

Judgements or Assumptions? The Role of Analysis in Assessing Children and Young People's Needs

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Abstract

Professionals involved in assessing the needs of children and young people are required to make sense of complex information. Judgements may be made intuitively or through more explicit, analytical thinking. Judgements are required in relation to risk and need and will impact on children and young people's lives in the immediate future and ultimately across the lifespan. While there are many demands placed on those developing best practice in assessment, two themes appear consistently from studies of serious case reviews and inspections. The quality of assessments has improved but there is a persistent difficulty with levels and quality of analysis in assessments. Also, there is a repeated failure amongst professionals to pay sufficient attention to what children and young people may be saying about their own needs and experiences. There are tensions between policy and practice in the exercise of analysis and judgement. Neither governance nor good intentions may be sufficient to address current weaknesses in practice and practice can benefit from further study of judgement in child welfare and protection. Contemporary policy and practice developments may be a connecting contributor to ongoing professional failure to analyse and failure to represent the child's lived experience accurately and empathically in assessment.

Keywords: analysis, assessment, judgement, children

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Introduction

Professional judgement is a crucial but contested aspect of child welfare and protection practice. The way in which professionals analyse information in assessments is of great influence and importance. However, relatively little is known of the way in which child welfare and protection professionals actually make judgements in practice. Further consideration of human rationality can provide insight into how best to support professionals in these most difficult judgement tasks. Models of human rationality or thinking have been considered in some depth elsewhere in the child welfare and protection literature (e.g. Hollows, 2003; Munro, 2008; Reder and Duncan, 1999). In this paper, I will explore some key concepts from judgement theory. I will consider their relevance in relation to the voice of the child in assessment and the significance of human rationality on professionals' capacity to make sense of information in assessment in a truly child-centred way. I will argue that a drive for explicit, analytical judgement has cut across existing strengths in the exercise of professional intuition and that effective judgement in child welfare and protection must embrace the potential benefits of intuitive judgement rather than merely seek to avoid the perceived costs.

Visions of human judgement

Traditionally, there has been a distinction drawn between two modes of cognition—analysis and intuition. Strong and often opposing views have been voiced about the predominance or superiority of one or other of these forms of judgement. Analysis has been described as a 'step-by-step, conscious, logically defensible process' (Hammond, 1996, p. 60). Intuition, on the other hand, has generally been identified with unconscious and automated thinking—a somewhat mysterious form of rationality that may be unavoidable but is deeply seated in our emotional functioning. While intuition may be difficult to access and understand, it is far from irrational and is indeed founded on our human ability to use past experiences to guide responses to new situations (Klein, 1998). Like many behaviours (e.g. walking or picking something up), much of our thinking is based on automated routine. Although the results of our thinking may become conscious, the process of thinking remains to a large extent unconscious and inaccessible (Selten, 2001). The tendency in child welfare and protection work has been to see analysis as the superior form of rationality. However, consideration needs to be given to the way in which judgements are *actually* made in child welfare and protection, as opposed to how they *should* be made:

Analytical approaches are not necessarily superior to intuitive ones. They may be based on a false understanding of the situation or on faulty

calculation. Intuitive approaches run the risk that the similarities (to previous experiences), which seem to justify the behaviour, are only superficial ones that hide crucial differences. However, in the case of a lack of understanding, an intuitive approach may be the only available one (Selten 2001, p. 28).

A cognitive continuum

Hammond (1996) sought to reconcile the differences between these two modes of rationality by viewing analysis and intuition not as dichotomous (an ‘either–or’ choice), but as the poles of a wide spectrum of judgement styles. This view challenged the notion of intuition and analysis as rivals and offered an alternative in the concept of a cognitive continuum. At one pole is purely intuitive rationality and at the other purely analytical rationality. Hammond’s model emphasises that humans can (and should) vary the levels of intuition and analysis in their judgement styles, depending on the demands of the judgement task.

Hammond (1996) offered an overview of the way in which the properties of judgement tasks cause different forms of thinking to be employed. Tasks that induce intuitive thinking are those that are characterised by a large number of cues that are quite fallible. For instance, a home visit may present hundreds of cues (body language, smells, a statement of intent) that are all highly fallible in that they may *or may not* be accurate indicators of fact. Intuitive thinking is further induced when these cues appear all at once (rather than sequentially) and need to be defined and measured without the presence of readily applied, explicit rules for judgement. The final element of the judgement task that induces intuitive thinking is that there is only a short period of time to make the judgement. At the other end of the cognitive continuum are the tasks that induce analytical thinking. These present lower numbers of more reliable cues in a sequential manner, there is more time in which to make the judgement and there is a recognised model for organising the judgement.

