how power, status, culture and professional identities could impact on the willingness and confidence of professionals to share their knowledge about a particular child and their family. It was felt chairs needed to carefully manage the discussion to ensure that a range of perspectives and hypotheses were considered.

Finally, it was felt that the chair needed to manage the pace of the discussion and ensure that the group did not rush to judgement too quickly. The chair also needed to provide opportunities to explore the rationale for decisions made in order to check out consensus and make explicit where opposing views existed. It was acknowledged that time constraints could make this difficult for the chair and the group to manage.

Sharing information and views

Participants across the seven workshops identified that decision making groups can provide a crucial forum for professionals to share and critically analyse information. It was identified that sometimes professionals had reservations about sharing their views for fear of upsetting families and that this could get in the way of open, up-front discussion. Participants also felt that some group members needed more encouragement to speak out in group settings and ongoing support to develop the confidence to share their genuine views. It was important that individuals recognised their professional role and responsibility to speak up, and to manage their relationships with families to ensure that everything that needed to be said was said.

Group membership

Participants identified that group membership was crucial to the effectiveness of decision making groups. Having the right mix of professions and non-professionals around the table and ensuring regular attendance by members was seen as vital to the work of decision making groups. This was seen as important to ensuring the group had quality information upon which to base decisions and also to improve continuity for families who might move between services and geographical areas.

Preparation for meetings

Workshop participants emphasised that it was important to the work of the group that all members came prepared to meetings and took the time to read all advanced papers. Concerns were raised by some participants about the quality of reports being presented to group decision making forums. Weak reports were characterised by being overly long, descriptive and lacking critical analysis. Poor quality information was also identified as one of the things that can delay the work of a decision making group.

Opportunities for review and reflection

There was agreement from across the workshops that in order to be effective groups needed regular opportunities to review the functioning of the group and reflect on the group process. Participants from across the workshops identified that this was not happening routinely in the decision making groups they were involved with. The suggestion was made in one workshop that the process of review and reflection could be more effective if standardised tools such as the Belbin Team Roles Questionnaire or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Questionnaire were used to develop their self-awareness and recognition of the strengths that different group members bring to particular decision making situations. The suggestion was also made that strong disagreements about cases should be recorded to allow for clarity about the outcome of the group process and to facilitate future reflection.

A shared understanding

Comments from across the workshops suggested that sometimes multi-disciplinary decision making groups do not have a common understanding of certain key concepts such as risk. It was felt that more joint training is needed to ensure shared understanding of terms such as risk and thresholds for intervention. It was felt this training was needed at qualifying and post-qualifying levels for all key professional groups involved in child welfare and protection work.

Multi-agency systems approach to serious case reviews

Possible benefits

Participants across the seven workshops generally had a positive view of the multi-agency systems approach to serious case reviews developed and piloted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence. Participants felt that using this model could help staff to feel part of something, rather than having the review 'done to' them. Participants felt this approach might increase the confidence of services as their work would be appraised in a more realistic way. It was hoped that using this approach might help to challenge gendered assumptions present in some existing serious care reviews. It was also felt that this approach could support a more learning-focused culture within agencies.

Possible challenges

Participants did raise some possible challenges in implementing this new approach. In particular they highlighted that there is currently a lack of time for reflection and that introducing this approach would not necessarily address this issue for agencies. It was also suggested that this approach was likely to be more time consuming than present approaches and therefore more expensive. Questions were also raised about staffing capacity, both in terms of staffing review teams and practice teams. Participants recognised that the experience of being involved in a serious case review was still likely to be painful for staff involved and that there needs to be recognition of this and support for staff whatever approach was adopted. Supervision was identified as a key place where staff could be supported to manage uncertainty in an ongoing way and develop reflexivity. Several participants asked: Will the approach really be able to challenge confirmation bias? And does the approach actually impact on the young people?

Finally there was some discussion in several of the workshops about the need for social work and other professions involved in child care and protection to learn from good practice cases rather than just focusing on learning from cases where things have gone wrong.

Points for action

Across the seven workshops participants identified a number of points for action. In keeping with the ecological theme for the day, these comments have been organised in relation to points for individual practice, group or team practice, organisational practice and the wider environment. These layers are outlined in the diagram below. Despite the sense of separation between these layers in the diagram, the discussion in the seminar and in workshops suggests that the relationships between these layers are dynamic and porous.



Individual

- » additional developments are needed in theory for practice in analysis, forming judgements and making decisions and research is also needed to test these theories[†]
- » shared understanding of risk, harm and risk assessment is needed
- » joint training between professionals to ensure better shared understanding of language and thresholds
- » surveillance doesn't work – models need to move away from this
- » more time for reflection and analysis

Group

- » group decision making forums need regular reflective time (perhaps at end of each meeting) and at least yearly reviews – strategies should ensure everyone gets a chance to share and 'loafers' are drawn out
- » the role of the chair in making final decisions perhaps needs to be reviewed in some way to ensure more consistency and meetings need to be clear about 'rules of engagement' for the decision making process
- » reviews need to involve a range of those who worked with the case – they may need to be less conclusive when complexities mean there are multiple factors which influenced the situation

[†]_____However, there can be problems with generalising findings, more Scottish based research is needed.

Organisation

- » there is a need to develop more flexible and responsive services – particularly in crisis situations
- » more high quality supervision needs to be on offer and there should be opportunities for peer supervision
- » continue to develop GIRFEC approach – seen as a way of improving decision making at every level
- » need to evaluate the impact of particular case review models on changing practice with children and families
- » funding for training – this is under threat or already being cut and needs to be seen as a priority for organisations

Wider environment

- » questions raised about the future of support for families and the role of the 'Big Society'
 - » need wider recognition in society that things will always go wrong sometimes
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