

Research Proposal (revised)

For consideration by SASS Research Ethics Committee – June 20th 2012

Project title:

An ethnographic study of practitioners making judgements about children and young people's needs (including their need for protection)

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• Aims of the research and scientific background of the research

The proposed research will study the way in which social workers make sense of complex data under pressures of uncertainty. There is a strong tradition of studying judgement and decision making in laboratory research (e.g. Tversky and Kahnemann 1974, Gigerenzer and Todd 1999) but such approaches tend to inform psychological, rather than sociological, enquiry. I have chosen ethnography as a recognised and effective means of developing an understanding of the contextual and situated nature of judgement. Previous research (e.g. Scourfield 2006) has used ethnography very successfully in UK social work settings and has been highly influential in areas such as recognising and understanding the importance and nature of gendered practices in social work. More recently, ethnological approaches have been used effectively in relation to social work judgement in the UK (Saltiel 2012 in press) and are beginning to build an important knowledge base.

Contemporary views of rationality are commonly based on ecological models which emphasise the significance of the features of the judgement task (or ecology of judgment) and an ethnographic study may complement the existing literature by providing further insight into the significance of the particular environments in which social workers make judgments. While statistical generalisability is not possible in this research, the use of such a purposively chosen case study may provide cautious theoretical generalisations for further research (Silverman 2010). Furthermore, the hermeneutic nature of contemporary social work assessments requires a research methodology, such as ethnography, which allows professional interpretations, attributions and meanings to be accessed and studied in naturalistic settings. There a number of ethical issues related to this methodology which will be given consideration as follows.

Non-participant observation – my study will consist of non-participant observation. Specific meeting (allocations, team leaders' meeting and supervision meetings) will be observed. Additional follow-up observations with particular workers will allow judgements about particular children to be tracked over time. I will be limiting individual observation periods to 4 hours and will remain active in observation during

these specific times. This will allow a discrete but uninterrupted period of observation and sufficient time for word-processing of field notes on the same day. I will not be active in observation when moving through any shared areas of the office which would bring me into contact with people who have not provided consent to participate.

While my involvement will be entirely overt, my participation will be limited to questions and comments designed to elicit further clarification and elaboration and to guard against presumptions. I have taken this stance primarily to avoid disrupting the naturalness of the setting and to reduce the potential for my presence to influence standards of practice.

I am an experienced practitioner and academic with well established links to the agency and workers taking part in this study. For this reason, covert observation would not be ethical as participants would not be aware of my wider role and the potential consequences for them of their participation. I have chosen non-participatory observation as a means of reducing the influence which my presence may have on the judgements under observation. The Hawthorn effect is undoubtedly going to have an influence and this will need to be taken account of in the research. However, the issue has been raised with potential participants in pre-research meetings and participants will have had previous experiences of making judgements under observation as such observed practice is a requirement of social work qualifying training. Participants are clearly informed that the study does not seek to audit practice or assess the quality of their judgement; it is about gaining a deeper understanding of their context and behaviour in making professional judgements.

Preparatory meetings with participants have helped to identify times and locations for observations which are the least disruptive. My previous extensive experience as a social worker in this setting will help me to anticipate and guard against potential disruptions (e.g. not requiring clarification of routine but technical terminology). Clear lines of communication have been identified for participants and me should concerns arise about the impact of the study or quality of practice observed (see participants' information).

Reflexivity – I acknowledge the inherent tension between naturalism and reflexivity in my proposed study. While attempting to provide a full description of events and cultures within the participating team, I am conscious of the inevitable influence of my own self on the research. Preparatory discussions with participants have explored the potential influence of my beliefs, expertise and professional experience on the research. Data collection methods include the maintenance of a reflective field diary. The role of self will be an agenda item in my supervision. The report will also include a brief overview of the way in which factors such as ethnicity, status, age, etc may have a bearing on findings.

Cultural interpretation – I have attempted to move beyond an atheoretical, non-analytic approach by grounding my study in the concept of bounded rationality (Simon 1991). The main tenet of this theory (that forms of judgement are influenced by the nature of the judgement task) is broad enough to support a holistic approach which avoids over-reliance on my own construction or interpretation of the data. The use of this conceptual model also allows me to build on a wider body of knowledge in consideration of the significant contributory factors in this particular setting.

Limits of time – the unfunded nature of the study and the limited amount of time available to me for this research prohibits a full-scale ethnography. However, the values of an ethnographic approach (such as gaining insight into complex and contested judgements and understanding the interactions between professionals and their organisation) make the ‘borrowing of ethnographic techniques’ (Wolcott 1986) a helpful starting point for this small-scale research. The dearth of empirical research in this particular area means that an ethnographic approach may provide initial insight into the process of judgement and provide hypotheses for follow-on research (Fielding 1996).

