SESSION 1 ABSTRACTS

Option 1 A: Factors influencing professional judgement

Factors influencing professionals’ judgement in cases of suspected child neglect: detangling the influence of case, worker, and organisational factors
Joel Gautschi [joel.gautschi@fhnw.ch]

Context: Child protection professionals are required to assess the safety of children and consider various case factors. It is assumed, that these judgements, are not only influenced by case factors, but also professional, organisational, and other external factors (e.g., Decision Making Ecology Model, Fluke et al., 2014). In Switzerland child protection authorities mandate professionals (often social workers), from different organisation types, to assess a child’s endangerment. The study aimed to detangle case, professional, and organisational factors influencing professionals’ judgement in cases of suspected child neglect.

Methods: A theoretical model, which postulates the association of case, professional, and organizational factors with professionals’ judgement in child protection assessments, was developed based on a systematic literature search and review. The model was tested with a factorial survey approach (cf. Rossi & Anderson, 1982), a multi factorial, experimental vignette design. Professionals judged experimentally varied vignettes (7 dimensions), describing suspected child neglect situations. Further, the participants rated items measuring personal and organisational characteristics. Data was collected in a full population online survey of professionals, responsible for child protection assessments, in German-speaking Switzerland. 543 professionals (response rate: 60%) from 158 organisations participated, and rated 1625 vignettes. Multilevel models were used to analyse data.

Findings: As hypothesized, all seven case factors (supervisory neglect, living environment, parent’s mental health, sensitivity towards the child, child’s behaviour towards the parent, social support, and parent’s cooperation) influenced professionals’ judgement of child’s endangerment. In my presentation, I will present findings on professionals’ different weighting of factors, and on interaction effects between factors. Professionals’ judgement was associated with their general child protection attitude. Several factors indicated an association with worker’s personal and professional experience with children. The organisational level explained little of the variation in judgements.

Conclusion: I will discuss these findings, their generalisation, and their implications in the light of other studies.

What are they thinking? An exploration of factors that influence child welfare professionals’ decision-making
Melinda Gushwa [melinda.gushwa@simmons.edu]
Emily Douglas [emdouglas@wpi.edu]

Context: Decision-making regarding children’s safety represents the most essential component of child welfare practice. Decision-making is typically guided by standardized assessment tools, which tend to focus on environment, social support, prior history of maltreatment and other salient factors. Yet, little is known about what influences workers as they make decisions on a day-to day basis. This study explores the factors that influence decision making regarding substantiating allegations of maltreatment or returning children to parental/caregiver custody.

Method: Child welfare professionals in the USA were recruited to participate in an online survey which explored various components of practice, with 619 workers responding from 15 states. Two questions explored the factors which most influenced decisions to remove children or return them from/to parental custody. A total of 451 responses were coded and analyzed.

Findings: Seven primary response categories emerged: Evidence regarding risk and safety (45%), Parental/caregiver behavior, including case plan compliance (24%), History of prior child welfare involvement (5%), Family supports (4.5%), Parent/caregiver-child relationship and potential adverse effects to child (4.5%), Substance abuse and parental/caregiver sobriety (4%), and Parental/caregiver mental health (3%).

Conclusion: The results mirror some of the risk/safety categories found in standardized child welfare assessment tools, and highlight specific factors of interest to workers. Within each category, the language used by respondents provided insight into their passion for/interest in various determination factors, as well as those areas of practice/ decision-making that were less at the forefront. This study represents an important look into the minds of child welfare workers as they undertake the complex process of decision-making regarding risk and safety for children and their families. Continued inquiry into this topic can help us to better ascertain the relationship between the use of standardized tools and individual worker preferences.

