

'A & E or Bomber Command? Understanding expertise in child protection teams'

This paper is based upon a study of local authority social workers working in inner city, child protection teams. The study used an ethnographic design, combining observations and in-depth interviews over a sixteen-month period (Jan 2010 – April 2011) in four inner-city, child protection teams.

The paper will discuss the emotional aspects of child protection work, particularly the impact of organisational culture. The social defences used within organisations by practitioners and managers to cope in highly challenging circumstances will be explored (Menzies Lyth, 1989; Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994). For example, avoiding or reducing the impact of responsibility by upward delegation, crosschecking or ritual task performance.

The paper will also explore the nature and development of practitioner expertise within a high pressure environment, examining how practitioners move from novices through to expert levels of performance (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Fook, 1997). A particular focus will be the interaction between organisational culture and practitioner expertise and, as noted in the Munro Review, whether the procedurally-dominated nature of current child protection settings presents challenges to the development and retention of experienced practitioners (Munro, 2011).

The implications for both social work education and service settings will be discussed. A key focus will be the implications for planned reforms being introduced by the Social Work Reform Board and the Munro Review of Child Protection. More specifically, the organisational tensions and barriers to the introduction of the Consultant Social Worker role will be discussed.

References

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