Human judgement

Good judgement can be likened to a good sense of humour in that it is generally viewed as a good thing and most of us think we possess it. However, the environment in which professionals assess children’s needs is particularly complex and contested and there are challenges in this environment (or ecology) of judgement that require professionals and agencies to pay careful attention to the nature and exercise of professional rationality. A vision of rationality as ‘unbounded’ assumes that, given sufficient resources of time, knowledge and processing power, we can make judgements with certainty (Helm, 2010). This view of rationality is often expressed

through concepts such as maximisation of expected utility, probability theory and Bayesian models (Gigerenzer *et al.*, 1999). However, such a vision of rationality does not seem to fit with the levels of uncertainty that define judgements in child welfare and protection. An alternative view may therefore be more helpful, with rationality as ‘bounded’ by the limitations of the human mind and the structure of the environment in which the mind is operating (Simon, 1955).

Errors of judgement are unavoidable (Hammond, 1996). Judgements may be made by individuals but the *source* of error in judgement may not necessarily lie within the individual themselves. Judgement theories can provide the means for understanding the way in which human rationality is affected by the environment in which professionals operate. I would identify child welfare and protection practice as an environment full of ‘multiple fallible indicators’—cues that might (or might not) be accurate or relevant. For example, a child’s behaviour and discussions with nursery staff may (or may not) suggest parental substance misuse. Child welfare and protection are frequently focused on social phenomena (such as behaviour and belief) and this means that the basis for judgement in such environments must necessarily be subjective, relative and debatable (Van de Luitgaarden, 2009).

It is worth anticipating that professionals can and do make assumptions (as opposed to judgements), whether they are employing intuitive thinking or analytical thinking. Intuition has been viewed with some concern as a source of bias (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) and error in child welfare and protection (Munro, 2008) and attempts have been made to steer practitioners away from this mode of thinking to a more deliberate, conscious and defensible form of analysis (Helm, 2010). However, a bounded model of rationality suggests that simply moving to a more analytical mode of thinking is not necessarily a failsafe (Gigerenzer *et al.*, 1999). For example, even when a practitioner has sufficient time and good levels of information and can access the appropriate texts and talk to significant people, it is still possible to see things from a particular perspective and not countenance other views. The personal–social environments that constitute child welfare and protection practice defy purely analytical thinking because the models (or theories) that are employed (such as attachment theory or motivational theory) are only informal and partially defensible. When the limits of analytical thinking are reached, we fall back on intuition (Hammond, 1996) and the limits to analytical thinking need to be appreciated and acknowledged in policy and practice.

Judgements: conscious and rational?

Analysis has been identified as a weak area in assessment practice and much attention has been paid in the last twenty years to ways of improving

practice in this area. A clearer understanding of the way in which we analyse information may be a useful contribution to improving practice. There has been a broad recognition of the difficulties facing practitioners with analysis. However, attempts to improve the quality of analysis have tended to focus on tighter governance to attend to problems (Munro, 2008; Rose and Barnes, 2006). It would appear that thinking here has been influenced by a vision of rationality as ‘unbounded’ (as it should be) rather than ‘bounded’ (as it is) and policy responses have sought to make practitioners think *as they should* rather than working with the grain of human judgement *as it is*. Equally, a desire to move practitioners towards more analytical forms of thinking may run contrary to the accepted maxims of theories of judgement. In environments that are defined by dense information, limited time for judgement and irreducible levels of uncertainty, intuition is the most effective form of rationality (Hammond, 1996). If a practitioner were to apply conscious, deliberate analytical reasoning within, for example, a quickly evolving home visit to a chaotic family, then the amount and complexity of verbal, emotional and sensory data would quickly overwhelm any attempts at explicit analysis during the visit. While explicit and conscious analytical thinking is also crucial to accurate assessment, we need to pay more, not less, attention to intuition and the way in which our beliefs, values and unconscious thinking may impact on professional judgements.

