Sense-making in a social work office: an ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements

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ABSTRACT
Social workers are routinely required to make finely balanced judgements on matters defined by subjectivity and uncertainty. Often, these judgements have to be made on the basis of information which is incomplete, inconclusive and contested. The way in which social workers make sense of such information is a crucial component of effective assessment and intervention. This ethnographic study of judgements in a social work office describes some of the practices which practitioners employed in making sense of information about children and young people’s needs. The findings suggest that initial statements in dialogue may potentially act as signposts for preceding intuitive sense-making. Observations offer insights into the way in which individuals construct professional responsibility. The study also suggests that sense-making is not necessarily an individual activity but can be an activity which is shared between people and across teams. The findings indicate the importance of emotional intelligence and intersubjectivity in social work judgements.

INTRODUCTION
Decision-making in social work practice is a complex and contested activity requiring judgements which are, by their nature, subjective and situated, yet still require to be formulated within theoretical, organizational and evidential boundaries. Professionals must make judgements about their clients’ needs and decide on appropriate responses to the difficulties identified. In making such judgements, practitioners must constantly configure their skills, knowledge and values in unique patterns, working with service users, colleagues and other professionals to respond in ways which satisfy numerous, often competing imperatives. The decisions which flow from these judgements can have life-changing consequences for clients and for the professionals involved. The study of judgement and decision-making is therefore fundamental to the development of effective social work practice.

Professional interest in assessment practice continues unabated, and considerable attention is being paid to the development of analytical skills in assessment practice. The introduction of structured assessment frameworks across the UK (e.g. DoH 2000; National Assembly for Wales 2001; Scottish Government 2012) may have improved professionals’ ability to gather and record data, but research suggests that analysis within written assessments continues to be absent or of a poor quality (Turney et al. 2012). This study provides some examples of the way in which social workers make sense of information in practice; that is, how they make judgements. Through ethnographic methods, the research offers a description of ‘sense-making’ activity in the complex, dynamic and uncertain world of practice. Erving Goffman’s concept of framing is used in this paper with specific reference to emotional messages in communication. Frames act as interpretive schemata (Goffman 1974), shaping understanding and guiding action. Frames of reference in practitioners’ communication can therefore offer insight into practitioners’ frames of thought. Everyday talk helps social workers to establish a shared understanding of why they do what they do (Pithouse 1984). This study
demonstrates the centrality of emotions and responsibility in case talk and considers the implications of the findings for sense-making in social work practice.

BACKGROUND

There is a strong tradition of studying judgement in laboratory research (e.g. Tversky & Kahneman 1974, Goldstein & Hogarth 1997, Gigerenzer et al. 1999), but such approaches tend to have been led by psychological, rather than sociological, enquiry. While there have been some significant studies of judgement in social work practice (e.g. Rose & Barnes 2008; Holland 2010), many have taken a prescriptive approach and have sought to evaluate the quality of judgements against particular benchmarks. There have been comparatively fewer naturalistic studies of judgements as they are made in reality, as opposed to a study of how judgements should be made according to some prescribed ideal.

Ethnography is a recognized and effective means of developing an understanding of the contextual and situated nature of behaviour (Punch 2005), including the practice of judgement or ‘sense-making’. Previous research (e.g. Hall 1997; Scott 1998; White & Stancombe 2003) has used ethnography very successfully to examine professional judgement in social work settings. Ethnography has also been highly influential in areas such as recognizing and understanding the importance and nature of gendered practices in social work (Scourfield 2002) and the impact of performance management on decision-making and responses to error (Broadhurst et al. 2010). Ethnographic approaches continue to be used effectively in relation to social work judgement (e.g. Gillingham 2011, Saltiel 2013) and provide a means for identifying, describing and contextualizing the ways in which professional judgement is carried out.

This paper gives an overview of the ethnographical study that sets out to answer the research question ‘What are the methods by which social workers make sense of information in real-time practice situations?’ An ethnological approach was taken, as my focus was on the description of sense-making activities, and this methodology allowed interpretations, attributions and meanings to be accessed and studied in a naturalistic setting.

METHODOLOGY

The research site was a large Children and Families Practice Team and Early Intervention Team situated within an urban Scottish local authority. The team consists of a staff of 27 social workers, senior social workers and social work assistants, supervised by seven team leaders under the overall management of a practice team manager.

