

Assessment in child protection; A comparative study Norway - England

by

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ASSESSMENT IN CHILD PROTECTION; A COMPARATIVE STUDY NORWAY – ENGLAND

Abstract

Aims: The overall aim of this thesis was to explore the phenomenon of assessment in child protection by comparing two different assessment practices, the Norwegian and the English. Additional aims have been to generate knowledge by interpreting findings from the perspectives of professionals and parents who have experienced assessment, and to contribute to identify central aspects of the use of professional judgement in child protection assessments. The guiding research questions throughout this thesis have been: what mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seem to constrain and support fruitful assessment practices? Additionally, what can we learn from each other (Norway-England) in terms of such practices? A “Critical Realist” approach has been applied as an overarching perspective throughout this thesis.

Methods: The data source for this study consists of interviews with social workers and parents from Norway (Bergen) and England (Bristol), together with assessment reports from both countries. This is an in-depth study with a qualitative approach, including interviews with 14 social workers regarding their perspectives on practice, analyzed by means of thematic content analysis. Additionally, 11 interviews with parents were undertaken, who had been assessed by social workers following child protection concerns, analyzed by means of thematic narrative approach. Furthermore, a total of 31 assessment reports (which were not linked to the family cases), were analyzed through textual content analysis.

Results: When analyzing the professionals’ experiences (*Paper 1*) three main themes emerged: 1. Assessment framework, 2. Professional judgements, and 3. Contextual factors. The main findings show that the social workers in Norway and England experienced their respective assessment framework quite

differently. Specifically, social workers in Norway presented professional judgement as a core element of assessing in child protection, but looked for more structured ways to make good judgements. However, they were concerned about increases in bureaucracy in the assessment process, resulting in more paperwork and less time spent with families. The social workers in England were proud of their “triangle” model for assessment and the general thoroughness in the system, but they longed for more trust to use professional judgement in assessment, and more resources to meet the needs of families after assessment. Differences between the two groups were discussed in the light of contextual factors, with special focus on the concept of accountability: How does the government in each country restrict and/or support the professional judgement of social workers when assessing in child protection? Differences were found in national accountability approaches, with the English authorities turning to structural accountability strategies by controlling and reducing the space for professional judgement through structures and procedures, and the Norwegian authorities on the other hand using a more epistemic accountability approach by supporting, rather than restricting, the room for professional judgements through resources in terms of staff and education. The parents’ experiences (*Paper 2*) resulted in two overarching themes of “emotions” and “power” in assessment practice. When asked about their opinions of the current assessment framework, families in both countries talked more about feelings than about framework and procedures. The parents’ experiences of assessment were similar in both countries. First and foremost they experienced strong emotions in a stressful situation: anxiety, frustration, powerlessness, but also relief. However some differences were identified in the way social work is acted out according to the national assessment framework and policy context. The English framework and procedures seemed to contribute to provide clarity with regard to process and power within the system. The Norwegian assessment practice was characterized by professional judgement accompanied by more resources, which seems to enable helpful decisions from the family’s point of view. However, this heavy reliance on professional judgement within relationships was also viewed by parents as social workers’ having informal power. *Paper 3* is a theoretical analysis of the different characteristics illustrated by Norway and England regarding the role of professional judgement in child protection assessments. This paper explores and discusses the different ways in which professional judgement is

understood and addressed in each system. Acknowledging child protection as a “Wicked problem”(in terms of complexity), a model of Grounded Professional Judgement is proposed, based on notions of epistemic responsibility and accountability to support the exercise of professional judgement in situations of uncertainty. This model occupies a middle position between those currently reflected in the assessment systems in the English and Norwegian context. Retaining a commitment to the use of professional judgements, the model nonetheless provides a structure within which a judgement can be exercised more rigorously, transparently and in a way that can be called to account. In this way, Grounded Professional Judgement may provide a counterbalance to the potential idiosyncrasies of decision making, and avoids professional judgement being elevated to a point where it is beyond challenge or critique. At the same time, in systems where the space for professional judgement has been reduced at the expense of increased procedure and bureaucracy, it would provide a framework within which professional judgement can be “reclaimed” by social workers and built back in to practice.

Conclusions: Assessment frameworks in child protection seem to be of importance for all those involved in assessment practice. Experiences from Norway and England can be used as illustrations of different stances on a continuum where different assessment frameworks and practices include diverse framing of the problems. Heavy reliance on assessment structures may restrict the room for professional judgements (as seen in England), whilst lack of mandatory assessment structures implies heavy reliance on professional judgement (as seen in Norway). The pitfalls on both ends of this continuum imply that a middle-position might be most fruitful in assessment; the main question is where to find the balance between the two. It also appears fruitful to support assessments by systemic factors, eg enough resources in terms of staff, education and interventions, together with constructive public debate. From the families` point of view, the “right” balance involves clarity of the assessment process and power issues, and provision of tailored services and interventions after assessment.

Key words: Accountability, assessment frameworks, child protection, comparative study Norway, England, family perspective, professional judgement, social workers perspectives.

ASSESSMENT IN CHILD PROTECTION; A COMPARATIVE STUDY NORWAY-ENGLAND

Sammenheng

Mål: Det overordnede målet for denne avhandlingen var og utforske fenomenet barnevernets undersøkelser gjennom å sammenligne to ulike undersøkelsespraksiser; den norske og den engelske. Delmål har vært å utvikle kunnskap ved å tolke resultatene fra perspektivene til sosial arbeidere og foreldre med erfaring fra undersøkelser, i tillegg til å bidra til å identifisere ulike aspekter ved bruken av profesjonelt skjønn i barnevernets undersøkelser. Et gjennomgående forskningsspørsmål for avhandlingen har vært; hvilke mekanismer påvirker undersøkelsene i de to kontekstene, og hva synes å hemme og fremme fruktbare undersøkelsespraksiser i barnevernet? Og i tillegg; hva kan vi lære av hverandre (Norge-England) når det gjelder fruktbare undersøkelsespraksiser? Et «Kritisk Realisme» perspektiv er gjennomgående anvendt i avhandlingen.

Metoder: Datakildene for avhandlingen består av intervjuer med sosial arbeidere og foreldre fra Norge (Bergen) og England (Bristol), sammen med undersøkelsesrapporter fra begge land. Dette er en dybdestudie med kvalitativ tilnærming, som inkluderer intervjuer med 14 sosialarbeidere vedrørende deres syn på egen praksis, analysert via tematisk innholdsanalyse, og 11 intervjuer av foreldre som har opplevd en barnevernsundersøkelse, analysert ved hjelp av tematisk narrativ tilnærming. I tillegg ble 31 undersøkelsesrapporter analysert ved hjelp av dokument analyse/innholdsanalyse (rapportene ikke koplet til de intervjuede familiene).