Ambivalence in residential care placement decisions: the role of cognitive, social, emotional and value-laden factors in cases of child neglect
Leonor Bettencourt Rodrigues [leonor.rodrigues@ics.ul.pt]
**Context:** The decision to keep a child in the family or to put him/her in residential-care is complex, ambiguous, and full of errors and uncertainty. This is especially true for instances of parental neglect, in which, although the long-term effects are detrimental, the physical proofs are hard to obtain. The literature suggests that the largely studied child, family and case characteristics, are only part of the decision-making equation.

**Method:** In this work, a more integrated, dualistic and ecological version of the Theory of Planned Behavior’s model was tested to describe the process through which the decision maker takes into account personal, contextual and social factors of the Decision-making Ecology in the definition of his/her decision threshold. One hundred and ninety-five professionals from different Children/Youth Protection Units, throughout the Portuguese territory, participated in this online study. After reading a vignette of a (psychological and physical) neglect case towards an one-year-old child, participants were presented with a group of questions that measured worker’s assessment of risk, intention, attitude, subjective norm, behavior control and beliefs towards residential care placement decision, as well as worker’s behavior experience, emotions and family/child-related-values involved in that decision.

**Findings:** A set of structural equation modeling analyses have proven the good fit of the proposed model (61%). The complexity of residential-care placement decisions was evident in the presence of multiple and both rational and intuitive factors involved in professionals’ judgments (e.g., emotional, value-laden, normative); and the effect of social processes on them. The most striking result was the role of attitudinal ambivalence and the presence of a conflict – not between the value of the child and the value of the family, as expected - but rather within the value of the child itself, i.e., there are two opposite forces in worker’s judgment related to child’s best interests. DARSIG Scholarship Applicant.

**Discussion:** In my work, I have been dedicated to better understand the (dual-) process (rational/heuristic) underlying professional judgment and decision-making towards the out-of-home placement after child abuse, and the role played by social, emotional, value-laden and contextual factors. The opportunity to discuss my work with the most experienced colleagues in this topic will be of key importance to learn with cutting-edge research in this domain and, therefore, to better integrate and improve my work. Thus, I believe my research is strongly related to DARE conference topics and DARSIG aims to support the development of research on decision-making/assessment/risk and to promote the use of research to inform practice. Furthermore, it will be the perfect launch now that I am starting a post-doc (funded by the National Science Foundation) which aims 1) to widen the applicability of the psychosocial model of residential-care placement decision, 2) to use evidence-base (re-reports and/or neglect cases) to learn about child protection services decisions and practices, as well as 3) to promote the dialogue between research and practice. Based on an ongoing partnership with the National Commission for Child Protection, the methodology will privilege professionals’ experiences/representations to provide guidelines/recommendations to inform social policy improvement and contribute to less ambiguous and higher quality decisions.

**Option 1 B: Decision and assessment processes with families**

The challenging encounter. When child welfare workers inform parents about the decision to bringing to court the question of the custody rights

Marte Tonning Otterlei [marte.t.otterlei@uis.no]

**Context:** When the Child Welfare Service (CWS) decides to bring to court the question of whether a child should live at home or in foster care this decision is founded on jurisdiction, knowledge, theories, norms and values. When a decision is made the CWS is obliged to inform the parents about their decision. There are several studies concerning the CWS decision making, but fewer studies about how the decisions is presented for parents.

**Method:** This PhD-project studies how the Norwegian CWS informs parents about the decision of bringing to court the question of the custody rights. It is a meeting where the social workers agenda is to inform about a serious decision, and for most parents, even though the outcome of the case is not yet known, is a demanding message to receive. It is an aim for the study to examine how both social workers and parents experience this specific meeting. The project will study how the social workers describe their communication in such a meeting, and how different discourses affect the social workers’ practice when giving such a message to the parents. The project will also study both social workers and parents’ experiences of the meeting when information about the CWS decision is given. The methodological approach is qualitative interviews. Phenomenology and hermeneutics is the theoretical framework to study the social workers and the parent’s experiences of the meeting. I will also use discourse analysis to study the underlying discourses of the social workers practice.