Access to the research site was negotiated in liaison with a Learning and Development Officer from the authority. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Stirling Research Ethics Committee. Discussions with the practice team manager and team members then followed, allowing the method of data collection to be designed in partnership with the members of the team being observed. Preparatory meetings with staff provided opportunities for me to share information about the study and gain consent from those who wished to participate in the research. Participation was voluntary and the practice team manager was clear that staff could choose not to participate and could withdraw their consent during the course of the study without consequence. All qualified social workers and team leaders in the team gave their consent to be observed and for any findings of the research to be placed in the public domain.

The team occupies one floor of a building with a number of rooms of different sizes. This meant that room occupancy rates relate to room size, with some workers being observed working alone in their room and other workers being observed with up to four other people in the same room. The team provides a ‘standby’ service whereby practitioners take turns on a rota to respond to concerns and enquiries where work is unallocated or the allocated practitioner is unavailable. When observing practitioners on standby, the primary subject was the specific standby social worker or standby team leader, but any other members of the team interacting with the primary subject were included in observations. All observations were office-based and included only members of the participating team. No clients or professionals from other agencies were directly involved in this research.

A schedule of overt non-participatory observations was carried out between June 2012 and September 2012. I sought to minimize the impact of my presence on participants and only interacted if participants initiated an interaction or if clarification was required on a specific matter (such as a technical term used). A range of different settings were observed, including three allocation meetings, one management group meeting and one supervision session. Nine observations were made of individual practitioners carrying out work through the standby system. Observations were carried out between 8:30 a.m. (when the office
opened) and 12 p.m. Observations took place on the same day of the week on 10 occasions, with some variation in later stages to allow particular pieces of work to be tracked over a longer period of time.

Observations of individual practice included the identified standby worker and any other members of the team that they interacted with. In the interests of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all references to professionals and service users in this paper. The following are the pseudonyms used to identify workers who have been quoted directly (Table 1):

I endeavoured to position myself so that I was in the participant’s peripheral vision. This allowed my presence to be recognized but unobtrusive. A significant amount of the stand-by workers’ time tended to be based around the use of a computer. However, in most observations, it was not possible to determine accurately which specific activities were being carried out on the computer.

The dynamic nature of available seating and room occupancy meant that an optimal position for my observations was one which maximized potential for data collection without compromising the professional work of those being observed. Participants did leave the room on occasion, and I remained seated until their return. On one occasion, I was able to follow the participant when they went to the practice team manager’s room to seek advice on a high tariff decision.

My use of an ethnographic approach is a recognition that what people do and say in the process of sense-making may reveal significant insights into the means by which professional judgement encompasses complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. In this research, sense-making activities could only be studied directly through observable phenomena (such as what people said or the information sources they accessed). Non-observable phenomena (such as psychological or emotional processes) could only be observed through the lens of their physical expression (e.g. facial expression and tone of voice). However, a clear description of such phenomena brings with it the potential to develop the knowledge base and promote further debate about the ways in which effective and empathic judgement can be developed and sustained in practice.

An ethnographic approach was chosen in recognition of the challenges of studying people making judgements. In particular, I eschewed the use of interviews as I felt that naturalistic observation would provide more reliable data than individuals’ post hoc accounts of judgements. In a study of sense-making, it is a prerequisite that I acknowledge my own positionality and the impact that this will have on my own sense-making as a researcher (Hall & Hall 2004). As I am a social worker with considerable experience in the field, I did not adopt a position of faux naïvety but favoured a position of subtle realism (Hammersley 1992), which took into account my own influence on the research. I recognized that my knowledge and experience would inform my description of sense-making in this professional setting. However, my adoption of a realist position in this research acknowledged that any authority in my own perspective would necessarily be limited and fallible in relation to the production of knowledge in this study. While naïve realism has been subject to considerable criticism (Robson 2002), subtle realism is defensible in such an ethnographic study as this, where my aim was to describe and explore the nature of judgements rather than evaluate or judge them.

DATA ANALYSIS

Contemporaneous handwritten notes were taken, and initial coding of these field notes was carried out on the same day as the observation session. Further coding was carried out in the ethnographic tradition, allowing themes to emerge from the data, leading to ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of the cultural traditions of the group under observation. Notes were coded using a staged method of rereading and coding to progressively more analytical categories (Burnard 1991).