Resultater: Under analysen av de profesjonelles erfaringer (*artikkel 1*) utviklet det seg tre hovedtema: 1.Undersøkelsesmodell, 2.Profesjonelt skjønn, og 3.Kontekstuelle faktorer. Hovedfunnene viste at sosialarbeidere i Norge og England opplevde deres respektive undersøkelsesmodell forskjellig. Sosial arbeidere i Norge vektla særlig profesjonelt skjønn som et hovedelement i barnevernets undersøkelser, men ville gjerne hatt mer strukturerte måter å undersøke på som hjelpestrukturer for gode skjønnsvurderinger. De var engstelige for at en økt byråkratisering i undersøkelsesprosessen vil resultere i mer papirarbeid og mindre tid til brukerne. Sosialarbeiderne i England viste

seg å være godt fornøyde med «triangelmodellen» i undersøkelsesarbeidet og den generelle grundigheten i systemet, men lengtet etter mer tillit i anvendelsen av profesjonelt skjønn i undersøkelsene, sammen med mer ressurser til å imøtekomme familienes hjelpebehov identifisert gjennom undersøkelsesarbeidet. Disse forskjellene mellom de to gruppene ble diskutert i lys av kontekstuelle faktorer, med et særlig fokus på begrepet «accountability» (ansvarsliggjøring/etterrettelighet); Hvordan støtter og/eller hindrer myndighetene i de to landene sosial arbeidernes bruk av profesjonelt skjønn i undersøkelsesarbeidet? Det ble funnet forskjeller i nasjonale «accountability» strategier, hvor engelske myndigheter går i retning av strukturelle «accountability» strategier ved å kontrollere og redusere rommet for skjønnsbruk gjennom strukturer og prosedyrer, mens norske myndigheter beveger seg mer mot «epistemic accountability» strategier med fokus på å støtte skjønnsbruken ved hjelp av økte ressurser i form av stillinger og videreutdanning fremfor å redusere rommet for- og kontrollere bruken av skjønn. Foreldrenes erfaringer (*artikkel 2*) resulterte i de to overordnede tema «følelser» og «makt» i undersøkelsene arbeidet. Selv om de fikk spørsmål om undersøkelsesmodell, så snakket foreldrene i begge land mer om sterke følelser enn om modeller og prosedyrer, og disse erfaringene var like i begge land. Først og fremst hadde de erfaringer i form av sterke følelser i en belastende situasjon; redsel, frustrasjoner, maktesløshet, men også lettelse. Til tross for disse likhetene så ble det også identifisert ulikheter med hensyn til hvordan sosialt arbeid ble praktisert med bakgrunn i undersøkelsesmodell og «policy» kontekst. Undersøkelsesmodell og prosedyrer i England så ut til bidra til klarhet og tydelighet med hensyn til undersøkelsesprosess og maktstrukturer i systemet. I Norge ble undersøkelsene karakterisert ved bruken av profesjonelt skjønn og et større tilfang av ressurser i barnevernet, noe som ut fra et familieperspektiv bidro til hjelpsomme beslutninger. Stor grad av skjønnsvurderinger ble imidlertid opplevd som en «taus» maktform av familiene. *Artikkel 3* er en teoretisk basert analyse av ulike karakteristika i synet på og bruken av profesjonelt skjønn i barnevernets undersøkelser, illustrert ved Norge og England. Denne artikkelen utforsker og diskuterer ulike syn på profesjonelt skjønn i de to ulike kontekstene, og stiller spørsmål ved hva vi kan lære av hverandre med fokus på hva som oppleves som fruktbare undersøkelsespraksiser. Gjennom å anerkjenne barnevernsproblematikk som et «wicked problem» (komplekst, i motsetning

til lineært), blir en modell av Grounded Professional Judgement foreslått, basert på et syn om «epistemic» ansvarlighet og «accountability», for å støtte bruken av profesjonelt skjønn i situasjoner preget av usikkerhet. Denne tilnærmingen befinner seg i en mellomposisjon i de to ulike synene på bruken av skjønn i undersøkelsesarbeidet i Norge og England. Denne mellomposisjonen ivaretar synet på skjønn som en sentral komponent i undersøkelsene, men tilbyr en struktur som gjør at skjønnsvurderingene blir mer transparente/gjennomsiktige og dermed gjennomført på en mer ansvarliggjørende måte («accountability»). På denne måten blir Grounded Professional Judgement en motvekt til synet på skjønn som hellig i seg selv og som selvforklarende i møte med kritikk. Samtidig, i systemer hvor profesjonelt skjønn har blitt redusert til fordel for økende prosedyrer og byråkrati, kan denne måten å tenke på tilby et fokus som kan hjelpe sosialarbeidere til og gjenreise skjønnen som et grunnleggende element i sosialt arbeid.

Konklusjon: Undersøkelsesmodell/struktur synes å være av betydning for de som er involverte i barnevernets undersøkelser. Erfaringer fra Norge og England kan brukes for å illustrere ulike ståsted på et kontinuum hvor ulike undersøkelsesmodeller og praksiser rommer ulike problemforståelser. Ved sterkt fokus på- og tiltro til undersøkelsesstrukturer, kan rommet for skjønnsvurderinger bli begrenset (som sett i England), mens mangel på undersøkelsesstrukturer impliserer en sterk tiltro til at skjønn utgjør en hovedkomponent i undersøkelsesarbeidet (som for eksempel i Norge). Fallgruvne på begge sider av dette kontinuumet med strukturer/prosedyrer på ene siden og profesjonelt skjønn på andre siden, viser oss at en midtposisjon kan være det mest fruktbare i undersøkelsesarbeidet; utfordringen er å finne den rette balansen. Undersøkelsesarbeidet ser også ut til å dra nytte av støttende systemfaktorer som tilstrekkelige ressurser med hensyn til bemanning, utdanning og tiltak, sammen med konstruktive offentlige debatter. For familiene som omfattes av undersøkelsene, innebærer en slik «rett» balanse tydelighet i undersøkelsesprosess og maktforhold, sammen med «skreddersydde» tilnærminger og tiltak.

Nøkkelord: «Accountability», barnevern, familieperspektiv, komparativ studie Norge-England, profesjonelt skjønn, sosial arbeider perspektiv, undersøkelsesmodell.

ORIGINAL PAPERS:

This thesis is based on the following papers referred in the text by their numbers (1, 2 and 3):

- 1.** Samsonsen, V. & Willumsen, E. (2014). Assessment in child protection: Social worker's voices in England and Norway. *Journal of Comparative Social Work*, 9(1), 1-34.
- 2.** Samsonsen, V. & Willumsen, E. (2015). Narratives from parents in England and Norway: -power and emotions in child protection assessments. *Journal of Comparative Social Work*, 10(1), 1-25.
- 3.** Samsonsen, V. & Turney, D. (2015). The role of professional judgement in social work assessment: a comparison between Norway and England. (Submitted 27.01.15, and received 10.06.15 as accepted with minor revisions, in *European Journal of Social Work*).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Aim and research question	5
1.2	A brief introduction to assessment in child protection	7
1.3	Different approaches to assessment	9
1.4	The comparative perspective	10
2	The contextual frame	12
2.1	Concept clarifications.....	12
2.2	The Norwegian assessment framework	14
2.3	The English assessment framework.....	16
2.4	Contextual factors influencing assessments in Norway and England .	19
2.5	Assessment related findings	23
3	Methodology	27
3.1	Ontological and epistemological considerations	27
3.2	Data sources.....	31
3.3	Sample and data gathering.....	32
3.3.1	<i>Social worker interviews</i>	32
3.3.2	<i>Interviews with parents</i>	33
3.3.3	<i>The assessment documents</i>	34
3.4	Data analysis methods	35
3.4.1	<i>Thematic content analysis</i>	36
3.4.2	<i>Narrative thematic analysis</i>	38
3.4.3	<i>Text analysis</i>	40
3.5	Methodological reflections.....	41
3.5.1	<i>Reflections on the comparisons</i>	42
3.5.2	<i>Reflections on the research interviews</i>	43
3.5.3	<i>My pre-understanding as the researcher</i>	45
3.5.4	<i>Credibility and transferability</i>	46
3.5.5	<i>Ethical considerations</i>	48
4	Theoretical perspectives.....	50
4.1	Social theories – different levels.....	50

