

Editorial

Child protection vocabulary in professional judgement – Fit for purpose?

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Without a doubt, the pressure that front-line practitioners work under to ensure they accurately assess and balance the need for professional intervention when confronted with presenting complexity of children's lives is extremely stressful (Kettle, 2018). The complexity of child protection work often requires significant professional judgement to be drawn upon to make safe and sensitive decisions, most often through the use of discretion, intuition, and analytical thinking (Nyathi, 2019). Since the Seebohm Report (1968) in the United Kingdom (UK), a increasing demand for audit-centricity in safeguarding practice has premised for clearly documented decision-making processes including the written descriptions of professional judgement but this is far from simplistic in practice (Broadhurst et al., 2010). Since the 1980s, Taylor and White (2001) have noted the fine dynamism between knowledge, truth, and reflexivity in social work professional judgements, remarking that the nature of safeguarding assessment is as much a practical-moral activity as it is a technical-rational one, especially on the common basis of incomplete, inconclusive and contested information (Helm, 2016). Taylor and White's observations of this dynamism remains a contemporary issue in safeguarding practice, yet we can extend this dynamic issue to all front-line practice, especially as newer forms of child maltreatment become recognised as social and legal problems (e.g. County Lines).

Whilst professional judgement is almost an exclusive qualitative exercise in safeguarding practice, it can be, if available, supported by risk-based consensus, actuarial and structured assessments, tools, and instruments to 'evidence' a threshold decision (De Bortoli et al., 2017). The use of assessments/tools/instruments offers front-line practitioners a way of describing a practical-moral situation in a technical-rational framework, however, their use is only as effective as the practitioner's knowledge on using it, e.g. vigilance for optimising assessment/tool/instrument conditions that maintains equity, validity and reliability (De Bortoli et al., 2017). The use, meanings, and consistency and, to be more precise, equity, validity, and reliability of vocabulary in assessments/tools/instruments for safeguarding practice is under-researched.

Overall, child protection vocabulary has notably reduced in national policy (Calder and Archer, 2016), whilst some concepts have expanded in their use/meaning such a 'vulnerability' (e.g. Public Health England's (2020) *No child left behind: understanding and quantifying vulnerability*). The contemporary relevance of vocabulary in long-standing child protection legislation such as the UK's *Children Act 1989* may be problematic in the ever-changing social world we live in, wherein the needs and demands continuously shift (discussed in depth by Pentaris and Oresanya in this issue). These three aforementioned vocabulary situations (reduction, expansion and relevance) have likely resulted in the increased requirement for regional, local or individual interpretation, creating greater heterogeneity in the construction and use of vocabulary in safeguarding practice (e.g. the exploration of professionals' perceptions of young male victims of sexual exploitation, explored by Fanner and Evans in this issue). The reduction, expansion and relevance in vocabulary in national laws and policy has created opportunities for regional or local proliferation of assessments, tools and instruments to rapidly occur, resulting in different responses (e.g. responding to child neglect, as discussed by DeGuerre et al. in this issue). This resulting proliferation causes increase in mixed use of language and classifications that may influence the social construction of everyday child protection vocabulary. These heterogenous, linguistic scenarios potentially create difficulty for practitioners who have to keep abreast of what is considered the 'right' judgement based on contemporary thought/morality/ethics and be cognisant of contemporary vocabulary of how to describe it. This is especially the case for more recently 'discovered' child maltreatment phenomenon such as child witness of domestic violence (e.g. examined by Howard in this issue).

Lexical knowledge encompasses all the information that is known about words and the relationships among them, and this is essential in attempting to ‘capture’ a child’s experience, that it is (unanimously) understood by all involved in safeguarding. In professional judgement, front-line practitioners commonly express expertise through lexical knowledge, with metacognitive verbs such as believe, know, and think, that allows description of their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. Legislation, policy and professional education provides us with ‘rooted’ vocabulary (e.g. ‘risk’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘complexity’, ‘danger’, ‘harm’, ‘safety’) but in light of the ever-changing social world, there is now a pressing requirement for more granulated vocabulary, co-produced with those who receive services. Our choice of vocabulary in these difficult situations, therefore, potentially becomes persuaded by intuitive heuristics, i.e. the mental processes to make judgements, particularly with arriving at the easiest option, rather than the best option and a significant degree of negotiation takes place between practitioners and those receiving services to ascertain mutual understanding. In order to deal with these difficult situations, dedicated research is needed that focuses on how we best co-produce and develop child protection vocabulary for safeguarding practice, allowing for unanimous and consistent understanding by all practitioners, children, caregivers, policy-makers, the media and the public. Therefore, the determination of this special issue of interdisciplinary papers is to begin this vocabulary-focused journey in safeguarding practice and ensure its fitness for purpose.

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Special Issue Guest Editor

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