Data were gathered in three distinct settings, which allowed other codes to be derived inductively through close reading of the data (Miles & Huberman 1994). As an ethnographic approach was utilized, I was seeking representative themes that might arise from

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**Table 1 Participants’ pseudonyms and roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>Team leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Team leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kirsty</td>
<td>Team leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Team leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Practice team manager</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
the data, and decisions about how fine-grained the analysis should be were taken as the research progressed.

FINDINGS

Through iterative coding of the data from observations, themes began to emerge, and the key findings could be grouped under themes as important factors in ‘sense-making activity’ in this office. To allow for sufficient depth of analysis and discussion within this paper, I have chosen to focus on two of the themes to emerge most strongly in the data collected:

• Making sense through ‘framing’ the situation
• Constructing responsibility.

This research seeks to address the question ‘What are the methods by which social workers make sense of information in real-time practice situations?’ While these selected themes can be considered as distinct and separate phenomena in their own right, they are seen in this study to be complexly interrelated in practitioner’s sense-making activities. Considered together, they offer insight into the specific and situated challenges of judgement in social work practice.

MAKING SENSE THROUGH ‘FRAMING’ THE SITUATION

Workers were observed to discuss cases with numerous people and in numerous ways across their working day. When workers were initiating the discussion with another person, they frequently started interactions with an opening statement. This opening statement or ‘frame’ appeared to act as an indicator or signifier for those elements of the dialogue which the initiator wished to emphasize as of greatest importance to their current understanding of the situation and to the current dialogue. This phenomenon was observed in both individual settings and group settings.

In the following extract, a standby social worker and a colleague discuss a case in a large shared office. The worker considered the breakdown of a child’s placement, with the primary focus on the emotional impact of their decision-making in this case.

Joanne: ‘I feel so guilty for Kieran because I organised the placement. On the surface it was OK but I did have reservations, I thought it would break down because of Kieran’s behaviour.’

This frame of ‘my emotional responses’ guided colleagues to a discussion which then helped the worker to make sense of both the feelings and past decision-making. By means of the initial frame, the interaction was steered, by mutual consent, to an important discussion of the impact of this situation on the worker, which ultimately may have helped them contain these difficult feelings, explore the complex issues of causation in the placement breakdown and integrate learning from this experience into ongoing practice wisdom.

Initial frames were not always accepted or agreed between those involved. In this next passage, the standby social worker (Jessica) has a discussion with the standby team leader (Catherine) about a message which was passed on to her by the receptionist. The standby worker provides a primary frame of ‘possible child protection’, but the team leader does not fully endorse this categorization.

Jessica: ‘This is possible child protection. It’s a wee girl, Kelly Gardner, one of Pat’s (another social worker) clients.’

Catherine: (answers t/c from practice team manager) ‘2 possible child protection ones . . . one of Pat’s, Kelly . . . I don’t know. Jessica says it’s child protection.’

Jessica: ‘Kelly is saying very clearly that her dad assaulted her last night.’

Catherine: (to Jessica) ‘What’s her age?’

Jessica: ‘Seven’

The team leader is focused on the subjectivity of the claim: ‘I don’t know. Jessica says it’s child protection’. The initial frame was resisted and the standby worker then offered two pieces of supplementary evidence to support their initial frame of ‘child protection’, namely the child’s ‘clear’ statement and the commission of a physical assault by a parent. The social worker did not fixate on the alleged assault but offered information relating to the child’s presentation, needs and statement about her desired outcome. While ‘child protection’ was a key frame for sense-making here, the inclusion of the word ‘possible’ was crucial in signalling a level of doubt. A more rigorous and methodical consideration of the facts allowed the team leader to ascertain the nature and extent of any injuries, but ensured that the alleged assault did not become the sole focus of the inquiry to the detriment of the child’s wider holistic needs. The child was therefore not lost as an individual in their own right.

The following extract exemplifies the way in which emotional frames of reference can have influence on decision-making. Concern and anxiety are constant features of child welfare and protection work. Emotions are therefore signalled and understood within the particular social and cultural practices of the social work office. The practice team manager comes to the standby team leader’s office to discuss a kinship
placement; the carer’s own daughter had made an allegation that she was physically assaulted by him when young. The team leader (Emma) opens with:

Emma: ‘This one is worrying . . . maybe I’m reading something into it, kind of hypothesising. He’s had a big reaction to being challenged . . . but then not to remember his second partner’s name?’