4.2	Critical Realism in relation to theory	51
4.3	Wicked problems	54
4.4	Professional judgement in assessment.....	55
	4.4.1 <i>Accountability theory</i>	57
	4.4.2 <i>Epistemic responsibility</i>	58
4.5	Power and emotions in assessment	58
5	Overview of the findings	61
5.1	Paper 1	62
5.2	Paper 2	63
5.3	Paper 3	66
5.4	Additional analysis of assessment reports.....	67
6	Discussion.....	73
6.1	The role of problem framing in assessment	74
	6.1.1 <i>Child protection assessment - “wicked” or “tame” problems?....</i>	74
	6.1.2 <i>Structural and epistemic accountability orientations.....</i>	76
6.2	Contextual factors in assessment	78
	6.2.1 <i>Assessment frameworks and the role of professional judgement</i>	78
	6.2.2 <i>Public debates and opinions</i>	81
	6.2.3 <i>Different resource situations</i>	82
6.3	Fruitful assessment processes – for whom?.....	84
	6.3.1 <i>The social workers perspectives on assessments.....</i>	85
	6.3.2 <i>Parents’ perspectives on assessment</i>	86
6.4	The “pendulum swing” – towards a fruitful balance?	88
6.5	Concluding remarks and implications for practice	90
	Acknowledgements	94
	Reference list	96
	Appendices	104

1 Introduction

When we look outside our familiar context, we can see new perspectives. This study originates from wondering about assessments in child protection, based on comparative reflections. I am educated as a social worker, and have worked in child protection/welfare services in Norway for several years. During those years of education and practice, in many ways I took the Norwegian assessment practice “for granted”, and did not question it to a great extent. When working as a research assistant in 2008, I “stumbled” across some literature discussing the role of risk assessments versus professional judgements in assessments. This opened up new perspectives on assessment, and raised some new questions for me about how assessments are carried out in Norway compared to other countries, and why this is so. This curiosity, and these new questions, led to a PhD position at the University of Stavanger, where I had the opportunity to explore different assessment practices. The Norwegian and English frameworks and practices serve as examples of different approaches to assessment within child protection, and offer the opportunity to reflect on and discuss variations including those beyond the two specific practices.

Over the last fifty years the focus on and knowledge concerning child abuse and neglect has increased significantly in the western world. Several studies show that children in contact with the child protection system are generally those at higher risk of poor health both physical and psychological, of committing suicide, and of poorer school performances (Egelund & Hestbæk, 2007; Vinnerljung, Sundell, Løfholm, & Humlesjø, 2006; Weyts, 2004). A common feature in child protection systems in the western world is the process of early assessment after a referral of concern is received. In practice this means that the assessment constitutes the initial phase of the

child protection case and the early stages of the working relationship between the family and social workers involved. This may lead to the conclusion that good quality assessment in child protection has a significant role to play in contributing to better outcomes for children in need of protection and provision. It is therefore important to understand what supports best practice in assessment. At its simplest, the process of assessment refers to the gathering of information to provide the basis for decision making, planning and resource allocation (Kirton, 2009). In practice, several different assessment models have been developed with different levels of complexity and structure. This may reflect the fact that the assessment of a child and their family in terms of risk and need is one of the most controversial and complex areas in child protection (Holland, 2011). This PhD thesis explores assessment in child protection by comparing two different assessment practices, the Norwegian and the English. The guiding questions are: what seems to constrain and support fruitful assessment practice, and what can the two systems learn from each other? Norway and England serve as illustrations of different assessment practices, and the comparative perspective raises the opportunity to shed light on different mechanisms at play in assessment practices in different contexts. This makes the issue relevant to practice in other national settings as well. "Critical Realism" has been applied as an overarching perspective (which will be elaborated), and its contribution to this thesis has specifically been the focus on "mechanisms" at play in assessment, in order to explain and discuss the phenomena of assessment within and beyond the two contexts.

Two contrasting assessment frameworks are explored; one "open" assessment framework, characterized by few mandatory guidelines and procedures (Norway), and one more structured assessment framework,

accompanied by many procedures (England). The comparison of the two contexts has been chosen to illustrate different approaches in assessment. Issues in assessment may be shown as a continuum consisting of heavy reliance on structures and procedures on the one hand, and few guidelines and heavy reliance on professional judgement on the other hand. The Scandinavian social democratic approach is characterized by few mandatory guidelines and a strong emphasis on children's and family's needs, but with little focus on risk assessment evaluations (Bunkholdt & Sandbæk, 2008) (eg Norway, Denmark and Finland). Other western countries (eg US, Canada, Australia and UK), have in general chosen more structured assessment models (Holland, 2011). Different approaches have been applied on the basis of public debates and several tragic deaths of abused and neglected children in the respective countries (Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2012). The more structured models appear to be based on risk assessment, and a belief in early detection as a means to predict which children are at risk. However, there is still a large margin of error when using predictive instruments with human beings (Munro, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

The current Norwegian assessment model may be described as an "open" assessment framework with no set national framework, and accompanied by fewer mandatory national and local procedures than many other westerns assessment approaches. This implies professional judgement as a core component in the assessment process, hence the name "the professional judgement model" used in this thesis. The current assessment framework in England is the "Common Assessment Framework" (CAF) (Department of Health, Department for Education & Employment, 2000), accompanied by many national and local procedures. A recent review of child protection services in England (Munro, 2011) emphasized the need to refocus on social work and professional judgement in assessment, and states that English social

workers spend too much time on procedures. Conversely, a similar report in Norway (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012) identified heavy reliance on professional judgement as a potential problem for public justice in terms of variation in services and decision-making. This PhD thesis explores two different assessment alternatives in child protection by an in-depth study of Norwegian and English assessment practices, in order to compare the two different approaches.

The study explores assessment from different perspectives: social workers and parents in both countries were interviewed about their assessment experiences and opinions. In addition, assessment documents such as final reports from child protection offices in both countries were analyzed. To understand contextual factors affecting assessment frameworks and debates, I relied mainly on literature especially from England and Norway. However, international literature also provided useful information and raised interesting questions. Since I am a Norwegian, and also a professional social worker with assessment experience, I realized I needed more “under the skin” knowledge from England. I, therefore, had a two months stay at the University of Bristol while gathering the English data, which gave me a more thorough understanding of “the English way of thinking” (of course there are a lot of different ways of thinking in England). I also gained an idea of the ongoing debates and had the opportunity to work with an English researcher on “paper 3” in this thesis (Dr Danielle Turney from University of Bristol). This thesis does not capture the entire field of assessments in Norway and England. The interviews took place in the cities of Bergen (Norway) and Bristol (England), with their specific practices and contexts. Still, the study aims to shed light on different mechanisms at play in assessment practice within and beyond these two specific contexts, and thereby aims to contribute to knowledge relevant to practice in other national settings as well.

This thesis consists of two main sections. First, there is a summary consisting of six chapters elaborating thematic and methodological issues and choices made in the thesis, together with an overall discussion of the findings. Second, a section including the three papers (1-3) is presented. Following the introduction, I present the contextual frame for assessments, before elaborating on methodology and theoretical perspectives. This is followed by an overview of the findings, and a discussion of these results in relation to the aim of the study. Finally, I outline the implications for practice.

1.1 Aim and research question

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore the phenomenon of assessment in child protection by comparing two different assessment practices, the Norwegian and the English. Additional aims have been to generate knowledge by interpreting findings from the perspectives of professionals and parents who have experienced assessment, and to contribute to identifying central aspects of the use of professional judgement in child protection assessments. The guiding research questions throughout this thesis have been: what mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seems to constrain or support fruitful assessment practices? Additionally, what can we learn from each other (Norway-England) in terms of such practices?