**Findings:** The interviews will be conducted in spring 2018, so I will present preliminary findings at the conference.

**Interdisciplinary decision-making in family support services: a perspective of the delegation theory**
**Jaroslaw Przeperski** [jprzeperski@umk.pl]

**Context:** For the past decade, social work with children and families in Poland has become increasingly complex. New specialists and new tasks for old professions emerged. The members of institutions, as well as families, might become disoriented in a complicated system of protection and support. Consequently, the way of decision-making and responsibility for making decisions has become unclear.

**Method:** One part of the study concentrated on identifying delegation of decisions (shift of responsibility for decision-making) in the work of nine professions (family judge, policeman, social worker, counselor from institutional foster care, teacher, family assistant, probation officer [two types], mediator). The data was collected by using a vignette. This vignette was taken from real life and examined by the family judge, family assistant and psychotherapist. The vignette was the basis for an interview for all of the participants (N=50: five from each profession plus five families). The interviews were taped and transcribed to prepare for scrutiny. The analysis was based on thematic coding.

**Findings:** This qualitative study allowed indication of cases when institutions delegate the decision-making to other institutions. The results show two processes of delegation. Negative, when the institution wants to shift, withdraw responsibility for the other institution or family; and positive when sharing of responsibility is a way of networking, empowerment and cooperation.

**Conclusion:** First results show the richness of different processes within the delegation theory. There is a need for further studies (both quantitative and qualitative) in the field of delegation.

---

**Assessing the situation of a child during a foster placement: a process accompanying the reflection of social workers on their practice**

**Amélie Turlais** [am.turlais@gmail.com]  
**Séverine Euillet** [seuillet@parisnanterre.fr]  
**Claire Ganne** [cganne@parisnanterre.fr]

**Context:** In France for the last fifteen years, assessment in the field of child protection has been the concern of many actors. At a legislative level, various laws such as the 2002-2 and the 2007-293 ones defined the evaluation of practices and the assessment of the situation of a child as being necessary to determine the needs for an intervention. At a scientific level, a lot of research (Boutanquoi 2008, Durning, Gabel, 2002; Robin, 2009) has argued for the importance of developing assessment tools to ensure the equality and the equity of an intervention. At a practical level, assessment appears to be a major part of the process of decision-making during an intervention. However, on a French national scale both the process of assessment and its resources are very heterogeneous. From these observations, this research is dealing with: how, when, why and by who the situation of a child is assessed during a foster placement.

**Methods:** To conduct it the methodology is divided into two phases. The first one is to gather data on resources used to conduct an assessment through a questionnaire sent to 182 associative foster care services in France. The second one is to access the point of view of professionals as well as children and parents on the use of assessment.

**Findings:** This paper will mainly focus on the questionnaires received (46). From their analysis, it will be detailed that social workers conduct an assessment to define the project of an intervention, anticipate the consequences of critical events and guide their decision-making process.

**Conclusion:** It will be demonstrated that assessment is used by social workers to work on continuities and avoid disruptions during the placement. It will then be argued that assessment accompany the reflection of professionals on their work.

---

**Option 1 C: Assessment tools and processes in adult care**

**‘What counts?’ for the client: assessment ownership**

**Martijn Bool** [m bool@movisie.nl]

**Context:** In the Netherlands, a validated objective screening instrument is preferred in the process of assessing the needs of social work teams’ clients. Such an instrument delivers data which provide insight to both professionals and organisations and enhances local governance. Two large cities in the Netherlands used the screening instrument to also indicate changes in fulfilling clients’ needs. The instrument failed to do this. Based on this experiences and a search of alternative instruments a research team of Movisie, a Dutch national knowledge centre on social issues, developed a new instrument. In several joint sessions with clients, professionals and local policy officers the requirements for assessing needs in different domains was formulated. Requirements included: ownership in the hands of the clients, show changes because of help provided, professionals have opportunities to show their judgement or legal obligation.