The team leader began the conversation by saying ‘This one is worrying’. The opening statement or ‘initial frame’ indicated the significance of the team leader’s emotional response to the allegation. Although it was not clear at this point what the team leader’s worries might have been, this was the ‘hook’ for discussion; the worry which this situation was generating. The team leader then followed up the initial frame by acknowledging the paucity of verifiable information and level of subjectivity required of the team leader in their sense-making so far. Social workers are frequently met with negative, hostile responses when inquiring into allegations of abuse so they need to make sense of these responses in context; whether the adult’s concerning response is understood in the context of the fear and anxiety naturally flowing from such a situation, or whether it is indicative of more ingrained patterns of belief and behaviour.

The discussion moved on to consider information from written reports, memory and accounts from grandparents and educationalists. The practice team manager (Sandy) eventually stated that ‘there is no way we can move this kid’. In this situation, the initial frame of the team leader’s emotional state was not directly responded to by the practice team manager. Instead, the focus remained on the diagnostic issue of whether the child was likely to be physically abused in the placement. Discussion from thereon focused on risk assessment and risk management. The feelings of concern and uncertainty expressed were not dealt with explicitly, but the practice team manager’s concluding statement was both powerful and definitive. It is possible that the team leader’s opening ‘frame’ was influential and was deemed by the practice team manager to be a credible working hypothesis for action. It may not have been possible at this stage to formulate a clear assessment and plan of action, but the team leader’s frame ‘this one is worrying’ has provided the practice team manager with a shorthand indication of the team leader’s intuitive risk assessment.

The following extract demonstrates the framing effect in communication between social worker and client. While on standby, a social worker took a telephone call from one of her own clients. The social worker greeted the caller and listened to what they were saying. The social worker then responded:

Anna: ‘OK, you didn’t manage the week before. What do you mean when you said you’d had a really bad week? Uhuh . . . your mood was really low? . . .’

The conversation continued for 34 minutes, with the social worker focusing on positives and solutions while guiding the client to consider their son’s needs and perspectives. The tone was overwhelmingly positive:

‘How did your visit go? Good, so it went well?’
‘It’s fantastic that you were able to do that for him.’
‘You’re half-way there Mary because you’ve realised the problem and what you have to do.’
‘I feel that, more than previously, you’re being honest with yourself.’

When the call was complete, the social worker spoke to her colleague whom she shared a room with:

Hillary: ‘Is she OK?’
Anna: ‘No, not really’

Despite the positivity in the social worker’s interaction with the client’s mother, she was in no doubt that the prognosis did not suggest a positive outcome in the longer term. The social worker would have had access to a wealth of information about this case which was not accessible to the observer. However, what was readily available in the conversation was the worker’s reflection of the initial frame offered by the client’s mother: She has had a bad week and is experiencing low mood. The worker appeared to have recognized this cue and responded in two ways. The first response was their supportive and positive interaction which would appear to be an attempt to help address the low mood or at least do no further harm. By constructing an alternative narrative, the social worker performed a positive and empowering function for their client’s mother (Fook 2012). The second response is revealed in the final comments to their room-mate. Despite all the positive talk, the social worker appeared to have made sense of the significance of the mother’s low mood in relation to future outcomes for her son. The primary frame has been the worker’s headline for making sense of the current situation, and they have received a significant message from this parent about their ability and motivation (Horwath & Morrison 2001) to meet their son’s needs at this point.
CONSTRUCTING RESPONSIBILITY

In this study, a significant code emerging from the data was that of ‘constructing a response’. In the process of sense-making, it was noted that the workers made sense of the data in the context of their understanding of their professional role and the wider role of their organization. These observations suggest that professionals make sense of information with reference to their specific roles and responsibilities. The following extract is a statement from the practice team manager at an allocation meeting. The discussion focused on a risk assessment of a father who had threatened to kill his children. With the risk assessment at an early stage, opinion about the likelihood of harm was divided between medical practitioners and addictions services. The statement offers insight into the task of sense-making in relation to professional response.

Sandy: ‘Someone needs to own this. It’s either nothing or it’s way up there.’

The first sentence opened up the possibility that an agency other than social work might take primary responsibility, but, given the levels of risk to the children, would appear unlikely. The nature of ‘ownership’ in this sentence was ambiguous, potentially encompassing a frustration about other professionals’ accountability for their risk assessments as well as a concern that a lead agency is required to coordinate the multi-professional risk assessment. The second sentence reflected the need to make a professional response that was founded on an accurate risk assessment. There was potential for a false-positive prediction of risk (unnecessary intervention where risk is predicted but harm does not occur) and a false-negative prediction (low/no intervention because risk is not predicted but harm does occur). The dilemma of the professional task is pithily but darkly constructed in this sentence as ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’.

