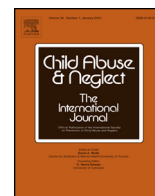


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Systemic barriers to effective utilization of decision making tools in child protection practice



Ravit Alfandari*

The London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Social Policy, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 August 2016

Received in revised form

18 December 2016

Accepted 20 February 2017

Keywords:

Child protection

Decision making

Professional judgment

Systems approach

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research was designed to evaluate the extent to which a national reform in Israeli child protection decision making committees was achieving its aim to strengthen professional judgment through introducing a new standard tools package into practice.

Twenty-one case studies of families referred to the committee were investigated and followed up after six months. Data were collected through interviews with social workers, field observations of the committees' discussions and document review. Using a systems approach as a conceptual framework, everyday practice was studied within its organizational context. A key finding of the research was a very limited utilization of the tools in practice. Evidence showed no advanced performance in the few cases where the tools were used, and that when they were used they mainly operated to record customary practice. Follow up data provided limited evidence of improvement in the safety and well-being of vulnerable children. The analysis revealed several systemic factors that interfered with the tools being fully and successfully implemented, including pressure of workloads, practitioners' inadequate skills, limited professional support, and an organizational culture that discouraged sound practice. The research directs attention to the organizational changes needed in order to enhance the provision of effective help for children and families.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The process of identifying needs and delivering successful help to children living in detrimental family circumstances, relies on the accuracy and soundness of practitioners' decision making (DePanfilis & Girvin, 2005). In the field of child protection practitioners have to make decisions and act under extremely complex conditions. Their work environment is characterized by intrinsic uncertainties and ambiguities which are impossible to eradicate completely (Munro, 2011). Enhancing practitioners' judgment and reasoning is a problem that continues to be of major political importance and the subject of considerable empirical investigation (Bartelink, Van Yperen, & Ten Berge, 2015; IMSSSA, 2014; Munro, 2011). Contemporary policymaking efforts to improve the quality of intervention decisions tend to take a more technical, rational approach, and concentrate on introducing artifacts and tools into practice (Rycus & Hughes, 2003; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Munro, 2011). The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of these approaches in the Israeli context, where a national reform in the decision making framework of formal committees, called Planning, Intervention and Evaluation Committees, had recently been initiated. At the heart of the reform is a new standard tools package designed to promote transparency, consistency, and rigor throughout all stages of the decision making process (IMSSSA, 2004a, 2009). The systems

* Present address: 5 Anilevich Street, Herzliya, 4630217, Israel.
E-mail address: ravit103@gmail.com

approach adopted in this study examined ways of working under this reform in the organizational context, in order to explore the influence of the work environment and culture on decision making practice and policy outcomes. This is an issue of insufficient empirical focus (López, Fluke, Benbenishty, & Knorth, 2015; Shlonsky, 2015).

1.1. Progress in improving professional judgment

Historically, clinical judgment and decision making procedures in child protection practice have largely relied on intuition, case studies, and professional experience (Hughes & Rycus, 2007; Rycus & Hughes, 2003). However, growing interest in the ways people make decisions in real-world situations has led researchers to question the rigor of intuitive decision strategies. Following the seminal work of Simon (1956) and his idea of ‘bounded rationality’, the literature contains extensive study of human cognitive shortcuts or heuristics. Researchers have described how heuristics lead to systematic errors or biases in the decision making process (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Of particular relevance to child protection are availability bias, fundamental attribution error, confirmation bias, and hindsight bias, all of which can result in partial use of information, insufficient critical thinking and failure to consider alternative views, which may reduce the quality of decisions (Gambrell, 2008; Gambrell & Shlonsky, 2000; Munro, 1999, 2008a; Saltiel, 2015). Research suggests ways in which practitioners can “educate their intuition” using analytical skills (Philips, Klein, & Sieck, 2004). Beginning with the pioneering study by Johnson and L’Esperance (1984), who developed a statistical predictive model for maltreatment recurrence, decision aids, guidelines, checklists, and formal risk assessment tools have become tightly woven into the fabric of child protection practice in the English speaking world, as, more recently, have computerized systems (Bartelink et al., 2015; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Hughes & Rycus, 2007; Peckover, Hall, & White, 2009; Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005). These technologies and tools were expected to promote decision making processes that are more reliable, more accurate, and less biased than the clinical judgment of individual workers (Hughes & Rycus, 2007).

Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence from field studies has led researchers to take a less optimistic view of the contribution of decision making aids to facilitating good practice. Their utility has been found to be inconsistent, and their effectiveness compromised by numerous factors. The structured tools used by many child welfare agencies often demonstrate poor reliability and validity, have not been empirically tested, and are concerned with family dysfunction while ignoring existing family strengths (Bartelink et al., 2015; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Rycus & Hughes, 2003; Wald & Woolverton, 1990). Several studies conducted in the UK, US and Australia show that formal tools are not used as intended in day-to-day practice. For instance, workers have been found to complete the decision making instruments after making decisions based on personal clinical judgment, deliberately manipulate tools to achieve wanted outcomes, and have an extended habit of non-completion of key information (Bell, Shaw, Sinclair, Patricia, & Rafferty, 2007; English & Pecora, 1994; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Hughes & Rycus, 2007; Lyle & Graham, 2000). Furthermore, an accumulated body of research reveals that software programs can have negative and disrupting effects on professional reasoning processes and restrict flexible responses to individual real-life cases (Bell et al., 2007; Peckover et al., 2009). Most notable however, is evidence of the demanding and time consuming nature of tools and technologies, at the expense of practitioners’ direct work with families (Munro, 2011; Saltiel, 2015). This study expands the debate about the ability of technical solutions to enhance practitioners’ decision making, by drawing attention to the organizational systems within which they are implemented.

1.2. The Israeli reform

Planning, Intervention and Evaluation Committees (PIECs) operate within Social Services Departments (SSDs) of all local municipalities in Israel, and serve as the key framework for consultation, assessment and decision making concerning care plans for vulnerable children and their families (IMSSSA, 2004a). These forums consist of professionals from social, education and health services, as well as family members. They are chaired by qualified senior social workers called coordinators (IMSSSA, 2004a). Family social workers are responsible for preparing cases for the PIECs, implementing decisions, and following up outcomes (IMSSSA, 2004b). Heavy workloads and ‘firefighting’ as a way of working (i.e. short-term solutions in urgent situations), are enduring detrimental characteristics of the SSDs (Ofek, 2009).

The tools package introduced by the reform translates policymakers’ conceptions of the core principles that underpin sound decision making and effective service delivery into tangible, straightforward working procedures. The discussion here focuses on the intellectual dimension of decision making, whereas research evidence regarding the working relationships of practitioners with both children and parents, in light of the reform is reported in the Author’s own (2015, 2016). The reform was designed to stimulate systematic analytical reasoning throughout the decision making process and specifically tackle some shared pitfalls in practice, including a lack of sufficient information about family circumstances or a robust analysis of its meanings and implications, an unsystematic deliberation process, and very limited follow-up of the committees’ decisions (Dolev, Benbenishty, & Timer, 2001). The innovation of the tools package is two-fold: firstly, it sets the child protection process according to organized and scheduled working procedures, and secondly, it requires practice in all stages to be documented. The package includes four standardized tools:

- The Tool for Collecting Information, designed to support the processes of gathering information about family life, analyzing it, and formulating a standardized family assessment report, called a ‘psycho-social report’ (PSR);

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936047>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936047>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)