Since the highly influential ‘Heuristics and Biases’ programme (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), the word ‘intuition’ has been synonymous with ‘error’, ‘bias’ and cognitive shortcuts. This research has supported a persistently negative view of intuition. Influential psychology texts (e.g. Plous, 1993) have done little to dispel this impression that human judgement is inherently flawed and untrustworthy. This is a position on judgement that has influenced many writers considering ways of minimising mistakes in child welfare and protection (Munro, 2008). Research (e.g. Gigerenzer, 1991; Plessner *et al.*, 2007) has now challenged the findings of Tversky and Kahneman through a series of experiments that have questioned the original research paradigms and offered alternatives that can make ‘apparently stable “errors” (of judgement) disappear, reappear and even invert’ (Gigerenzer, 1991, p. 83). Although this more recent research has begun to reassert the validity of intuitive thinking, intuition is still a contested form of rationality within child welfare and protection.

Through well-intentioned moves to control intuition’s worst vagaries, we may actually be cutting right across some of the strongest tools in the cognitive toolbox for allowing professionals the opportunity to gain a clear picture of the meaning of children and young people’s experiences to them. Assessment is interpretive (or hermeneutic) and subjective by nature. Working with children and young people in assessment doubles the levels of subjectivity, as practitioners are not just presenting their own perceptions, but are actually being asked to present their perceptions

of the child's perceptions (Van de Luitgaarden, 2009). In a professional drive for objectivity, we may have unwittingly heightened the likelihood of professionals moving away from children and young people's views and explanations in their analysis. In doing so, the child moves from being the subject of their assessment to being an object in their assessment.

Child death reviews in the UK operate within a societal context that can make it hard to move away from a culture of blame and a focus on improving practice through tighter control of individual practice and potential error (Munro, 2010). Learning from child death reviews is learning from 'worst case scenarios' and has resulted in a focus on improving practice through policy and procedure (Rose and Barnes, 2006). For example, of 182 recommendations from twenty-four serious case reviews, 171 recommendations related to policy, procedures and resources. Only eleven recommendations related to the people doing the analysis in assessment (Hyland and Holme, 2009). It can therefore be argued that support and encouragement are required throughout the system to give further consideration to the way in which human judgement operates within an environment such as child welfare and protection.

Engagement with children and young people

Failure to engage with children in assessment has been identified as a significant failing in practice (e.g. Cleaver *et al.*, 2004; Holland, 2004; Laming, 2003). Such failures are often blamed on a lack of time and current systems emphasising the importance of bureaucratic and administrative tasks (Leveridge, 2002). However, there are other potential reasons for non-engagement that also need to be considered. The social constructionist perspective of children and context of childhood has helped to highlight the political disempowerment of children and failure to recognise children's agency (Turnbull and Fattore, 2008). Routine failure to listen and the predominance of adult concerns for children's safety have diminished their levels of autonomy (Parton and O'Kane, 2000). There is also recognition that practitioners may lack key skills and knowledge required to engage meaningfully with children and young people (Biehal *et al.*, 1995; Schofield, 1998). While these issues have been explored elsewhere, I would seek to comment further here on the impact of human judgement on representation of children and young people's views and experiences.

Theories of human judgement may help to explain and understand professional difficulties in engaging meaningfully with children and young people in assessment. Theories of task and cognitive structure (Hammond, 1996) suggest that, where cues are multiple and fallible and time is in tight supply, more intuitive forms of thinking are employed. Practitioners may therefore spend a good deal of their time in assessment

making sense of information in intuitive, unconscious ways. Intuitive thinking is understood to be founded on learning from previous experiences (Plessner *et al.*, 2007). We should therefore be extremely curious about the nature of the experiences that practitioners are using to inform their intuitive thinking. Intuition is formed upon personal experiences and on processes of social development and acculturation that provide rules and beliefs to guide judgement (Kruglanski and Gigerenzer, 2011). In the field of child welfare and protection, professionals are expected to deal with the normally abnormal and the empirical evidence is often scant. When working with circumstances and behaviours that are the exception to the norm, learning based on experiences of normative human behaviour and development may provide inaccurate models and templates for thinking. Learning from professional experience and absorbing the professional maxims and beliefs of others play a crucial part in developing intuitive reasoning. Understanding those factors that influence our intuitive judgements about children's agency should therefore be given greater priority. Without clear recognition of the validity of children and young people's views, practitioners may fail to recognise the need to draw on these more intuitive and therefore less easily verbalised ways of thinking. Logical, explicit analysis then trumps intuition by minimising or ignoring those aspects of the child's views that appear to the worker to be less reliable or competent. If intuitive reasoning is naturally induced by the features of the judgement task, then there is a need for approaches to engagement with abused and neglected children and young people that seek to understand intuition rather than eradicate it.