**Methods:** We used several methods. For construction of the instrument we used both separate focus groups with administrators, professionals and clients and finally a joint work session to discuss the results and the
Implementation of a capacity tool in a learning disability and autism service

Darragh McCullagh [darragh.mccullagh@positive-futures.net]
Jonathan McGookin [E: jonathan.mcgookin@positive-futures.net]

Context: Capacity and the ability to make decisions has always been a complex area within the learning disability field. Historically, people with a learning disability have often faced discrimination and at times have had their human rights compromised by others making decisions on their behalf. The introduction of the Mental Capacity Act in GB in 2005 aimed to address this issue and in NI the formalising of the capacity legislation is well under way.

Methods: In response we developed a practical tool that aims to assist decision makers working alongside people with a learning disability to consider issues of capacity. It’s based on the functional test of capacity that assesses the four key areas: Does the individual understand the information pertinent to the decision? Can the individual retain the information for long enough to make the decision? Can the individual weigh the pros and cons of making the decision? Can the individual communicate their decision?

Findings: The results of the assessment provide the decision maker with additional support to either enable the person to make their own (potentially unwise) decision, or if capacity didn’t appear to be present make an interim decision on their behalf. This will then trigger a best interest pathway or referral to clinical psychology for further investigation.

Conclusion: We will use our practical ‘on-the-ground’ experience to inform the tool and share our thoughts on how this will impact the work we do within our services.

Screening adult safeguarding risks: a qualitative study into how adult safeguarding teams assess and prioritise safeguarding referrals

Dr Jeremy Dixon [Jeremy.dixon2@bath.ac.uk]

Context: Safeguarding adults forms a core part of adult social work and involves workers making efforts to assess risk and protect vulnerable adults from abuse. In England and Wales, the status of safeguarding practice has been raised by the introduction of The Care Act 2014. This law gives local authorities duties to assess and to act to prevent abuse or neglect where it occurs.

Methods: Drawing on ethnographic research data in two local authorities in England, this paper considers safeguarding practice as a form of governmentality.

Findings: The findings draw on both observations of how social workers used assessment tools in practice. They also draw on interviews with those workers. The paper focusses on how workers decided which referrals met the threshold for further assessment and which were screened out. Safeguarding referrals were received from a wide range of sources including care homes, the emergency services and members of the public. In line with legal criteria social workers considered the degree to which the person had prior support needs, whether they were experiencing abuse or neglect and whether they were able to protect themselves. However, workers also sought to assess the motivation of referrers.

Conclusion: Safeguarding referrals were seen as a means by which individuals or organisations might seek to attribute or avoid blame or as a means of placing individuals at the front of the queue for social services. Considerations about referrer motivation were used alongside case information to consider whether reported risks were genuine.
A balancing act: a study of the professional judgement of child protection social workers

Dr Martin Kettle [E: Martin.kettle2@gcu.ac.uk]

Context: Whilst there is a strong focus on decision making in the child protection literature, the perspectives of social workers working to protect children are under-represented. This paper seeks to redress this balance and draws on the author's doctoral research in one Scottish local authority.

Methods: The paper has two aspects. Firstly, the inherent tensions within the policy context are explored as a foundation for the empirical study. Secondly the study, based on 22 in-depth interviews with social workers, is explored. A constructivist grounded theory methodology was used, which uses the constant comparison method, and in so doing seeks to build a theoretical understanding of social workers’ sensemaking from the ground up.

Findings: This study looks at how information, responsibility and in particular anxiety are transacted between social workers and other professionals, with anxiety being implicit in other aspects. Further, this study found that social workers negotiated a range of delicate balances. This paper focuses on two of those balances, namely, ‘closeness- distance’, and ‘power over- power together’. If social workers became too close to families there was a risk of losing perspective. If social workers were too distant engagement proved difficult. Social workers aspired to share power with families, but frequently exerted power over them.