The data derived from 14 interviews with social workers, 10 interviews with 11 parents and 31 assessment reports on a total of 46 children. Three papers were written as parts of this study (see papers 1-3), all of them relating to the overall aim and representing sub-themes of this thesis. The specific aims of the three papers were:

Paper 1: “Assessment in child protection – social workers’ voices in England and Norway”. This is an empirical paper based on interviews with social

workers in Norway and England, to explore their opinions of the two different practices and contexts for assessments.

Paper 2: “Narratives from parents in England and Norway: - power and emotions in child protection assessments”. This is an empirical paper, based on interviews with parents who have experienced assessments in Norway and in England, with the aim of capturing their experiences and opinions on assessments.

Paper 3: “The role of professional judgement in social work assessment: a comparison between Norway and England”. This is a theoretical approach on the two different assessment practices, with the aim of exploring and discussing the different ways in which professional judgement is understood and addressed in each system.

These three papers each explore and discuss assessment from different perspectives but with the same purpose: to contribute to a deeper understanding of assessment in child protection, by revealing and discussing some influential mechanisms at play in the two contexts, in order to shed light on what seem to constrain and support fruitful assessment practices.

“Critical Realism” contains both a general, philosophical aspect and a more social scientific aspect (Danemark, Ekstrøm, Jacobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). It has been applied as an overarching perspective in this thesis because of its focus on revealing and discussing mechanisms in order to explain more clearly the phenomena of assessment in child protection. In addition, the notion of “Wicked problems” as perspective and theory has been applied to discuss differences in understandings of child protection issues, thereby illuminating differences in the role of professional judgement in the two contexts. Other more specific theories have been used as analytical tools; understandings of professional judgement, power related theories, and theories

on emotions (these will be elaborated in the theory section).

1.2 A brief introduction to assessment in child protection

This is brief introduction on the topic “child protection assessments”, which will be further elaborated in the next chapter, with clarification of concepts and a more thorough presentation and discussion of assessments in Norway and England.

Over the last fifty years, the focus on abuse and neglect has increased in the western world. National child protection and child welfare are organized differently in different parts of the world because they are social configurations rooted in specific visions for children, families, communities and societies (Cameron & Freymond, 2006). A common feature in child protection systems, however, is the process of early assessment after a referral of concern is received (Kirton, 2009). Every day, social workers all over the world carry out assessments of children`s welfare, with the aim of helping to protect them (Holland, 2011). At its simplest, the process of assessment refers to the gathering of information to provide the basis for decision making, planning and resource allocation (Kirton, 2009), but several different models have been developed to meet this task (Holland, 2011). Since 2000, the number of referrals to child protection has increased in several western countries: Australia, Canada, the US, England and Norway (Kirton, 2009; Studsrød, Willumsen, & Ellingsen, 2012). In Norway, with a population of 5.84 million (in 2013), 41 493 assessments were initiated in 2013 (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2014). In England, with its population of 53.01 million (in 2011), there were 440 800 initial assessments and 184 800 core assessments completed in the year ending 31 March 2011 (UK government statistics, 2014) (see chapter two for more information on initial vs core assessments). The

number of assessments stresses how important it is to gain knowledge about what makes an effective assessment, and how significant a role good quality assessment has in contributing to better outcomes for children in need of protection. However, regardless of the assessment model and structure, a decision based on the information gathered has to be made. Decision-making and the use of professional judgement plays a key role in the assessment process regardless of the framework and procedures (Turney et al., 2012).

Different ways of finding the most useful approach to assessment have been tried in different nations (Holland, 2011). Several assessment models and procedures have been implemented in the developed world, and most western countries have chosen risk assessment models, which can be defined as; “The systematic collection of information to determine the degree to which a child is likely to be abused or neglected in the future” (English & Pecora, 1994: 452). Risk assessment models have often been chosen on the basis of public debates which have followed the tragic deaths of abused and neglected children in the respective countries. This has been the case in England. A different solution to meet the same problems in protecting children has been developed in Scandinavia. The “professional judgement model” is mainly a Scandinavian social democratic model, characterized by fewer guidelines and a stronger emphasis on children’s and families` needs. There is little focus on risk assessment evaluation in Norway (Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes, 2011), even though there have been some changes towards greater focus on risk factors over the last years with locally implementation of a new assessment model (Kvelling, 2010). This division reflects a debate in the literature on the usefulness of standardized questionnaires and tools in assessment (Turney et al., 2012). There are studies which suggest that the use

of standardized tools in assessment is an effective way to detect and prevent maltreatment (Barlow & Schrader-MacMillan, 2009), but other researchers warrant against these tools, pointing out that practitioners believe the reliability of such tools to be greater than it is often the case (Munro, 2011).

1.3 Different approaches to assessment

As mentioned above, one of the key issues in the international discourses on child protection assessments is the tension between seeking assessment which has measurable scientific validity and seeking assessment that reflects the nature of each family's individual situation (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000; Holland, 2011:2). The child protection literature is commonly divided between "child protection" in the liberal western countries (eg the US, Canada and England) and "child welfare" in the social democratic context (eg Norway, Sweden and Denmark). Traditionally "child protection" systems focus on risk assessment, while "child welfare systems" tend to have a more therapeutic orientation towards the needs of families (Christiansen, 2011), and the differences in assessment approaches seem to reflect these different orientations. Evaluating risk of abuse or neglect, might be seen as an attempt to "look into the future" on the basis of our knowledge of risk factors. Some of the best known forms of risk assessment are actuarial methods, which involve the presence of standardised risk factors, and often incorporate a cumulative scoring system (Munro, 1999; Turney et al., 2012). Some states in the US have applied actuarial systems as a way to try to protect children from future harm (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000). Even though the English assessment model might be characterized by structure and procedures, it cannot be placed within the actuarial systems (although some cumulative scoring systems are available as methods in assessments). The Norwegian assessment is, on the

other hand, less structured, without a set national framework and mandatory procedures for social workers to follow, which might imply more reliance on professional judgement. I will now turn to why a comparative perspective seem useful for shedding light on the aim and research question of this study, by describing some of the contributions and limitations of comparative studies in general.

1.4 The comparative perspective

One of the most central aspects of a comparative perspective is the opportunity to learn from others. We search for knowledge to identify commonalities and differences, to learn on different levels (Ragin, 1994). Finding out “what happens” in another country lies at the core of cross-national and comparative research (Baistow, 2000). The comparison of different practices raises the opportunity to reflect on and learn through differences. By moving outside our own familiar practice, the opportunity to “pick up” good ideas and reflect on our own practice is offered, because of the contrast of practices. Cross-national research can be carried out on different levels with different purposes. For example, one can either compare countries as objects of the study, or countries can provide the context of the study. If countries provide the context of the study, the researcher is able to study a particular phenomenon across two or more countries to find out more about it (Baistow, 2000). Other options in comparative research are also available, eg “trans-national research”, where the countries are considered as components of larger international systems (Ragin, 1994). In this thesis, the unit of analysis is assessment as a phenomenon, and the two countries serve as the context for the exploration and contrast of frameworks and practices. The identified mechanisms in assessment manifest themselves differently in the two contexts, which allow reflection on these

differences.

