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Child Protection Decision Making in England and Finland: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract : Background: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the duties placed on signatory nations to take measures to protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and maltreatment. The systems for ensuring this protection vary globally, shaped by national welfare policies. In England and Finland, past research has highlighted differences in how child protection issues are framed and how state agencies respond. However, less is known about how such differences impact processes of social work judgment and decision making in practice. Method: Data was collected as part of a wider PhD project in three stages. First, social workers in sites across England and Finland were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Participants were then asked to comment on two constructed case vignettes, and were interviewed about their experiences of child protection decision making at the point of referral. Interviews were analyzed using NVivo to draw out key themes. Findings: There were similarities in how the English and Finnish social workers responded to the case vignettes; for example, participants in both countries expressed concerns about similar risk factors and all felt further assessment was needed. Differences were observed, in particular, in regard to the sources of support and guidance participants referred to, with the English social workers appearing to rely more upon managerial input for their decisions than the Finnish social workers. These findings suggest evidence for two distinct decision making approaches: 'supervised' and 'supported' judgement. Implications for practice: The findings have relevance to the conference theme of research and evaluation of social work practice, and support the findings of previous studies that have emphasized the significance of organizational factors in child protection decision making. The comparative methodology has also helped to demonstrate how organizational factors can influence practice in different child protection system 'orientations'. The presentation will discuss the potential practice implications of 'supervised', manager-led approaches to decision making as contrasted with 'supported', team-led approaches, inviting discussion about the relevance of these findings for social work in other countries.

Keywords : child protection, comparative research, decision making, social work, vignettes
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