Some passages of sense-making led quite quickly and clearly to a threshold for action (Dalgleish 2000) where a decision was made without equivocation or ambiguity. As there are relatively few areas of social work practice which are unequivocal and free of ambiguity, these episodes were of particular interest as they may provide insight into the methods used in rapid decision-making and when such circumscribed sense-making processes may or may not be appropriate. When the threshold for action is reached, the search for further evidence stops, and the participant reaches a ‘good enough’ level of confidence in their judgement to take some form of action.

In the following extract, a standby social worker takes a telephone call from reception about a looked-after child attending a birthday party. Before taking the call, the social worker checked with her manager (at the door) and checked the electronic information system. The standby worker then asked the following set of questions:

Anna: ‘Is there any condition attached? Safety warrant, yes? Is Liam (child) concerned about dad being there? Will the parents be there? What do you think, Jane? Do you trust that he wouldn’t leave?’

Through these questions, the standby worker has ascertained the following:
- That the child is subject of compulsory measures of care
- The child’s views about his father’s possible attendance
- The carer’s views generally, and, in particular, about Liam’s capacity for decision-making.

At this point, the standby worker decided that they had sufficient information to make a decision:

Anna: ‘Sounds fine to me. His parents won’t be there; he’ll be supervised; there’s a plan in place and he gets to go to the party.’

The standby worker has made sense of their responsibility towards Liam. He must be kept safe from harm, but he must also not be denied the opportunities afforded to children who are not looked after. The worker appeared to have taken responsibility for a quick and intuitive risk assessment of the situation rather than delay decision-making for the return of Liam’s allocated worker. The risk assessment was by no means extensive, and it was not possible for me to ascertain how much additional information the standby worker had been provided with. However, the worker was able to clearly summarize the risk-reducing factors and the benefits accruing from the risk judgement.

In the following extract, a team leader phoned another professional about a mother alleged to have bitten her daughter. It was noted that, as this was an adoptive placement, the adoption worker was consulted rather than an initial referral discussion (IRD) being arranged. Many agencies in Scotland hold an IRD when child protection concerns need to be discussed between members of agencies, including the National Health Service, police and Local Authority...
Social Work. The interaction observed here did not consider whether this was the correct course of action, but the team leader listed the supports available and recounted the standby worker’s visit the day before.

Kirsty: ‘. . . the root of her (the adoptive mother’s) anger was fear of social work intervening again, connected to her own difficult childhood.’

Again, there was no discussion of this interpretation, but there was further consideration of the need for an IRD.

Kirsty: ‘. . . yes, because human bites . . . oh, her face! Oh yes, her chin . . . yes, if that’s her thoughts then arrange an IRD see what Police think.’

Up until this point, the case appeared to be primarily understood as a family in need of support. The mother’s alleged physical abuse appeared to be understood in the context of a stress reaction. When it became clear that the mother had bitten the child on the face, this precipitated an immediate reformulation of the case as one of suspected child abuse requiring a more detailed and forensic, multi-agency inquiry. It would appear that the team leader could make sense of a mother biting her adopted child in the context of fear and unresolved trauma. When it transpired that the mother had bitten her daughter on the face, this construct of ‘stress reaction’ became untenable for the team leader. A point had been reached where the primary professional responsibility appeared to move from supporting a stressed mother to protecting the child through more rigorous responses and a potential criminal investigation.

Group members frequently asked clarifying questions. For example, in relation to a family affected by parental mental ill health, a team leader (David) inquired ‘Are army welfare involved?’ A significant number of these queries and clarifications were focused on which professional or agency had responsibility for responding to the child or young person’s needs. While this could be viewed as problematic or in some way a failing, the data here (in the context of multi-professional systems) suggest that this might have been a necessary and important area for discussion which was perhaps less about thresholds to resource allocation and more about identifying which agency is most appropriately placed for a proportionate and appropriate response.

DISCUSSION

The terms ‘judgement’ and ‘decision’ are sometimes treated as synonyms and used interchangeably in the literature. However, there are important differences and, in this paper, I draw a distinction between the two activities. Judgement can be considered as the process of drawing inferences from the data, whereas a decision is a choice between different courses of action. Ideally, judgements should therefore precede decisions and involve a process of analysis or ‘sense-making’, which then informs professionals about what to do next in any given situation.