A relevant question to ask regarding this thesis is why Norway and England were chosen as comparative units when studying assessment in child protection. One of the main reasons is the assumption of established differences in the level of set assessment frameworks and mandatory procedures. England is characterized by a more risk-based, structured assessment approach (Gilbert et al., 2011), and Norway appears to have an assessment approach based on families' broader needs for interventions, based on professional judgements, without a set national framework and fewer mandatory procedures (Kildedahl, Uggerhøj, Nordstoga, & Sagatun, 2011). Comparing these two different approaches illustrates the more general social work dichotomies of methods of structured risk assessments versus decision-making based on professional judgement (Bishop, 2000; Munro, 2011). In this study, Norway and England are both objects of the study, each with its national specific characteristics and debates, but also the context for studying the phenomenon of assessment in a broader sense (Baistow, 2000). Although one can easily say it is no wonder that assessments are carried out differently in different welfare regimes and political systems, I will say that *because of this* it is important to discuss and analyze how the same problems are understood and addressed in each system. How can we account for the different directions England and Norway have moved in, to address the same problem? The possibility of contrasting and standing both inside and outside these two different practices provides opportunities to consider possible strengths and weaknesses within each (Berven, 2003), and adds knowledge and insight to the broader discourse of assessments in child protection.

2 The contextual frame

In this chapter, the contextual frame for this study will be elaborated, by a description of the assessment frameworks used in Norway and England, and by highlighting some of the factors which influence assessment in the two countries. Clarification of some of the most important concepts is set out in the beginning of the chapter, and further description and discussion is provided throughout parts three and four. The “state of the art” is crucial when conducting a research study. What do we already know about child protection assessments? How might this study contribute to knowledge about assessments? This important issue will be elaborated at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Concept clarifications

Child protection is the concept I use for both the protection and welfare dimension. In Norwegian, the word for the child protection system incorporates both the protection and welfare dimensions that are separate in the English language. This mirrors how the Norwegian system is organized with no formal division between child protection and child welfare services. In the English language, however, a distinction and tension seems to have arisen between these two terms; child protection and child welfare. This distinction is also present in how English services are organized and how cases are “labelled”. Within the English child protection/welfare system, a child either is defined as “in need” or on a “child protection register”, which implies at risk of harm. This division of levels of concern is not as explicitly present in the Norwegian system. In this thesis I don’t move into this discussion, but simply acknowledging its presence. I have chosen to use child protection as a general term because the kind of assessment I am referring to is the early assessment

by the frontline child protection service, not the broader assessment of children and families in other parts of the system. As we can see, the term *assessment* also differs between the Norwegian and English context and language. In this thesis, my task is the early assessment when a concern is referred. In Norway, the term assessment in child protection refers simply to this early stage of investigating a concern within a timeframe, to target intervention and the level of concern. By contrast in England, assessment is a much broader term used whenever a situation is to be assessed or evaluated. Assessment as a term in England is used in several different situations throughout the child protection and child welfare system, all the way up to placement and adoption. Assessment in the English context is also used as a term in the care of older people, care of disabled people etc., referring to different levels of assessment as well as purposes. In sum, the concept of assessment is used in a much broader way in England than in Norway. In this study, I use assessment as the equivalent of the Norwegian “undersøkelse”, and refer to the early stage of assessment in child protection. When presenting and discussing differences in assessment in the two contexts, I turn to the concepts of *assessment frameworks* and *assessment practice*. Framework refers to the different national approaches on assessment: how to collect, systematize and analyze the information gathered in assessment. Practice is a broader concept, including frameworks and other contextual factors like resources, debates etc. In this thesis I mostly use the concept assessment practice, but sometimes the term framework is more precise, at which point, I use this term instead.

2.2 The Norwegian assessment framework

Historically, Norway was the first country in the world to establish a public child protection/welfare system (Stang-Dahl, 1978). The legal frames are enacted in the Child Welfare Act of 1992, supported and supplemented by the more general Administration Act of 1967 (Bie, 2014). The UN Convention on Children's Rights (1989) is ratified by Norway and serves as an important underpinning basis for the child protection services (Bie, 2014). The Norwegian system was and is centered on children's and families' broader needs for services and interventions (Christiansen, 2011). In the 1980s, the Norwegian child protection system was criticized in the media because of children receiving insufficient help after referrals; the so called "folder children". This public debate has influenced how the system handles referrals and assessments, with set timescales enacted in the Child Welfare Act (Bunkholdt & Sandbæk, 2008). The main assessment guidelines are the basic principles of the Child Welfare Act itself, combined with a deadline of 3 months for completion. The principles are: "in the best interest of the child", combined with the "least intrusive act", and "the biological principle". It is also stated explicitly in the law that information regarding the assessment is not to be shared unnecessarily, which sometimes leads to problems in terms of inter-professional sharing of information (Kildedal et al., 2011). The caregivers cannot refuse an assessment or home visits, and the social workers can decide to talk to the child in privacy (ibid.). As these principles show, Norway does not have a nationally anchored explicit assessment framework or mandatory procedures, even though there is some national guidance (Barne-, likestillings- & inkluderingsdepartementet (BLD), 2006). This underpins the idea that professional judgement is a main component when social workers assess referrals based on concern or when the child appears to have a special need

for interventions and support (Kane, 2006). However, municipalities have the power to implement child protection assessment frameworks independently for the purpose of structuring the information gathering process on the basis of risk factors (Kvello, 2010). This has resulted in local variations throughout the country, and development of local frameworks and computer systems. Many municipalities have recently implemented an assessment framework called “Kvello”, which is broadly based on research knowledge about risk and protective factors (ibid.). The child protection office at a local level has the opportunity to consider the best way to investigate concerns. This means that the amount of information gathered, and the extent of family contact will depend on the specific situation and the professional judgement of those involved. However, municipalities often seem to develop procedures in cases where there are major concerns such as child abuse.

Broadly, the lack of externally imposed mandatory structure is consistent with the idea that professional judgement is a main component in social workers' assessments when there are child protection concerns. An assessment should take place when the child appears to have a special need for interventions and support (Kane, 2006) but the practitioner decides independently when this is the case, and then the best way to investigate the concern. So the amount and kind of information gathered, and the process for gathering it, will depend on the particular situation and the professional judgement made about the situation. Although it is not mandatory to write a final assessment report, it is common to produce some kind of record after an assessment is finished, either in the form of a report or a note in the child's file. Although the Child Welfare Act (1992) sets timescales and provides some juridical principles, assessment is carried out mostly on the basis of the social worker's professional judgement and according to municipal

frameworks if they exist (the concept of professional judgement will be elaborated in the theory section).

2.3 The English assessment framework

The legal frameworks for the English child protection services are set out in the Children Act of 1989, and the UN Convention on Children's Rights which were ratified by England in 1991 (Kirton, 2009). As a result of serious cases of abuse and neglect, England has implemented national mandatory procedures for assessment in child protection. Between 1970 and 1985, 35 public inquiries were conducted in relation to cases of serious child neglect or abuse of children by their caregivers, where the child protection system had failed to reveal and prevent the mistreatment (H. Bochel, C. Bochel, Page, & Sykes, 2009). This led to extensive public debate, and social workers were criticized for not recognizing the symptoms of child abuse, and for putting too much emphasis on cooperating with the adults at the cost of the children. The Department of Health introduced the publication "Protecting Children: A guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment" (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, 2000), which followed the introduction of the Children Act of 1989. The new assessment framework was designed to "provide a systematic way of analyzing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context in which they live" (Department of Health, Department of Education and Employment and Home Office 2000:8). This is the basis for the current assessment model, "the Assessment Framework". Following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, the public inquiry led by Lord Laming (see the Laming Report, 2003) resulted in the "Every Child Matters" policy. This rearrangement of social

services was one of the biggest social and political reforms in England (Simon & Ward, 2010), with the main aim that safeguarding children should be “everybody’s business”.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) came as a result of the “everybody’s business” approach, and is designed to promote early preventative intervention that co-ordinates assessment across multiple agencies and professionals, including health, education, housing and leisure services as well as social services. A simple assessment form is used, and it is possible for other professionals and agencies to identify and register whether a CAF has been completed (Holland, 2011). This is a “lighter” form of assessment than the more thorough version undertaken by the child protection system. There is also a distinction between what is called “initial” and “core” assessment within child protection, according to the time and depth of the assessment. Core assessment is the thorough, in-depth assessment, based on information gathered through “the Assessment Triangle” (fig 1). The guidance for this model is evidence-based (Holland, 2011), and the triangle consists of three equally important elements: the child’s developmental needs, the parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors. As the figure shows, every side of the triangle has further specific sources of information and issues to be investigated. In addition to this triangle, national and local procedures are developed as well as computer systems, including timescales and mandatory written reports. Hence, English child protection assessments constitute a structured model which is intended to be comprehensive. It also emphasizes procedures and utilizes specifically designed computer systems.

