SESSION 4 ABSTRACTS

Option 4 A: Principles and knowledge in professional judgement

Does Probation Officers’ reasoning change in the light of scientific evidence? Analysing the quality of evidence utilisation in social work

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Content: Although professionals in numerous domains are increasingly required to solve problems using scientific evidence, surprisingly little is known about which type of knowledge is used by professionals in social work.

Methods: By means of case vignettes and think-aloud protocols, this study focuses on what types of knowledge novices (social work students, n = 21) and experts (probation officers, n = 24) use for their practical problem solving, at what quality level they do so and how they integrate scientific evidence presented in form of a research summary in their solutions. The analyses for these research questions are based on a mixed-design with one between-subjects factor (expertise level: expert vs. novices) and one within-subject factor (repeated measures without and with presenting a research summary).

Findings: Results show that experts and novices rely on significantly different kinds of knowledge. Experts include knowledge based on the client’s perspective as well as legal information significantly more often. Furthermore, experts have more skills to integrate the presented scientific evidence with other kinds of evidence. Regarding the use of specific kinds of evidence, the expertise level does not interact with the presentation of a research summary.

Conclusion: In terms of the quality of evidence utilisation, no differences could be observed. However, the descriptive results show that the quality of evidence utilisation of experts increases after the presentation of a research summary while it decreases in the case of novices. In the presentation, we will conclude with suggestions for research and social work education.

The role of faith in social work education and practice

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Context: This presentation will explore the ethical and emotional aspects of decision-making as it relates to an emphasis on spirituality and faith in social work education and social work practice. It is important to help our clients assess their family and personal resources. Often religious institutions and faith-based agencies are starting places for social/emotional support and for service provision. The faith of clients often impacts their decision-making.

Methods: This presentation will focus on a study of the attitudes of social work graduate students related to the inclusion or exclusion of faith within social work higher education curricula. Secondary data collection was analysed from 101 graduate students in an elective course taught over a four-year period. A comparison was made of the faith beliefs of college faculty.

Findings: Fifty-four percent of the students reported they were not comfortable discussing issues of faith, religion or spirituality in academic classrooms. Thirty-four percent of the students felt that it is not acceptable to discuss their own ideas as they relate to faith in academic studies. The Pew Charitable Trust’s research indicated that 22.9% of college professors self-identify as atheist or agnostic. In the general population of the United States, 7.1% self-profess to being agnostic or atheist.

Discussion: Much of social work history includes programs rooted in religious organizations and charity care. The values of the dignity of human worth, the importance of service to others and of social justice overlap between faith and social work. Evidence-based and empirical research are often void of the impact of abstract beliefs and the acknowledgement of faith-based emphases in a client’s life. Neither institutional nor ideological religions play key roles in social work practice and education. It is imperative that we allow social work students the opportunity to look at all available forms of social capital and to bring more evidence-based research to issues of faith, regardless of the faith belief systems of faculty.

What knowledge do social workers use to inform their decision regarding permanency recommendations for looked after children?

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Context: Accurately identifying children at risk of abuse and intervening in ways that will protect them is far from an exact science (Spratt, Devaney and Hayes, 2015; Fleming et al, 2015) and is made all the harder by the fact that social workers have no unitary knowledge base or actuarial-like formula to draw on to determine their
recommendations (Enosh and Bayer-Toplisky, 2015). In the absence of either, it is important to know what knowledge social workers in the field use to inform their recommendations for permanency.

**Method:** This paper will present findings from an exploratory in-depth qualitative research project whose aim was to explore the knowledge that social workers use to make decisions regarding permanency.

**Finding:** The paper will outline how a specifically-created case study was established in consultation with experts to explore the knowledge practitioners in a statutory local authority used to make decisions regarding permanency. The paper will outline how thinking aloud protocols and a semi-structured interview were used to explore the knowledge used by practitioners to make the decision. From the interviews, themes were generated using NVivo 11. An adapted model of knowledge was used to help structure the themes arising from the interviews (Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long and Barnes, 2003, p.vii) and these themes will be presented.

**Conclusions:** The paper will outline that whilst the research recognises Pawson et al., sources of knowledge as valid that there is wide variation between practitioners in relation to the extent, depth and degree to which each source of knowledge is used. Based on the findings recommendations will be outlined that will help inform social work graduate and postgraduate education, training and supervision, with the aim of improving the extent and depth of practitioner knowledge in the field thus increasing the robustness, consistency and defensibility of decisions taken.