Examples of difficulty with children's views

We all look at something and see different things. The subjective nature of assessment requires practitioners to understand and accept that assessment in child welfare and protection is an interpretive activity and that no single objective 'truth' can be defined. However, it is human nature to seek certainty and, in situations in which little certainty can be afforded, it is possible that practitioners may settle for an illusion of certainty rather than the reality of uncertainty. This may have consequences for our capacity to 'have regard' for the views of children and young people.

Is it possible that the workings of human judgement might not naturally and automatically require us to think about the child's views? In a teaching session that I was facilitating, a social worker described a situation in which a child's father had been excluded from the family home. The child had been heard to say 'where's daddy?' a number of times. Having concluded that the child was missing her father, efforts were made to re-establish some form of contact. Only after this worker had spent time and developed trust and understanding with the child did it become clear that she needed

to know where ‘daddy’ was because only then could she keep herself safe. What had happened for the professionals in this case was that the searching ended for most people when the solution was reached that his was about a child’s need for their parent. Alternative explanations were never considered. Moving towards intuitive rationality and ‘satisficing’ common sense (Simon, 1955) in this case meant that practitioners were operating on too low a threshold of ‘good-enough’ solutions and the majority of practitioners involved failed to sustain their analysis long enough to explore alternative hypotheses.

Satisficing judgements (Simon, 1955) make effective use of available information by ensuring that not all possible solutions have to be considered: the searching can stop once an aspirational level has been reached and a ‘good-enough’ solution has been found. This theory would suggest that satisficing is an inherent feature of bounded rationality. As we cannot alter this fact, then we must support and prepare child welfare and protection workers to ensure that children’s views, experiences and explanatory models are given sufficient weight and attention in judgement. It is my contention that bounded rationality may influence judgements as heuristics (cognitive ‘rules of thumb’) for searching and ceasing to search for meaning may be built on priorities and experiences that reflect the adult practitioner’s needs and not necessarily the child’s needs and priorities. Such thinking may not always recognise the wisdom of children and do not always access the evidence base in terms of their needs and wishes.

The wisdom of children

When practitioners do seek and gather the views of children, they may not always quite know what to do for the best with their findings. Adult practitioners’ views tend to take precedence within analysis (Cleaver *et al.*, 2004) and there is a persistent and powerful unspoken value that children are not expected to know what is good for them (McLeod, 2008). The inquiry into thirty-five years of sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children in the Q family echoes a key finding in a great number of contemporary inquiries and serious case reviews:

Professionals failed to listen and consider the situation from the child’s perspective: they did not see the children and, where possible, talk to them to find out what they thought and felt about the issues; and then to take action based on this information. Too often professionals took the word of parents at face value without considering the effects on the child (Cantrill, 2009, p. 19).

Although listening to children is required by agencies and embedded in practice (Cantrill, 2009), contemporary frameworks are acknowledged to be hermeneutic, that is ‘concerned with interpretation’. We know that, no

matter how much we are told that certainty and truth are fool's gold in such assessments, it does not reduce the allure of certainty. Much analysis appears to be flawed and biased towards the superimposition of adult views over children's views. Consideration might therefore be given to supporting practitioners to move away from a view of analysis as *interpretation* of children's needs and experiences and to develop dialogue and analysis *with* children and young people in their own assessments.

Lord Laming suggested that it is not just 'structures that are the problem, but the skills of the staff who work in them' (Laming, 2003, p. 6). The Progress Report recommended that assessments, above all, should 'involve direct contact with the child' (Laming, 2009, p. 29). Structures must create not only the time for this contact, but the appropriate environment for practitioners to analyse the information that their contact provides them with in an effective and child-centred way. It is perfectly feasible for any professional to have direct contact with a child or young person and still fail utterly to gain any real understanding of what that person feels, needs or wants. Direct contact is no guarantee of effective practice if it does not contribute to effective analysis and informed judgement. Certain features of the organisation affect the prevailing ways of thinking; this includes the tools provided, training offered and time made available for thinking (Hamm, 1988). More effective engagement with children may therefore require approaches that develop intuitive reasoning through child-centred practice tools and the development of insight through observation and reflection.