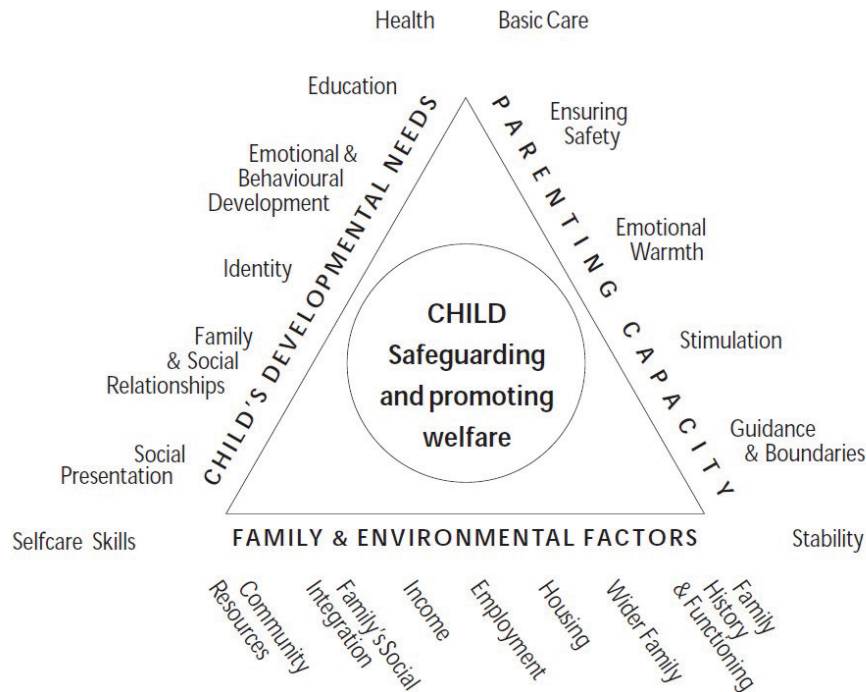


Fig 1: The Assessment Framework

Source: Department of Health (2000:17).

As we can see, there are differences in both policy and practice between England and Norway in assessment frameworks: In Norway, there is no national set mandatory framework for social workers to follow in practice, whereas in England, there is a national set mandatory framework which informs practice. In addition, Norway has few national mandatory procedures accompanying assessment, and various levels of local procedures and computer systems. England on the other hand, has a lot of both national and local mandatory procedures, also accompanied by different computer systems. However, the countries are unified in the national anchoring of child protection assessments in a specific law (Norway: “The Child Welfare Act” of 1992,

England: “The Children Act” of 1989), and the ratification of the UN Convention on Children’s Rights.

2.4 Contextual factors influencing assessments in Norway and England

The number of people living in England is 53.01 million (in 2011) (UK Government statistics), whereas 5.84 million people live in Norway (in 2013) (SSB, 2013a). The child population in England consists of 13 000 000 children, and approximately 50-100 of these children die every year because of mistreatment (Kirton, 2009). Tragedies in terms of children dying have been extensively debated in the English media, and the government response to these debates has been to implement major reviews of services, which have led to social policy reforms with direct impacts on child protection assessments. The child population in Norway consists of approximately 1 120 000 children (SSB, 2013b). It is difficult to identify the estimated number of child deaths due to abuse in Norway, but they certainly occur. In many ways Norway and England are “most different cases”. Both are western, democratic and affluent societies, but whereas England is a densely populated country with a more liberal policy system, Norway is a more sparsely settled country with a strong social governmental policy system. At the same time, the two countries are facing the same underlying issues in child protection assessments; preventing child abuse and promoting child welfare. In this section, some of the relevant contextual factors for assessments in the two countries are set out. This includes differences in policy and public discourses. However, this is not an attempt to analyze and fully explain differences, but to highlight some contextual features of importance when exploring assessments in the two practices.

The governmental response in England over the last two decades, in preventing and detecting child abuse has been through risk assessments and bureaucratization (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2011). The Norwegian governmental response to criticism of its child protection service has mainly been to transfer more resources into the system in the form of staff, interventions and continuing professional development for social workers already employed (Norges offentlige utredninger (NOU) 2000:12 p 111). The terms “risk”, “need” and “abuse” may be regarded as socially constructed phenomena, where the content is culturally and normatively defined (Parton, Thorpe, & Wattam, 1997). This implies that a country’s social policy reflects its values and, in the case of child protection, these values have an impact on how social workers carry out assessments (Bochel et al., 2009). The ideal of Norwegian social democracy is based on solidarity and a high degree of government intervention, whereas the English, more liberal/conservative system, is underpinned by values of personal privacy (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kirton, 2009). The broad economic context in each country has affected public services generally and social work in particular. In England, since 2010, there has been a sustained period of government spending cuts, with the result that local authority budgets have decreased significantly. These cuts have led to reductions in welfare services, tighter eligibility criteria for access to services, and decreasing levels of resource. Along with this “squeeze” on local government services, there has been increased pressure on the voluntary sector, where funding streams have also been affected. Norway, on the other hand, is still perceived as a wealthy country mainly because of the oil industry (although the oil industry in 2015 is facing problems), and has not yet experienced the economic difficulties facing many other European countries. Even though there has been a political shift in Norway giving conservative parties a larger role in the coalition government (in 2013), the country still consider itself to be a social democracy, with ideals

of a high levels of government intervention and redistribution of resources within the population. Terrible tragedies like the death of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Baby P) have been extensively debated in the English media (see, for example, Jones, 2014; Warner, 2013 and 2014). The government response to these debates has been to implement major reviews of services, which have, in turn, led to social policy reforms with direct impacts on child protection assessments. In Norway, the public debates on children dying of abuse have not reached the same level as those in England. However, especially one tragic event was debated extensively in the media. This was the death of 8 year old Kristoffer Kihle Gjerstad who was beaten to death in 2005 by his stepfather (he has been convicted of the killing). This led to a debate about the responsibility of children's services, but unlike the debate in England, this Norwegian debate did not lead to a national review of services. So far, no debates in Norway have pushed forward policy changes in assessment in child protection. The culture of public debates, both in form and consequences differ strongly between England and Norway (Green, 2008). Debates in England, especially related to the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Baby P, almost took the form of a witch hunt against the social workers, doctors and managers involved. Several people were sacked or resigned from their jobs, and their names and faces were on the front pages of national newspapers and magazines, as well as on the radio and TV news (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2013 and 2014). In Norway, the public debates related to the death of Kristoffer Kihle Gjerstad did not reach this personal level. No individual, other than the killer, was blamed directly, except Kristoffer's mother who was convicted for not protecting her son. Kristoffer's grandmother has fronted the debate asking, "What can we learn from this? How can we prevent this happening again?" (Gangdal, 2010). Green (2008) provides a thorough analysis of differences in public debates between Norway and England; different

political cultures and the structures that sustain them create different incentives to respond to crimes. In England, both majority parties are impelled to respond loudly and clearly to high-profile cases. Any opportunity to exploit weaknesses in political opponents are used for one's own party gain. Norway in contrast, has a multi-party system based on consensus and compromise, and there are fewer incentives to attack political opponents. Crimes are less likely to become a means to gain political capital than in England. As for the media, there is a highly competitive press market in England, with the need for catchy headlines, and less trust in expert commentaries on cases. This is not to the same extent the situation in Norway, where even the tabloid press presents a wide array of views of claim-makers including experts, which leads to more balanced reporting and discussion (Green, 2008). As Green's (2008) analysis shows, there appear to be differences between public debates in England and Norway, especially with regard to cultures of blame and responsibility. The interviews with the English social workers illuminated how the media debates influence practice from their perspectives.