**Option 4 B: Assessment tool development in family and child care**

**The impact of evidence-based assessment on decision making in child protection: findings from a longitudinal study in Switzerland**

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**Context:** In Switzerland, public child protection authorities will intervene if a child’s well-being is harmed or threatened and parents are unwilling or unable to remedy the situation. The authorities decide upon enacting child protection orders based on a professional assessment of the child’s and the family’s situation. This assessment is typically carried out not by the members of the authority but by frontline workers operating on their behalf, who are often employees of a separate social services agency. Professionals agree the quality of the assessment is core to the appropriateness of the authority’s decision. However, no widely accepted standards on assessment and decision-making procedures have been established.

**Method:** In 2015, the authors published an evidence-based assessment tool that structures the assessment, linking risk and protective factors of child development with the decision to potentially enact orders. Currently, a three-year longitudinal study, involving a pretest-posttest design and an intervention group with matched controls, is underway that will analyse how the implementation of this tool affects the decisional outcome. Furthermore, the study will document how professionals handle the new tool and how decision-making based on the tool is embedded in organizational procedures. Finally, the study will provide findings on how standardized assessment affects the child and its primary caregiver, particularly their perceptions of fairness, transparency and opportunity for participation in the process.

**Findings:** In our talk, we intend to give a concise description of the new tool and the rationale that lies behind it. Beyond this, we will present findings from the ongoing study which relate to the period leading up to the implementation of the new tool. They highlight how the assessment practises of frontline workers are strongly oriented towards hypothesised decision rules and preferences of the authority.

**Conclusion:** We conclude with specific hypotheses about how the introduction of standardized assessments might affect such tendencies.

**What factors are associated with outcomes for children who live with parental substance misuse?**

- Jessica Roy [Jessica.roy@bristol.ac.uk]

**Context:** Parental substance misuse is a significant child welfare and public health issue across the globe. Research has indicated that children living with parental substance misuse are at increased risk of maltreatment. However, children living with parental substance misuse have heterogenous outcomes and there is a paucity of empirical research to evidence why this may be the case. The paper will report on the findings of an ESRC funded PhD study which aimed to identify the factors associated with children’s social care outcomes for children living with parental substance misuse.

**Method:** The study is a retrospective longitudinal cohort study. A sample of 299 children living with parental substance misuse in one local authority in England was followed from the point of referral to children’s social care for two years. Data was collected about children’s outcomes and relevant risk and protective factors. Multivariate and exploratory statistical techniques, including cluster analysis, were used to analyse the data.
Findings: Cluster analysis indicated that there were five distinct children’s social care outcome typologies within the sample. Bi- and multi-variate (regression) analysis indicated that the type and recurrence of risk factors were significantly associated with children’s outcomes. Risk factors associated with children’s outcomes included: the presence of a non-substance using parent/carer; domestic violence and abuse; household stability; parent/carer engagement with children’s social care; parenting capacity; and the local authority team.

Conclusion: The study’s findings indicate that the variation in children’s outcomes cannot be sufficiently explained by substance misuse factors alone. The findings suggest that children’s outcomes in this population are associated with both the type and chronicity of parental and environmental risk factors. The implications for social work practice will be discussed, specifically in relation to the development of a risk assessment tool.

Reducing recurrence of child abuse and neglect (CA/N) in higher risk cases

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Context: In 1988 the New England Journal of Medicine introduced a treatment-effectiveness metric called the Number Needed to Treat (NNT) (Laupacis, Sackett, and Roberts, 1988). The NNT is the number of cases that must be treated in order to prevent 1 occurrence of a poor outcome (e.g., a heart attack). It was reported that as risk of a poor outcome declines from 100% toward 0%, the NNT increases exponentially, going to infinity at 0%. Thus, at and near 0% risk, treatment is likely to be ineffective. IMPLICATIONS: 1) even when child protective service (CPS) staff possess a service to which CA/N families are responsive, CA/N prevention efforts are likely to succeed only with higher-risk cases.
2) CPS staff need a valid assessment of CA/N risk to identify the higher-risk families that are more likely to respond to service efforts. We show the operation of these principles in a set of 3827 CA/N cases arising in 8 California counties.