Frameworks for practice and assessment (Department of Health, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2004) emphasise the crucial need to gain children's views through a variety of creative and informed methods of connecting and understanding. The importance of triangulation in assessment is understood so that taking different perspectives and using a variety of methods form part of the activity of building the picture of the child's world. Is it possible to do all of the above and still not allow children and young people's views and beliefs to take sufficient precedence in analysis?

The evidence base from children

The combination of evidence based practice grounded in knowledge with finely balanced, professional judgement is the foundation for effective practice with children and families (Department of Health, 2000, p. 16).

When considering the evidence base for practice, there appears to be a strong focus on the evidence base that flows from research. This is entirely right and appropriate, as best practice in assessment and intervention must build on a foundation of empirical evidence of what works best and in what situations. However, in attempts to achieve consistency with the wider body

of research, we may lose the element of connection with children and young people's unique experiences.

There seems to be an unspoken value impacting in practice: children are not wise, adults are. We may listen to what children say but we seem to have great difficulty in hearing what they say, that is, being able to understand what is being said and integrate it into our own cognitive and emotional mapping. Different professional groups hold differing opinions about how to represent the views of the child in assessment (Horwath, 2007) with the potential for group norms and pressures to perpetuate the predominance of adult views and opinions over those of children and young people in assessments.

The evidence base for assessment has been described as drawing on theory, research, policy and practice (Department of Health, 2000). Current policy and practice developments appear to be predicated on a view of human rationality as essentially unbounded (Helm, 2010). There appears to be a persistent belief that humans should be able to make complex analytical judgements effectively in child welfare and protection if only the right training and tools can be found and employed effectively. However, this is a view of judgement as it *should be*, not as it actually is. The reality is that practitioners make use of theory and research only as far as the boundaries of time and resources will allow, often resulting in practitioners confining their use of theory to specific concepts and maxims (Fook *et al.*, 1997) rather than what might be considered 'best evidence'. The evidence base should include children's own explanations and interpretations; however, rationalist adult models persist and children continue to be viewed as passive recipients of services rather than social actors in their own right (McLeod, 2008). Children's own perspectives are therefore missing in practice analysis (Winter, 2006) and in the research literature.

Analysis, 'making sense of information', is a crucial element of the process of assessment. However, it is also an activity that practitioners feel ill-prepared for (Cleaver *et al.*, 2004) and is often a weak area of child welfare and protection practice (Ofsted, 2008). While workers are encouraged and corralled into making more analytical judgements, the nature of the environment in which child welfare and protection decisions are made means that analytical thinking may be difficult to achieve and may even be a mismatch of the kind of judgement style required in this environment (Hammond, 1996; Helm, 2010).

Environments that contain high numbers of possible but uncertain cues have been shown to invoke more intuitive ways of thinking, while lower numbers of more reliable indicators require a more analytical style of thinking to be applied. Child welfare and protection is a socially constructed domain of activity and is therefore the realm of the subjective, the interpretive and the debatable (Van de Luitgarden, 2009). Theory employed in such work is most likely to be informal and therefore both malleable and contestable. In such an environment, what must practitioners do to have the best chance of making sense of information? To avoid many of the

known potential errors of reasoning, workers are encouraged to share their analysis with others. Supervision has become recognised as a crucial tool in ensuring that workers explore a number of possible explanations and interpretations (Reder and Duncan, 1999) and do not form fixed ideas about possible explanations at too early a stage in their analysis (Helm, 2010; Munro, 2008; Scott, 1998). The powerful nature of human confirmational tendency makes this check a necessary but perhaps rather ineffective tool and further practice developments must recognise that supervision is not a panacea. Good, effective supervision can only be one tool in a broad selection of practice supports to manage the complex task of judgement in child welfare and protection more effectively.

Practitioners may make sense of information alone. Insight may come as the final report is being compiled or it may arrive as the practitioner is driving home. Practitioners may make sense of information with other people. The use of peer and line management supervision requires the practitioner to make their thinking explicit to others and, by doing so, requires them to make their reasoning explicit to themselves. One area of practice that lags behind in analysis is our ability, capacity and motivation to make sense of information alongside the children and young people whose needs we are assessing:

Possibly the single most significant practice failing throughout the majority of the serious case reviews—the failure of all professionals to see the situation from the child’s perspective and experience; to see and speak to the children; to listen to what they said, to observe how they were and to take serious account of their views in supporting their needs (Ofsted, 2008, p. 18).