The Munro review of child protection in England (2011) is, in many respects, very different from earlier reviews of child protection (Parton, 2012). It emphasizes the need to refocus social work on the use of professional judgement in assessments, and argues that English social workers spend too much time on procedures (Munro, 2011). This involves moving from a system that has become over-bureaucratized and focuses on compliance to one that values and develops professional expertise and focuses on the safety and welfare of children and young people (ibid.). Parton (2012) calls this an attempt to bring about a paradigm shift in English child protection. By contrast, in Norway, a recent national report states that too much emphasis on professional judgement and too few procedures may be a problem in Norwegian assessments, partly because child protection services vary significantly

between municipalities and between different social workers (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012). This report showed, for example, that a large number of referrals that were not followed up, were evaluated as requiring assessment when they were reviewed by other social workers in other districts (although of course this could happen in more proceduralised systems as well).

With regard to the pendulum swing between heavy reliance on risk assessments on the one hand and professional judgements on the other, it is interesting to note that while the Munro review implies the need for changes in England that would move assessment processes more towards Norwegian norms, the Auditor General's report implies the need for some systems/structure in Norway to support a higher level of consistency in response.

2.5 Assessment related findings

Earlier research documents the division between liberalistic "child protection" systems and social democratic "child welfare systems" in terms of "risk" and "need" (Gilbert et al., 2011; Khoo, Hyvonen, & Nygren, 2002). The purpose of this study is not to document this division. It is more of a contextual factor for the comparison of assessment processes, and has to be taken into account when analyzing and discussing the findings. Risk assessment versus professional judgement is an ongoing discussion and tension in social work. This discourse is highly relevant for this thesis, since the Norwegian assessments seem to be broadly based on professional judgements, whereas the English assessment framework seems to be placed within the reliance on risk assessment as a basis for decision making. An international literature review by Stewart and Thompson (2004) regarding human decision making in the child protection system, stressed social workers' faults and errors in reasoning,

corresponding with Tversky and Kahnemans' classic work on errors in reasoning (1974). Even the best professional is a "victim" of human heuristics; thinking in categories, over estimating the individual features of the cases, remembering new experiences more clearly than older experiences etc. The research on human decision making is in favour of more predictive risk assessment models (Munro, 1999; Stewart & Thompson, 2004). However, the lack of "tailoring" abilities of risk assessment instruments will produce false negatives and false positives: Some children will not be considered "at risk" even though risk factors in parenting are revealed, and some children will be harmed despite evaluations suggesting they are at low risk (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000). The notion of predictive computerised systems does not fit well with social work core values of "person in situation" meaning individual tailored approaches (Shulman, 2008). However, frameworks such as the Assessment Framework in England, have given more structure to the way information is recorded during assessment (Turney et al., 2012:161). Holland's "Coastal Cities study" (1999) investigated how social workers carried out in-depth assessments where concerns about children's welfare were expressed. She found two major discourses in analysis and decision making; the "scientific" and "reflective" approaches to assessment, weighting and combining objectivity/distance and involvement towards the information and family (see Holland 1999, and Christiansen 2011:24 for more information). Complex multi-dimensional problems are likely to require assessments drawing on different professional expertise, and the quality of cooperation within and between professional groups seem important in promoting effective multi-agency or inter-professional practice (Turney et al., 2012:146). However, research comparing assessment frameworks is limited, but some general barriers to quality in assessment have been identified at both personal and systemic levels (Turney et al., 2012:210). Key factors at the personal social

worker level seem to be whether or not the practitioner feels competent and confident to carry out assessment, and key system factors include IT systems and the sense of lack of time for face-to-face work (ibid.).

In terms of child protection assessment from parents' perspectives, what do we already know? Earlier research on the child protection system highlights the importance of taking account of parents' experiences of their contact with this system (Chapman, Gibbons, Barth, McCrae, & Nscaw Research Group, 2003; Hardy & Darlington, 2008; Willumsen & Severinsson, 2005). There is limited knowledge about how those involved with the child protection system view their experience (Baker, 2007). Studies show inconsistent results about parents' perceptions of the child protection services (Studsrød et al., 2012). Research findings differ both in experience of the process, and in the outcomes of these services, from major satisfaction among parents (Dale, 2004; Winefield & Barlow, 1995) to major critical concerns (Bolen, McWey, & Schlee, 2008; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Houghes, 2008; Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In a recent study (697 respondents) of parents' perceptions of the Norwegian child protection system, 40.6% of the parents reported exclusively positive experiences, 30.7% reported solely negative experiences, while 24% of the parents described both positive and negative experiences (Studsrød et al., 2012). When it comes to assessment related findings in England, Turney et al. (2012) suggest that key factors identified for good quality assessment from parents' perspectives are the relational ability of the assessor, such as willingness to listen and to demonstrate empathy and respect, and also clarity about the specific purpose of the assessment. Assessment related studies in Norway are limited, but findings from Scandinavia support Turney et al.'s review on the importance of relational skills (Kildedahl et al., 2011; Samsonsen, 2009). A recent Norwegian study highlights the emotional aspects of parents' encounters with the child protection services and

the importance of taking these emotions into consideration, showing that parents' rational arguments and emotions are inextricably linked to each other (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). This presentation on assessment related findings in Norway and England is not exhaustive. An updated literature search was conducted in April 2015, with assistance from a librarian at the University of Stavanger, but this has not yet been able to identify any comparative research on assessments from Norway and England, which is this study's contribution.

3 Methodology

This part is divided into two: The first section describes the ontological/epistemological and methodological starting point for this thesis, and the second section consists of methodological reflections. Qualitative design and methodology have been used in this study in the form of thematic content analysis, narrative thematic analysis and text analysis. These will be outlined as analytical tools in this first section. I will then elaborate on the different aspects by considering their implications, strengths and limitations in a section on methodological reflections, including ethical considerations. The comparative perspective has already been discussed in part one, but additional methodological reflection on this will be included at the end of this chapter. The Critical realist perspective will be introduced, but further elaborated in the theory section which follows this section.