Extensive discussion with potential participants has allowed me to identify particular times and activities (such as allocation meetings and team leaders’ duty) which are most likely to yield good data on judgements. This will reduce the possibility of my time being spent observing nothing happening (i.e. no participants in the room at the time of observation). The selection of specific opportunities for observation will allow for repeated instances of judgement to be considered and for me to reach the deeper levels of the reality of this activity. It is possible to extend the study slightly if information of new cultural significance is emerging at the planned end date.

I have recently published a practitioner’s guide to effective analysis in assessment (Helm 2010). Following on from these studies, a seminar was held (Ecology of Judgement, Stirling University 2010). This seminar generated a great deal of data and indicated a desire across communities of practitioners and academics to gain a better understanding of the way in which practitioners make sense of large amounts of uncertain and contested information in child welfare and protection assessments. The researcher is taking study forward and has therefore proposed this research. The study will be developed into peer reviewed journal articles and will contribute to my PhD studies by publication.

• **Study design**

The proposed research is a qualitative study. An ethnographic approach will be used to explore the way in which practitioners make sense of information and the situated complexity of judgements in everyday practice (Stake 2003). A schedule of overt non-participatory observations of practice is proposed.

Close study of judgement within the team will be carried out between **June 2012 and September 2012**. A range of different environments (duty work, team leaders' meetings allocation meetings and supervision) have the potential to provide good opportunities to observe practitioners making sense of information under a variety of conditions of certainty, time and quality of information.

I will need to fit the study around my availability and suitable times for the team. It is proposed that a calendar of available days will be created and dates agreed with the team when observations can take place. Discussion with the team and agency contact has taken place on three occasions now to consider such details and develop this proposal.

• Participants – who (inclusion and exclusion criteria), how many, how potential participants are identified and recruited

The proposed research was discussed and initially developed with [REDACTED] (Learning and Development Officer) and [REDACTED] (Practice Team Manager) from [REDACTED]

Participants in the research will be members of a Children and Families Social Work Team within [REDACTED]. There are approximately 60 members of staff in this team and two meetings took place in May 2012 to further inform staff of the research and to gain consent from those who wish to participate in the research. I have now met with 18 social work staff and all the team leaders. Staff were provided with written information about the research proposal and the information and consent forms were reviewed and piloted with the team.

Participants will be required to provide written confirmation of their understanding of the proposal and their agreement to participate. Observations will only take place with staff that have provided consent. Staff have been clearly advised by the researcher and the Practice Team Leader (PTL) that participation is entirely voluntary and there will be no consequences for staff who choose not to participate or who withdraw their consent during the course of the study.

The team are based in two buildings. The larger building houses a number of smaller offices all on one floor. Each room accommodates between one and four people depending on room size. The smaller building accommodates a staff group in a shared room. This is helpful in terms of informed participation as I will be able to plan observations according directly to recorded consent: Observations will only take place in offices where all staff have consented to participate. As no observations will take place in shared areas, there are only very limited chances that non-participating staff will enter the area under observation. If a non-consenting individual enters the room during observation, an end to observation will be negotiated as the requirements of operational activities dictate. As observations are

not taking place in open areas shared with other staff (e.g. criminal justice social workers or administrative staff) these workers will not be asked to provide consent and will not take part in the study.

- **Potentially vulnerable groups**

No direct contact is proposed with vulnerable groups. Observations will take place within the participants' offices and any information disclosed about vulnerable groups will be dealt with under the Data Protection Act 1998 and [REDACTED] guidance on confidentiality.

- **Methods of data collection**

I will make audio recordings of all contact with participants. These recordings will not be transcribed verbatim but will be used to cross-check the accuracy of written notes made contemporaneously. Field notes will be word-processed on the same day, wherever possible, thereby providing text which can be coded and analysed. The researcher will keep a separate set of impressions and analytical notes and will maintain a reflective field diary.

I will follow a small sample of assessments from receipt of referral through "holding", "strategic" and "issues" judgements (Hollows 2004) to initial decisions and action. In these assessments, participants will be provided with Dictaphones, personal notebooks and/or other means of recording their thoughts at the time of decision making. They will be encouraged to use these tools (and any other they may chose) to record their thinking about the way in which they have sought to make sense of information in their assessment. Direct quotation of participants in the study will be necessary. Anonymity will be maintained but clear guidance will be provided to participants about the limits of confidentiality. Where I have any concerns about professional standards or the safety and wellbeing of any service users, I will raise the issue with the participant directly and with the PTL. Concerns will be discussed verbally at the earliest possible time. If the concerns cannot be address through clarification, then they will be put in writing to the participant and the PTL. Any concerns which are not satisfactorily resolved at this point will be discussed with my PhD supervisors and [REDACTED] Learning and Development agency contact.