The dictionary definition of ‘judgement’ is commonly framed around the notion of wise decisions. There are recognised difficulties in making judgements in child welfare and protection, and the literature (e.g. Munro, 2008; Reder and Duncan, 1999; Vincent, 2010) testifies (albeit with hindsight) to the low levels of wisdom demonstrated in some professional judgements. Current child welfare and protection systems may be criticised for failing to do the job that children themselves want the systems to do (Scottish Executive, 2002) and the following section will consider some of the factors that may have contributed to the current low levels of activity and skill in engaging with children and young people to make sense of information in assessment.

Potential barriers to meaningful engagement with children

I have identified that human judgement in child welfare and protection is frequently intuitive in nature. Attempts to move practitioners to more analytical modes of reasoning are likely to be unsuccessful and even

dangerous if the worker finds their mode of thinking at odds with the features of the ecology for judgement. In particular, environments that are rich in contested cues and short on time for thinking are not compatible with more analytical forms of thinking. While I have focused on human reasoning, it can be seen that there are many interacting influences that need to be considered. The following influences may therefore be worthy of further discussion in their own right.

Hindsight bias has been identified in inquiry reports that have identified the 'right' answer in a way that may have not been possible at the time of the practice in question (Munro, 2002). Although child welfare and protection are an area of work commonly defined by uncertainty, there is an enduring allure to finding the 'right' answer and we recognise that the malleability of many psychological theories, alongside the human tendency to deviate very little from our original 'anchor' hypothesis (Kahneman *et al.*, 1982), may produce bias and error in analysis. Pressure to achieve higher levels of certainty (however illusory) may impact on professionals' capacity and motivation to develop key meaningful relationships. Before the task of analysis can truly be shared with children, practitioners must understand children's non-verbal (or intuitive) reasoning and value its contribution to the ecology of judgement.

A rush to protective action and rigidity in response to the attempts of children and young people to speak in confidence may have resulted in a child welfare and protection system that is failing to provide children and young people with the levels of participation and control that they desire (Baldwin, 2000; Daniel and Vincent, 2004). A desire to enhance analysis in assessments has fallen prey to the mantra of measuring what is measurable. Because intuition is hard to access, it is therefore hard to quantify. Intuition has become viewed as inherently flawed/untrustworthy. Systems appear to be gearing up for practitioners to understand intuition only as a source of error and to ensure that they move to deep analysis as quickly as possible thereafter. Those who denounce intuition never mention 'the fragility of analysis which can lead to striking costly errors within the carefully thought out systems designed to remove intuitive cognition' (Hammond, 1996, p. 90).

The ecology of judgement

Judgement theory demonstrates that thinking is bounded by the limits of human processing power. It has also been demonstrated that the features of the judgement task and the ecology or environment in which the judgement is made are crucial elements of human judgement. Having considered visions of rationality, I have examined the impact of current practice on the capacity of professionals to meaningfully interpret and present children's thoughts and experiences in assessment. In this final section, I will

suggest a number of areas that are worthy of further consideration in relation to developing and enhancing child welfare and protection practice.

Worker

Professionals working with limited amounts of time, understanding and certainty will be employing predominantly intuitive judgement. Practitioners therefore need to have appropriate experiences upon which to base their judgements. 'Life experiences' (whatever they may be for an individual) should not be assumed to be sufficient learning. Post-qualifying training and development should to be focused on critical reflection as a key means of employing intuitive learning and developing explicit and conscious understanding of experiences. Practitioners need a clear and confident grasp of theory to make the required movement between intuition and analysis without giving predominance to adult views and explanations over those of children and young people. The client-centred approaches common to most social work training may need to be complemented by attention to the skills of debate and dialectics required to sustain and develop judgement through open and explicit dialogue (Reder and Duncan, 1999). As workers move towards more analytical modes of thinking, a comprehensive and critical understanding of guiding theories becomes crucial in forming a judgement and in recognising when the limits of analytical thinking have been reached.

Supervisor

Supervisors play a vital role in ensuring that practitioners appropriately match their style of thinking to the features of the judgement task. Intuition and analysis need to be applied appropriately and supervision should motivate workers to question their own views and interpretations, seek disconfirming evidence and test their hypotheses. If we consider the combination of implicit judgements about children (such as the unwise or untrustworthy child) with the power of the confirmational bias (Plous, 1993; Scott, 1998; Sheppard, 1995), then it is a distinct possibility that somewhere in the unconscious thinking of professionals may lie the seeds of inevitable error in our judgements about what children can tell us about their own needs, views and experiences.