Conclusion: The delicacy of the balances negotiated by social workers leads to a powerful analogy of social workers as tightrope walkers, and strategies to seek balance are identified. The implications for practice are explored. More attention needs to be paid to the internal mental processes of social workers, a cautious approach should be taken to rational-technical solutions and social workers need to be better prepared to respectfully challenge other professionals.

Professional identity and social work: exploring how social workers and educators in Norwegian secondary education perceive and prevent risks of radicalisation

Martin Sjøen [martin.sjoen@uis.no]
Håvard Haugstvedt [havard.haugstvedt@uis.no]

Context: Norwegian counterterrorism policy places great responsibility on first-line practitioners to prevent individuals from radicalising towards extreme violence. This paper provides a qualitative exploration of how social workers and educators in Norwegian secondary education perceive and prevent risks of radicalisation.

Methods: Twenty-two semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled practitioners were carried out in 2017. Frameworks for analysis include securitization theory, educational theories and social pedagogical theories.

Findings: Most informants express, albeit in varied degree, increased awareness on issues of radicalisation. These narratives reveal a professional duty to safeguard students from radicalisation by reducing risk factors such as personal adversity, marginalization, social exclusion and feelings of deprivations. It is evident that the informants favour soft prevention building on existing social pedagogical approaches of dialogue, strengthened resilience, social cohesion and collaboration with families and communities. While the majority of informants’ favour soft prevention through safeguarding, the politicized connotations of “radicalisation” seems to constrain some professional activism. This is evident through the framing of immigrant and particularly Muslim students as vulnerable to radicalisation. Monitoring students based on religion or culture is certainly worrisome and it could undermine democratic values of individual freedom and tolerance. Furthermore, many informants believe that the characterization of young individuals, whether they adhere to radical ideas or not, as “suspects”, is a contested social pedagogical approach. Our work finds that the counterterrorism policies can have implications for the professional practitioner. Some informants voice criticism towards their perceived securitization of social pedagogical practices. Considering the educational requirements in Norway to provide inclusive arenas for socialization and learning, schools should rather build environments characterized by mutual trust and respect, which may allow for practitioners and students to freely interact with each other.

Conclusion: Overall, these explorative findings suggest some concerns regarding the intertwining of security strategies and social pedagogical work in Norwegian education.

A model of interdisciplinary decision making in social work

Florian Windisch, Dr. iur. [Florian.windisch@fhsg.ch]

Context: Social work decision-makers are inevitably confronted by claims of diverse disciplines that often demand incompatible decisions. But what makes for a “good interdisciplinary” decision? This is a theoretical contribution. Its justification lies in the requirement that the methods and empirical results used in the decision-
making process call for a legitimising orientating framework. Generally, the presented model refers to all decisions in social work. It shall be exemplified by using a concrete case, e.g. in the area of child protection. **Methods:** The model takes recourse to theories of interdisciplinary decision-making, to theory of science, and philosophy. It also borrows elements from legal concepts of norm construction and legal theory of balancing. **Findings:** The starting point is the basic assumption that decisions are guided by normative prescriptions on the one hand and by descriptive analyses of the predicted empirical consequences on the other hand. On this basis, I contend that the competing disciplinary norms and values cannot be subject to a hierarchical order. Hence, all distinctive disciplinary values must be acknowledged. Against this background, the chosen decision should be the one that has the least infringing effect on the disciplinary values in total. As the according selective criterion, I suggest the principle of proportionality stemming from legal theory of balancing. Furthermore, empirical methods and their according analyses of consequences have just as much an effect on the decisions. Again, there are no valid reasons for putting these methods into a hierarchical order. Accordingly, diverging analyses of consequences must be accepted. To the extent that a decision entails alternative consequences, however, its weight in the evaluation is reduced. **Conclusion:** Finally, the role of law in social work decision-making will be discussed. In developed democracies law takes a special role that transcends the one of a normal discipline.