



# Reflecting on decision-making – practice gains

*Tony Stanley reviews the systems of decision-making in social work*

*Note – The study on which the following article is based has received approval from the Human Ethics Committee (Canterbury University) and Child, Youth and Family's Research Access Committee.*

## **Introduction**

Child protection social workers routinely make decisions that can have a major impact in the lives of children and their families (Howe, 2000). The act of decision-making in Aotearoa/New Zealand by social workers has been criticised through media representations of tragic incidents involving children and young people. Thus, the practice decision to act or not to act in a particular way has been portrayed as ineffective and at worst negligent. This practice issue, decision-making, is beginning to be found in the social work literature (DePanfillis and Zuravin, 1999; O'Sullivan, 1999).

This paper reviews this literature and argues that social workers are a central agent in early case decisions. The studies cited in this paper all draw on the practice experience of practitioners to highlight the centrality of this involvement. The literature is largely international; however, this is valuable for statutory social workers in Aotearoa/New Zealand because of the paucity of local research in how we form, review and operationalise early practice decisions. It has

been argued elsewhere that to understand and make sense of decision-making in practice will lead to an informed policy/practice interface (O'Sullivan, 1999). The paper sets a context for local practice, reviews the practice decision literature and draws professional practice issues out of this literature to argue that social workers are a central agent in case decision-making.

## **The New Zealand practice context**

In the Child, Youth and Family practice reality there are multiple decision-making forums in operation. From group supervision models, individual supervision and case reviews to peer debriefing, social workers are active agents in the decision-making process of early casework. The Family Group Conference (FGC) model of decision-making is used in Aotearoa/New Zealand when the child or young person is found to be in need of care and protection (Connolly, 1994). However, before convening this forum, social workers are required to form a belief (to decide) that the child or young person is in need of care and protection.

Child, Youth and Family's submission to the Brown Report (2000) stated that the work of social workers in forming practice decisions is complex. The Department's submission went on to discuss:

*'...the difficult professional judgements that social workers are required to make every day in assessing risk and in making safe decisions that are in keeping with good practice and the principles of the Act'* (Brown, 2000: 51).

Departmental social workers make over 15,000 placement decisions each year (Brown, 2000). The literature in this area is therefore useful for social workers to reflect on, in terms of their practice and professional development.

The body of literature in Aotearoa/New Zealand that addresses decision-making in child protection is largely focused on the FGC process (Connolly, 1994; Gilling, Patterson and Walker, 1995; McKenzie, 1996) and participation by clients in child protection (Maxwell, Robertson, Thom and Walker, 1995). A second area of literature has focused on the non-statutory area of child welfare in relation to care and protection (Munford et al, 1998; Thompson, 2001). There is a body of literature that covers the contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand child protection system (Pearman, 1995), child protection practice and policy in the voluntary sector (Thompson, 2001), and the experiences of women working for Child, Youth and Family (Wolstoneholme, 1999).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the risk discourse emerged as a central aspect in child protection decision-making, in response to calls by both social workers and community for a safer, more consistent social work practice (Smith, 1995). Smith (1995) argued for a practice framework of analysis that was consistent in the field and in social worker supervision. The practice context of Aotearoa/New Zealand adopted this consensus approach to risk assessment in the mid-1990s (Smith, 1995) to assist in decision-making practices.

## **The international literature**

The literature on social work decisions highlights a relationship between organisational factors and decisions made by social workers (Cameron and Wilson-Salt, 1995; Cuzzi, Holden, Grob and Bazer, 1993; Schofield, 1997). The variables discussed in the literature include time restraints, societal expectations, legal frameworks, professional supervision, workload and management culture (Munro, 1996, 1999). In addition, Drury-Hudson (1999) argued that social workers' cognitive structure and schema, their attitudes, beliefs and values, and the characteristics of the service users affect the process of decision-making. Jones (1993) also suggests that parent and carer attitudes and responses will feature as a variable in the decision-making process. Other such variables

include the age of the children, the history of family involvement with the agency and the family's socio-economic situation (Jones, 1993). The interaction

between carer/parent and child has also been explored in research as a variable in the decision-making process (Holland, 2000) as has the social worker's professional experience and present position (Banach, 1998).

Barnes and Chand (2000) argued from the UK practice context that there is little policy or guidance in determining early care and protection assessments. Their study draws on the work of Parton (1997, cited in Barnes et al) and Scott (1998, cited in Barnes et al) to argue that social workers can be uncertain about a course of action because defining 'child abuse' is still problematic. The authors argued that shared definitions such as 'neglect' will assist in decision-making consistency. Barnes et al argued that social workers need to consider the theories and values that underpin practice decisions. The

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authors used a case study in their article and effectively argued that the social worker's value positions influence practice decisions. Thus, supervision is an area where such issues can be discussed and reflected on.

