

knowledge and decision making in child protection social work

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There have been a number of highly publicised cases in the UK where social workers were perceived to have made errors in decision making about children at risk. This study addressed the question: how do social workers make decisions in child protection work in conditions of uncertainty and complexity. Observations and interviews were carried out across two UK sites: a team with legal child protection responsibilities and a team undertaking family assessments. Observation field notes and interview transcripts were coded manually and thematically analysed. The social workers were faced with considerable uncertainty and had to make decisions quickly based on incomplete or contested information. The conditions of practice favoured rapid heuristic decisions which could lead to bias and error. The knowledge workers produced was gathered from a range of sources including home visits, work with other professionals, information from non-professionals, case notes and research-based evidence. All these sources were seen by the social workers as troublesome and fallible. These fallible sources had to be evaluated, synthesised and reconstructed for practice through a series of complex social processes that made up the context of the work. Insufficient attention is paid to the contexts in which knowledge is produced and used. Knowledge production and decision making are embedded in practice contexts. Key processes such as gathering and evaluating information through home visits and professional supervision are complex social interactions artfully managed by skilled actors rather than means for producing objective knowledge. More research is needed into these everyday processes to develop theories of social work "practices". Errors cannot be eliminated but studying how professionals make decisions within local practice contexts could help researchers better understand where and why errors occur and what social processes make those errors more or less likely.

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