When the limits of analytical thinking are reached, the practitioner must begin to draw on intuitive thinking (and vice versa). 'Just how far such movement will go depends on what the circumstances, including supervisors and colleagues, will allow' (Hammond, 1996, p. 155). Practitioners also need emotional support to be able to 'have regard' to the views of the child and supervision is crucial to the effective containment of emotion. It has been explained that intuition is an experiential system of learning and workers need to develop their learning through critical

reflection. Although the perception persists in some circles that ‘common sense’ and ‘life experience’ may equip someone for work in child welfare and protection, the research thoroughly disproves this simplistic view and front line management plays a crucial part in the interface between individual rationality and the wider ecology of judgement. A fuller understanding of theories of human judgement should facilitate more effective supervision. Recognition of the cognitive challenges inherent in analysis may inform supervisory practice and reinforce rather than reduce the potency of children and young people’s voices in assessment.

Organisation

There are significant challenges in creating an environment within which the child’s voice can be truly heard and understood. Training in child development and communication are prerequisites for effective child-centred analysis and it is of deep concern that training and development budgets continue to face reductions in the face of wider resource shortages. There is a challenge to be tackled in ensuring that children ‘have the microphone’ when it comes to planning and delivering CWP services. As adults, we tend to keep our hand on the microphone to be in control of who says what and when. We need to consider the possibility that it is something more deep-seated than simply a lack of time or expertise that prevents practitioners more readily handing the microphone to children and young people in assessment. Structure and culture have a highly significant impact on judgement and child-centred analysis should be practised *because* of agency cultures rather than *in spite of* agency cultures.

New approaches

Many of the messages emerging from this article have been iterated before in consideration of related themes. While there is recognition that the required changes are not easily established, there is opportunity for change in the way we learn from failures in the system. Learning from serious case reviews, significant case reviews in Scotland, has tended to focus on the causal links between failures of care and individual error. The Social Care Institute for Excellence proposes a model for reviews (Fish *et al.*, 2008) that may provide a useful refocusing away from continued unsuccessful (and perhaps counterproductive) attempts to control ‘errant individuals’ (Munro, 2010, p. 1140) to a more effective way of viewing errors of judgement within the ecology that shaped individual rationality. The systems approach potentially provides a naturalistic perspective on judgement and decision making that allows for consideration of how judgements are actually made rather than how they *should be made*. Research into the way in which child welfare and protection judgements are made is remarkably scant given

the scale of endeavour and the extreme consequences of failures of judgement in this field. While considerable research exists in other fields, there remains a difficulty with dissemination and cross-fertilisation and this is no substitute for research focused on child welfare and protection.

Conclusion

Failing to engage meaningfully with children and young people may result in professional analysis that is formed upon a partial and flawed evidence base. Both analytical and intuitive thinking have their limits. Analytical thinking can become overwhelmed by the complexity of the judgement task, resulting in ‘assessment paralysis’ (Reder and Duncan, 1999). At the other end of the continuum, intuition can be an inaccurate guide, resulting in ‘extinction by instinct’ (Langley, 1995). Intuitive analysis is the form of thinking most likely to be required of child welfare and protection professionals. Through ‘satisficing’, it is possible to come to conclusions quickly and without considering all possible solutions. This kind of recognition-primed decision making (Klein, 1998) will be predominantly based on normative adult experiences. To ensure that searching for other explanations does not stop too quickly, professionals need support and training to be able to recognise the validity of children’s explanatory models and represent them faithfully in analysis:

That’s the problem with those people (professionals), they don’t want to believe the truth, they just want to believe the easiest side, the side that is ... the simplest basically. They don’t want to hear the truth because the truth is so much harder to understand and so much longer than a lie about the truth (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006, p. 103).

Children and young people have clearly identified that professionals fail to really listen, not because of a lack of time, but because they appear to focus on adults’ views and protect themselves from the difficult nature of what they are being told. Practitioners also demonstrated a limited repertoire of responses when faced with children’s views (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). Resources may indeed be limited but responses need not be and professionals need to have confidence to begin interventions with a clear understanding of the child’s needs and experiences. An improved understanding of intuition provides an important counterbalance to the current focus on policy and procedure as means of promoting child-centred practice.

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