Risks and Values in Adult Safeguarding: An Examination of How Social Workers Screen Safeguarding Referrals from Residential Homes

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Abstract : Safeguarding adults forms a core part of social work practice. The Government in England and Wales has made efforts to standardise practices through The Care Act 2014. The Act states that local authorities have duties to make inquiries in cases where an adult with care or support needs is experiencing or at risk of abuse and is unable to protect themselves from abuse or neglect. Despite the importance given to safeguarding adults within law there remains little research about how social workers conduct such decisions on the ground. This presentation reports on findings from a pilot research study conducted within two social work teams in a Local Authority in England. The objective of the project was to find out how social workers interpreted safeguarding duties as laid out by The Care Act 2014 with a particular focus on how workers assessed and managed risk. Ethnographic research methods were used throughout the project. This paper focusses specifically on decisions made by workers in the assessment team. The paper reports on qualitative observation and interviews with five workers within this team. Drawing on governmentality theory, this paper analyses the techniques used by workers to manage risk from a distance. A high proportion of safeguarding referrals came from care workers or managers in residential care homes. Social workers conducting safeguarding assessments were aware that they had a duty to work in partnership with these agencies. However, their duty to safeguard adults also meant that they needed to view them as potential abusers. In making judgments about when it was proportionate to refer for a safeguarding assessment workers drew on a number of common beliefs about residential care workers which were then tested in conversations with them. Social workers held the belief that residential homes acted defensively, leading them to report any accident or danger. Social workers therefore encouraged residential workers to consider whether statutory criteria had been met and to use their own procedures to manage risk. In addition social workers carried out an assessment of the workers' motives; specifically whether they were using safeguarding procedures as a shortcut for avoiding other assessments or as a means of accessing extra resources. Where potential abuse was identified social workers encouraged residential homes to use disciplinary policies as a means of isolating and managing risk. The study has implications for understanding risk within social work practice. It shows that whilst social workers use law to govern individuals, these laws are interpreted against cultural values. Additionally they also draw on assumptions about the culture of others.

Keywords : adult safeguarding, governmentality, risk, risk assessment
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