Findings: Using the California Family Risk Assessment (Johnson, Clancy and Bastian, 2015) to classify cases as to risk, we found in-home and foster care services to be effective in reducing recurrence of maltreatment only among higher risk cases and ineffective among lower risk cases.


Option 4 C: Ethical and philosophical reflections on decision processes

Evidence-based practice and shared decision making in the social services

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Context: Evidence-based practice (EBP) is nowadays considered by many to lay the foundation for the best possible medical treatment, education and social services. The Swedish National Board of Health describes EBP as ‘a deliberate and systematic use of the best available knowledge; the professional’s expertise; [and] the person’s situation, experience and preferences’. However, how ‘the person’s situation, experience and preferences’ should be taken into account is still open to interpretation. One idea is to make use of theories of shared decision making (SDM). SDM was developed as a part of patient-centred care, and all SDM models are characterised by a dialogue where the professionals listen to the client in order to reach a problem description, evaluate different interventions and design a treatment plan. The study poses the question of whether SDM models are appropriate in relation to the work performed by social workers with their clients when it comes to decisions about measures.

Methods: Philosophical methods will be used in order to explore SDM models and different arguments. Conceptual analysis aims at clarifying and/or defining concepts. Argument analysis describes arguments and evaluates their validity and relevance.

Findings: Differences between sets of decisions made by medical practitioners and practitioners in the social work practice are found and expressed in terms of different ‘decisional topographies’. For instance, there are important decisions made by social workers in relation to their clients that nevertheless do not fit the descriptions of “key treatment decision points” as set out in the medical literature on SDM.

Conclusion: Different decisional topographies have a bearing on participation models, such as SDM models. Hence, if SDM models are promoted as the desired interpretation of participation within an EBP framework, these differences need to be accounted for in order for the recommendations to be theoretically and practically credible.
Missing independence for the Estonian social worker

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Context: The independent social caregiver or the social worker positions did not exist in history before 1995 in Estonia (Tulva 1996). In the 21st century, the main social work "organiser" is the local government. The two laws describe the social welfare obligations, but they do not define who should be the implementer of the specific duties. The Social Welfare Care Act gives a general name "social care (welfare) administration", § 8 defines the Duties of Local Governments in the administration of social care (welfare).

Methods: Accorded to the results of my dissertation, the created administration of social work in local government is involving the four units: 1) the political leadership, 2) the political co-operation, 3) the specialist or non-professional and 4) the political-administrative unit (the Ministry of Social Affairs). The responsibility is shared between administrative and political units and however, the administration is involving the non-professionals, who are professionals in another field or the about non-educated members.

Findings: Therefore, the practice exists, where people from the street are directly related to the client work. However, their main activities conduct in client work — the decision on the allocation of social benefits (from the local government budget) and for using of social services. This practice includes several problems stemming from the profession's independence. Use of the collective style in the decision-making process, there is lack understanding of the ethical code, human rights, human dignity, apparently also lack professional skills and knowledge. There existing the ambivalent position of the employer of the social work field: at the client level has carried out the politicized decision-making process and usually, the social worker is not included in the decision of the social policy of local government.

Conclusion: The Social Affairs Committee could be regarded as a citizenship-based group, their activity must be the limit to solving the strategic matters of social policy.

Decision-making processes in cases involving racialized families: the need to consider ethical and political aspects of child protection workers’ agency

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Context: In the province of Québec (Canada), immigration and intercultural relations have been brought on the front line of public debates sporadically in the past decade. For child protection services particularly, issues regarding adaptation of services, identification of children in need of protection and over-representation of racialized families challenge agencies and child protection workers (CPW) daily. The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate how aspects that influence the decision-making process are tied to wider macro system matters, among other things, political and ethical issues.

Method: A qualitative Grounded Theory study was conducted with CPW assigned in two metropolitan child protection agencies. Two waves of interviews (N=18) and one focus group were done. The analysis yields a description of six aspects that influence the decision-making process with racialized families from the CPW’s point of view: 1) short delays, 2) type of maltreatment at stake, 3) attitudes of racialized families, 4) lack of preparation for this type of work, 5) the different roles of evaluation and 6) tensions that emerge in intercultural encounters.