- **Methods of data analysis**

The primary source of data will be my contemporaneous notes. These notes will be coded using a staged method of re-reading and coding to progressively more analytical categories (Burnard 1991). Deductive coding can be derived from Hammond's (1986) concept of the 'cognitive continuum' as this will allow grading of responses through 6 categories between the poles of "intuition" and "analysis" in terms of judgement styles. Data will be gathered in three distinct settings and this will allow other codes to be derived inductively through close reading of the data (Miles

and Huberman 1994). As an ethnographic approach is being utilised, I will be seeking representative themes that arise from the data and decisions about how fine-grained my analysis should be will be taken as the research progresses. As a consequence, I have ensured that opportunities for review and triangulation have been created with my supervisors and the PTL for the research site.

• **Response to any conditions of use set by secondary data providers**

N/A

• **Principal investigator's summary of potential ethics issues and how they will be addressed**

Safety of service users – I may be provided with information which suggests that a child or young person may be at risk or that practice is not of the standard required by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). My role in this process is one of researcher rather than practitioner and, while I have a knowledge of practice, it remains the responsibility of the agency to maintain standards of practice within the research site. If I receive information at any point which suggests that a service user may be at risk of significant harm, I will raise these concerns with the participant at that point and will inform the Practice Team Leader (PTL) of their concerns in writing. If concerns cannot be satisfactorily addressed with the PTL they will be discussed with the researcher's supervisors and, ultimately, information may be passed on to the SSSC for their consideration.

Disruption to practice – My presence may have a negative impact on the effectiveness of service delivery. I have been involved in the delivery of Continuous Professional Development to this agency for 10 years and, as a consequence, may have been involved in the teaching and assessment of members of the team. In addition, some members of the Team may be currently studying the CPD programme which I direct. As an experienced practitioner and teacher, my presence may have an impact on participants' actions and responses when they are being observed. I intend to address these concerns in the following ways.

- I have chosen this setting for my research as I have never had direct responsibility for teaching or assessment in this agency. My links to participants are therefore limited as possible within Scottish practice settings.
- Any participants who are identified as currently studying on my programme will be contacted to ensure that they are fully aware of the implications of their participation in the study.

- I am a registered social worker with extensive experience in statutory child and family social work. This will provide me with sufficient understanding to observe and record without unduly disturbing participants in their work.
- I have met with the team on two occasions before data collection. These issues have been raised for discussion and potential participants will have had repeated opportunities for reflection and questioning before consent is sought.
- Participants will be made fully aware that their judgements are not being scrutinised for purposes of audit or management but to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions which support effective analysis in practice.
- Participants will be made aware of their right to speak to their PTL about any concerns arising and I will withdraw at any point that concerns are raised with the PTL until such time that concerns can be satisfactorily addressed.

Informed consent

All workers in the office have been provided with a briefing on the proposed research. The researcher has met with prospective participants on two occasions to discuss the proposed study, its aims and objectives and the potential ethical issues which may need to be addressed. As a consequence, I have now met with almost half of the social workers and all of the team leaders. Written information about the proposed study has been circulated to all workers by the PTL. Prior to any data collection, an email will be circulated to all staff based in the premises with a summary reminder of the study and a note of dates, times and locations of any observations taking place within the office.

Consent will be actively sought via the consent form (attached) with the participant's name and signature confirming verification and agreement. Workers who do not give consent will not be included in observations.

The issue of the researcher's influence is of relevance to the proposed methodology and to the ethical integrity of the research. I have considered the methodological issues in the first section of this proposal. Here I will consider the ethical issues arising.

Pre-research contact with the team has taken place on two occasions and I have consistently reiterated that no one is required or obliged to take part in the study. Non-consent is the default position. This message has been endorsed and reiterated by the PTL to ensure that a clear message is also given by the host agency of the purely voluntary nature of participation. Peer pressure is a strong influence so I have

ensured that participants are aware of their right (and the details of the process) to withdraw their consent at any point. This allows people to revise judgements made previously under perceived pressure.

As someone with practice experience in the field, it is possible that I may see or hear something that gives me cause for concern in relation to standards of practice or clients' welfare. Participants are made aware of my obligation as a registered social worker to make my concerns known to them and their line manager. The impact of scrutiny on judgements is a key issue for consideration in this study. My own status and influence on participants will therefore be given full consideration in terms of the findings and the limitations of the study.