A recent UK doctoral study (Kelly, 2000) found that an explicit understanding of the decision-making process and its multi-faceted nature will enhance social workers' ability to be reflective in their practice. Kelly's research considered psychological theories and concepts of risk in terms of how these can provide a descriptive and interpretive evaluation of decision-making processes in child protection practices. She found that decisions bounded by objective principles in the British legislation (Children's Act 1989) operated alongside subjective constructions held by the social workers. Kelly used documentary analysis of child death reviews and a selection of ongoing case studies in her research. She found that reflective practice can be assisted by an understanding of the decision-making processes in practice.

DePanfillis and Zuravin (2001) argued that risk assessments were developed to reduce inconsistency in decision-making. They argued that research to date has focused on practice decisions in the areas of placement and safety of children and young people. The authors argued that attention to decisions in other areas will assist overall case practice.

Burke (1997), in an earlier UK study, argued that cases where 'risk' is an inherent quality require focused supervision, because the concept of risk has multiple meanings in the practice context. This qualitative research finding showed that social workers resolved more 'risk' type cases through supervision than other means. Munro

(1996; 1999) reviewed 45 British child death enquiries and commented that social workers are slow at revising judgements reached in their practice. She found in this research that assessments of risk made by child welfare staff are based on a narrow range of evidence, and argued that revisiting case analysis is a sign of sound practice.

*'Judgements and decisions can only be the "best" on the available evidence. As the case progresses and new information and ideas are received, judgements have to be reviewed and sometimes changed'* (Munro, 1996: 796).

Both Munro and Burke highlight the value in sound supervision in order to resolve practice dilemmas that may affect decision-making.

However, decision-making in child protection has been labelled inconsistent in the literature

(Rossi, Schuerman and Budde, 1999). Rossi et al interviewed 27 senior child protection specialists and 103 social workers during 1994-95. This empirical study showed there was a wide variety of

decision-making outcomes when social workers considered the same case examples. One limitation to this research is that these social workers were discussing case vignettes provided to them by the researchers, and thus an emotional distance from practice was noted. These findings are important as the researchers concluded that variety in decision outcomes is an issue for the practice context. Other researchers have commented that decision-making in child protection is affected by participatory practice (Bell, 1999) as conflicting paradigms may operate (for example, reductionist paradigms of mental health that focus on an aspect of a person's functioning contrasted with holistic theories of child protection). Bell studied four teams of social

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workers (n=22) from local authority teams undertaking care and protection assessments. Using a semi-structured format, the researcher found that case decisions were formed before case conferences and this can make partnership working more difficult, as the care and protection social worker's role was at times unclear to the families. This study also argued that the supervision process was useful for 63% of the social workers in resolving this type of practice situation.

Portwood (1998) surveyed 323 professionals with respect to their constructions of child abuse. This study showed that a personal history of abuse and one's parenting experiences had little effect on defining abuse. What Portwood (1998) found was that professional work with children and young people (for example, the training, support and role of social workers and teachers) had a more significant impact on defining abuse. The authors concluded that professional, not personal, contact with abuse had a more significant effect on defining abuse. This is interesting in light of Trotter's (2002) research finding that social workers who spend more time defining their role with families and colleagues found that they had better outcomes overall in their practice. Trotter interviewed 50 child protection social workers and 282 family members involved in the Victorian child protection system. This research showed that when social workers used their skills of engagement and clarity in their role as a care and protection social worker, the clients were more satisfied with the outcomes.

***Significance of this literature for social work practice***

In reviewing the decision-making literature to date I agree with O'Sullivan (1999) that it contains

a number of practice benefits. In summary, these include:

- : using theory to inform decision-making
- : using the supervision context to review case decisions, value positions and the forming of these decisions
- : assisting in the introduction of new frameworks of practice, as these are continually introduced
- : sharpening awareness of practice that will result in improved service delivery for clients, social workers and the wider community
- : managing power relationships safely and ethically through a consideration of practice decisions, which can otherwise can be oppressive
- : enhancing training, staff development and practice through reflective models of social work.

In addition, the cultural milieu of Aotearoa/New Zealand is specific to us, and thus engagement with our social work practice around decision-making will add to our understanding of care and protection practice.

***Conclusion***

It has been argued that reviewing the available literature on decision-making highlights a number of professional areas of practice that social workers are engaged in daily. The professional issues that were highlighted in this review include the use of risk assessment tools, skills and knowledge held and developed by social workers, the values that social workers hold, the supervision context, participatory practice and theory in decision-making. However, these are not discrete areas of practice; they operate within a professional framework enabling review,

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questions and challenges in the ongoing development of our practice.

Decisions are made in a context of uncertainty because our work in child protection is more complicated today (Brown, 2000). The literature shows that having a reflective style of practice supported by effective supervision assists social workers to undertake the complex tasks of child protection social work. This paper has argued that decision-making practices by social workers in care and protection is an area of the literature that can assist in developing a reflective approach to practice. The process of decision-making is not linear and, as Munro (1996) has argued, such a review and revisiting of practice decisions will assist social workers to effectively plan for the course of action they design with clients. Professional decisions are formulated in our practice daily; how we arrive at these and then enact them is central to the practice and core business of child protection. □



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