Findings: Theorization of results shows that from the CPW’s point of view, they navigate those aspects via their own agency, which is mainly based on personal preferences, values and attitudes. The analysis of CPW’s agency under political and ethical lenses indicates that even though the decision-making process with racialized families is tackled with care, the overreliance on personal agency might render the process partial and unfair for racialized families.

Discussion: This presentation concludes with a discussion on ethical issues of universality and variability in decision-making with racialized families and pleads for anti-oppressive frameworks in decision-making research and practice.

Option 4 D: Managing risk and decision making

Meeting the heightened demand of accountability through decision-making tools: a managers’ perspective

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Context: The public sector has been characterised by a constant pressure for accountability. While there are many ways to demonstrate this accountability, social work increasingly relies on the possibilities of decision-making tools to perform this task. In this context, managers are often perceived as proponents of decision-
making tools. However, research draws attention to a more nuanced viewpoint, showing that also managers use their discretion to align with more professional values.

**Methods:** This prompted us to interview managers from Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) services in Flanders (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) to empirically revisit the current state of knowledge of their perspective on and role in the use of decision-making tools for the purposes of accountability.

**Findings:** Our findings indicate that managers accept the need for accountability and see potential benefits in using decision-making tools to assist them in creating it. However, at the same time, these managers also expressed their deepest concern about how the current demand for accountability is fully encapsulated in the logic of the database. According to them, the nature of accountability has become solely bureaucratic, which contradicts with the nature of social work itself.

**Conclusion:** As a result, and from their commitment to frontline professionals and clients who need help, managers developed, and encouraged frontline professionals to develop, strategies of resistance. This resulted in the creation of an organisational environment where managers allowed and even stimulated their frontline professionals not only to talk about and share their concerns in using decision-making tools to demonstrate accountability, but also to create strategies that deviated from governmental procedures. This prompted us to rethink (1) the use of decision-making tools to meet the current heightened accountability demands and (2) the position of managers in this debate as these managers play more and more an important role in social work services.

Planning frequency of inspection of care homes based on risk: a pilot scheme

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**Context:** A revised “Fees and Frequencies” model of inspection will be introduced by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority for Northern Ireland by 2019. In essence, the current requirement to inspect nursing and residential homes in Northern Ireland will reduce from a minimum of two unannounced visits to one, with the proviso of additional inspections more frequently.

**Method:** Deciding the criteria and rationale for more frequent inspections has led RQIA to initiate a project to develop a statistical model for determining the frequency of inspection that relates to a level of risk. This paper will initially outline the policy context for the development of the model before explaining the process of creating the framework at both an organisational and operational level and describing the methodological approach undertaken to develop a multivariate risk model.

**Discussion:** Specific details of the model’s implementation will be discussed (a pilot phase will begin in April 2018) and preliminary findings will be shared. In addition, some initial critique will be advanced about the benefits of this approach to defining risk in the context of regulation of health and social care.

**Conclusion:** This is the first time the N.Ireland regulator RQIA will present on its strategic development in a multi-professional arena.

Revisiting the rule of optimism

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**Context:** The ‘Rule of Optimism’ has been a key feature of the child protection discourse in the UK since it was first used over 30 years ago, and has continued to be a very powerful explanatory device in Serious Case Reviews. Yet despite its longevity it has been subject to very little by the way of critique. This paper seeks to redress that balance and will explore how ‘the rule’ has become an explanatory device, often used to focus attention on social workers behaviour at the expense of an exploration of structural and organizational aspects.

**Methods:** This paper draws on literature, including Serious Case Reviews, back to the original publication by Dingwall et al study, tracing the origins of the rule and exploring whether it can still be regarded as operating in the current climate. Evidence from recent SCRs will be drawn upon to suggest that ‘the rule’ is very much alive. Drawing on the work of Berlant on ‘Cruel Optimism’ ‘the rule’ will be subject to critique, leading to an exploration of the role of optimism. Further, evidence from the author’s grounded theory study of the sense making of child protection will be drawn upon to locate optimism in its practice context.

**Findings:** As an explanatory device, the ‘rule’ has largely been used retrospectively, and can be seen as evidence of hindsight bias in operation, and an over-focus on the behaviour of professionals, in particular social workers, at the expense of addressing structural issues.

**Conclusion:** A cautious approach to optimism requires to be adopted, and critical reflection is a key mechanism for ensuring that social workers are supported in negotiating the delicate balances that are required in working to keep children safe.