Identification of participants – All participants will be provided with an alternative identifier in any material published from the research so that the identity of those quoted is only known to me as the researcher. I will be provided with a list of all team members so that I can clearly identify the full staff group and participants. The list will allow me to link participants to their identifier. (E.g. Mr Smith (Social Work Assistant) = A). Participants will be quoted verbatim in the final report and therefore may be identified by their words. Although participants are only open to a low likelihood of identification by colleagues who know them well, all staff are made aware of this possibility prior to giving consent. There is a possibility that participants may self-censor or filter their actions and communications as a consequence of observation. Participants will be aware of the purpose of the study in advance and the potential for influence will be taken into account in data analysis.

• Benefits to research participants or third parties

The research will provide [REDACTED] with a clearer understanding of the process of judgement within their child welfare and protection services. Findings will inform planning and development of services. The team taking part in the study will benefit from opportunities to discuss and reflect upon judgement making which is often tacit and inaccessible. The findings of the study will inform knowledge exchange activity and [REDACTED] may wish to arrange workshops or seminars to disseminate the findings of the study. The researcher would be willing to provide this input.

• Risks to participants or third parties, physical, emotional and situational, and what has been done to assess, obviate or minimise risks

There are no professionals, others than team members, expected in the offices in which the research will be situated. No service users will be present during the research. No risks are predicted which would require specific consideration in this proposal.

- **Risks to researchers, physical, emotional and situational, and in particular how researchers will be protected/supported especially in the field and outside the UK**

There are no physical or situational risks anticipated in this research proposal, other than the risks attendant upon travel and working conditions, which are covered by the University of Stirling's Health and Safety policy. Any emotional impact (or unexpected physical hazards) will be discussed with the researcher's PhD supervisors.

- **Procedures for freely given and adequately informed consent – information provided and methods of documenting**

I have met with potential participants on two occasions. Information was provided in the first meeting and practitioners in the team had an opportunity to discuss the proposal and ask questions. The second meeting was with team leaders and allowed further discussion of ethical issues and data collection methods.

- **Procedures for dealing with information arising in the course of fieldwork that is a cause for concern, such as disclosures from participants or behaviours or incidents observed that raise significant concerns about the safety or well-being of participants or other people**

Earlier consideration of ethic issues highlighted the means by which I would respond to concerns about service users' wellbeing. If I was to receive information which gave me cause for concern about the wellbeing of participants or any other person, a similar process would apply. I would speak initially to the information provider where this was appropriate. I would then share my concerns with the PTL and my supervisors. If concerns were more significant and immediate, I would speak directly to the PTL or, in their absence, the relevant Service Manager within [REDACTED].

- **How any data collected will be kept secure and methods of transferring data within teams**

All manual records/files will be held in a locked cabinet in my locked office at the University. Only I will have access to this cabinet. All electronic documents will be held on the University server and will only be accessible by my username and confidential password.

- **Any data sharing outside the proposed research team**

N/A

- **Details of research activity that falls outside the UK and links to local institutions**

N/A

- **Expected outcomes, impacts and benefits of research**

The potential outcomes and benefits of the research have been outlined above for participants. The research will further enhance the strong working relationship between the University and [REDACTED] with benefits to future Continuing Professional Development (CPD), knowledge exchange and research activity. The study of judgement in this field is young and there is a paucity of empirical research. The research will therefore provide a valuable opportunity to capture data on judgement and inform the developing literature on the subject. There are considerable practical benefits and the research will have a positive impact on relevant organisations by informing developments in policy, procedure and professional development.

- **Dissemination (and feedback to participants where appropriate) and possible ethics implications of dissemination plans**

The penultimate draft of the report will be shared directly with the team of participants. Any final amendments will be approved at this meeting to ensure that the report is a fair and accurate representation of practice. Following this feedback opportunity, the report will be presented for publication in a peer reviewed journal. [REDACTED] have been provided with the opportunity to have the researcher present their findings for wider purposes of staff development and organisational enhancement. If the report is to be shared with a wider audience, the identity of the research site will be protected.

- **Measures taken to ensure confidentiality, privacy and data protection during and beyond the end of the project**

The information will be recorded through digital audio recordings and contemporaneous notes and will be stored in both formats. The researcher will also maintain a reflective field diary. The materials will be held securely at the University for the period of PhD study (ending October 2019 at latest). The only materials which would allow an individual to be identified would be the records noting which identifiers/pseudonyms were matched to which individuals. These records will be destroyed at the end of the period of PhD study.

- **Members of Advisory Groups and whether they pose any risk to the safety of the researchers or participants.**

N/A

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