This paper has dealt with sense-making phenomena as discrete activities so that each element can be considered with sufficient rigour and clarity. However, the observations have clearly demonstrated that activities such as framing, dialogue and response construction are deeply enmeshed and inextricably linked.

An important phenomenon observed in this study was the use of ‘framing’ statements in sense-making. The way that practitioners chose to talk about their experiences was crucial in determining how they understood the situation, and the use of a framing statement was observed as a means of establishing and sharing meaning. The concept of a ‘frame’ has been applied in many different disciplines, each drawing on different aspects of the construct to study their specific subject. For example, Firkins & Candlin (2006) used frame analysis in their study of child protection risk assessments. In the context of sociology, Goffman (1974) suggested that conceptual frames help people to process experience and inform actions. In the findings of this study, frames are considered as a means of making the meaningless meaningful. The framing statements observed provided important information about where the emphasis was being placed and about the relevant importance of the phenomena to the practitioner. Analysis of such frames provides the potential for further study of the process of sense-making and methods of communicating meaning in dialogue.

These opening statements or frames appear to indicate the relative importance of particular aspects of the narrative. The interaction is already a summarized and partial account of the bigger picture, and the opening statement is highly significant, in that it appears to indicate the worker’s key concern or preoccupation among all the themes contained in the interaction. It is a cue to the other person about their sense of the situation, and it is then up to the respondent to decide how to respond to this cue. This research supports the notion of communication as a mindset (Reder & Duncan 2003), which requires emotional intelligence and a capacity for mindfulness about other people’s emotional states. Effective sense-making includes
recognizing when the frame is congruent with one’s own concerns and when there is dissonance which needs to be considered further.

The initial frame appears to be an observable output of the practitioner’s preliminary or preceding sense-making. A great deal of the activity of analysis occurs in the individual’s internal cognitive/emotional world, and the challenge of accessing this ‘black box’ has seen the predominance of psychological and neuropsychology in related research. However, in this study, the process of sense-making can be seen to be shared and contingent, and the findings emphasize the importance of emotions and relationships in professional judgement. Emotional frames were strongly prevalent in this study, and ethnographic approaches have the potential to a greater understanding or emotion as a component of knowledge and communication in child welfare and protection.

In this study, it was possible to observe a number of instances where sense-making activity led to a decision during the period of observation. In single agency decision-making (such as the issue of the child going to a party), there appeared to be a limited set of factors which the practitioner felt were germane to the judgement and once these factors had been considered, could lead to a decision about what course of action to take. Research into judgements in child welfare and protection may benefit from further consideration of these everyday ‘good-enough’ judgements. Constraints of time and available information in such settings mean that it is often not possible to make judgements on the basis of a full and exhaustive consideration of the problem. Instead, practitioners make ‘satisficing’ (Simon 1990) or ‘good-enough’ judgements, with the search for further information ending once an acceptable level has been reached.

Recent research (Platt & Turney 2013) has cast light on such search strategies in child welfare and protection, indicating that many judgements are indeed based on a limited number of factors. However, to date, little attention has been paid to the way in which the practitioners’ understanding of their role, and that of their organization, informs these ‘satisficing’ judgements. Further study of the cultures and practices of teams and organization may therefore provide an important perspective on the ways in which practitioners construct responsibility when making sense of information about children and young people.

Two of the examples considered in this paper emphasized the importance of organizational responsibility. While the emotional frames tended to be accepted (or at least not challenged) by the respond-
There is significant pressure in our contemporary risk society (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992) to reduce professional discretion and to focus on forensic judgements in child welfare and protection. However, the findings of this research suggest that sense-making involves careful consideration of multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, often in the absence of any degree of certainty, and this is an arena which requires full and effective use of a range of human sense-making capacities. While decision tools such as assessment frameworks and predictive risk tools may contribute to effective judgement, they are a support to, and not a substitute for, well-trained and well-supervised, thinking and feeling practitioners. This study has shown that social work judgements are complex, contingent and socially situated processes which require high levels of emotional intelligence and communication skills. This was a small-scale study, and further research is required on this subject. However, there is compelling data even from this small study to suggest that intersubjectivity and emotional intelligence are central aspects of sense-making in social work judgements and are worthy of further consideration in research, policy and practice.

REFERENCES


