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The ecology of judgement and decision making in child and family social work

The task of making professional judgements and decisions in social work has fascinated academic social work since 1917 when Mary Richmond first identified this as a central area for developing practice knowledge and skills. Over time, judgement and decision making in social work has been the victim of changing patterns and ideologies of practice. A tension between defensive practice, which led to the imposition of procedural protocols for judgement and decision making, and professional autonomy in making clinical judgements has developed.

Research in the USA (Baumann, 1997) and the UK (Hollows 2001, 2003) has linked the process of judgement and decision making to the ecology of practice in child and family social work. Studies conceived independently and using diverse methodologies have yielded highly compatible results. These studies demonstrate that key factors influencing judgement and decision making form an ecology of practice which influences not only the nature of practice but the way it is experienced by professionals and service users alike.

More recently, Cauvain (2009 forthcoming) has used this model to theorise the experience of being a social worker and to identify issues in the recruitment and retention of the social work force.

The key factors under consideration are:

The cases – the content and predominant characteristics of the cases held by social workers

The worker – the training, experience, management and supervision of staff combined with their personal resilience

The agency – issues affecting the way in which the agency operates, including management attitudes and processes, in terms of the development of a 'competent workplace'

The outside world – how the role and task of child and family social workers are regarded externally, including government, courts, other professionals, media and communities.

This paper will present these issues and point to some ways of reconciling conflictual aspects within the practice ecology.