3.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

In modern qualitative research, there is broad agreement that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual, and that any gaze is filtered through the lenses of language, social class, ethnicity etc. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011:12). The modern discussion emphasizes to a greater extent the impact of these filters and how to deal with, and interpret them (ibid.). Morris (2006:xxvi) puts it like this: “ How do we know what we know and how do we know we`re right?” This question has interested philosophers of science since medieval times, and is still considered highly relevant. When undertaking a research project, the researcher has underlying assumptions about both the nature of reality (ontology), and the theory of knowledge (epistemology). Ontology can be described as the theory of being; what we believe exists in

the world, and how this reality looks (Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005). Is there a reality which exists beyond and independently of human subjectivity, or is reality merely subjective constructions based on experiences and perceptions? (ibid.; Willumsen, 2006). Epistemology on the other hand, can be described as the theory of knowledge; what we think we know about the world, the examination of the conditions, possibilities, nature and limits of knowledge (Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005; Danemark, Ekstrøm, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). In this thesis, the underlying ontological and epistemological perspective has been influenced by the critical paradigm in general (Morris, 2006; Shaw, Briar-Lawson, Orme, & Ruckdeschel, 2010), and by the theory and philosophy of Critical Realism in particular (Bhaskar, 2008; Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005; Danemark et al., 2002).

Critical theory, in general, is an ideologically oriented approach to the study of human phenomena, which focuses on power and empowerment structures related to the phenomena (Morris, 2006:131). As researchers, we can never be free of our own values when observing the reality around us (ibid.). For a social worker committed to social action, this is an appealing alternative which makes sense when conducting social work research. Critical Realism contains both a philosophical aspect and a more social scientific aspect (Danemark et al., 2002). The basic ontology of Critical Realism is that reality has an objective existence (Danemark et al., 2002:15), and the basic epistemological assumption is that knowledge is conceptually mediated and, by this, open to adjustment. The most significant task for critical realist researchers is explaining phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce them (ibid.). The event itself may not be the most important thing, but the complex mechanisms, structures and tendencies interacting and counteracting to produce the phenomenon may be the most fruitful perspective (Bhaskar, 1978). For me, this makes sense in the complex field of child

protection, with its ongoing political and public debates, possible conflicts of interests and resource battles between service users and the public, with highly pressured social workers, and the mass media acting as a powerful influence in debates and changes (see paper 1 and 3 for further analysis on this matter). To elaborate the relation between this ontological “reality” and the more epistemological “constructions/subjectivity” point of view, Critical Realism separates reality into three domains: what actually happens (ontology), our perception of reality (epistemology), and the “mid-domain” consisting of mechanisms producing phenomenon. The empirical material in this study can provide access to both “what actually happens” and different stakeholders’ perceptions of this “reality”. My analysis of some of the contextual mechanisms in assessment in the two contexts serves as an attempt to grasp the “mid-domain”. The scientific work in Critical Realism is to investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships between our experiences, what actually happens and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world (Danemark et al., 2002). This is the link between the independent existing world, and our study of this world. The underlying mechanisms generate phenomena both in the real world and in our study of the real world.

After I attended an international conference in July 2013 on Critical Realism and a workshop with Roy Bhaskar who is the originator of the Critical realist perspective (Bhaskar, 1978), the Critical realist *ontology* stood out for me as the central starting point for research; the notion of conflicting interests in society leading to possible obstacles in producing the best possible phenomenon. So my aim of exploring the phenomenon of assessment in child protection was to identify what mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seems to constrain or support fruitful assessment practices. The project is founded on the belief that identifying barriers and gateways to more fruitful practices in assessment will reveal new possibilities.

In this sense, the value base in Critical realist research is not neutral, but rather central: destructive power structures in society can be pinpointed allowing the possibility of positive changes for the people involved and avoiding practices that disempower people. Critical Realism emphasises the relation between knowledge and practical relevance, and states that the purpose of the task is what should guide us in our scientific work. For example, what we need to know when building a house is different from what we need to know when we tackle the environmental crisis (Danemark et al., 2002). So, the *epistemological* focus is a shift from the empirical to the real. Social life is about empirically irregularities, and since the variables cannot be controlled, the researchers cannot act as if the phenomenon exists in a closed system. The researcher rather acknowledges the phenomenon's complexity by studying variables interacting and counteracting (Bhaskar, 1978; Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005; Danmark et al., 2002). Since the social world is uncontrollable it is also unpredictable, which means social scientists cannot make accurate future predictions. However, if we gain knowledge about mechanisms which are producing and maintaining the phenomenon, we provide insight in barriers and opportunities to improve the situation. There are some similarities between Critical Realism and hermeneutics. Danmark et al. (2002) says that since society is made up of thinking and reflective human beings capable of changing the social reality, we study a socially produced reality. We interpret the interpretation of other people. But specific for Critical Realism, is the focus on the mechanisms which produce events rather than the events themselves or our interpretations of the events. And more specifically, we study the dynamics between different influential forces, where some powers are triggered and others not triggered, and the interaction in the complex field of tendencies and mechanisms. Science is about explaining existing events with the aim of learning, the ongoing social activity

that is science (Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2002). Talking about improvements and fruitful practice are normative issues, but nonetheless accepted within the critical paradigm (Morris, 2006). I will now turn to a description of how the study was conducted, before turning to reflections on the research process.

3.2 Data sources

The data sources for this study consist of interviews with social workers and parents in both England and Norway, together with assessment documents from the two countries. Since this is an explorative study with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding, a qualitative design has been chosen. Because of the explorative aim of studying assessment from the perspectives of both social workers and parents, different information sources were deemed appropriate for this purpose.

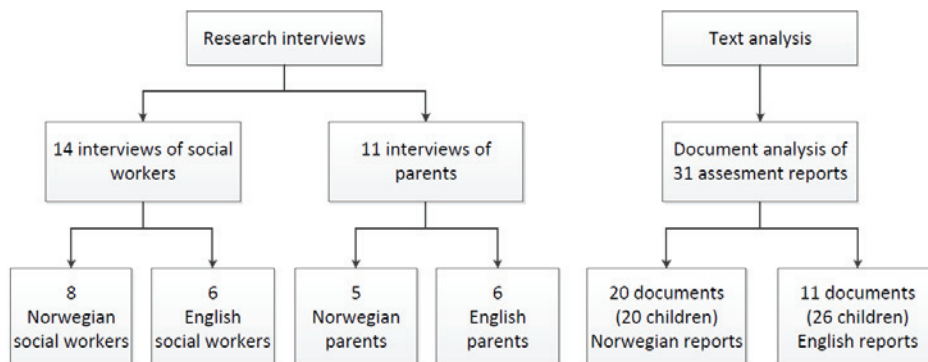


Fig.2: Overview of the empirical material

3.3 Sample and data gathering

Both social workers and parents were recruited through the city councils in Bergen, Norway (258 000 inhabitants) and Bristol, England (433 000 inhabitants), and the assessment reports were also received from these two cities. Later I will reflect on the comparative units of analysis.

3.3.1 Social worker interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of how social workers conducting assessment experience their framework and practice, fourteen social workers in total (Norway=8, England=6) were interviewed for about one hour each, using a semi-structured interview guide. The sample was recruited through the city councils/municipalities in Bergen, Norway and Bristol, England. Both cities have well established local authorities, and the social workers recruited all work in the child protection services in those municipalities, which constitutes the selection criterion. Contact was established with managers in the child protection system in both cities, and they informed the social workers at their office about this study and gave them an information letter (see appendices 2.3 and 2.5). The social workers interested in participating contacted me by email or telephone, and we agreed on a time for an interview. The interviews mostly took place at the social workers' main offices, but the University of Bristol's offices were used for interviewing two of the English participants. All social workers interviewed were qualified social workers with at least 3 years' work experience. The questions concerned the social workers' experiences with assessment work, and their points of view regarding assessment, for example, what promotes and what inhibits fruitful assessment. A pilot study was conducted before the data collection. For further information on questions asked, see interview guide (appendices 4.3 and 4.4).

3.3.2 Interviews with parents

When studying assessments in Norway and England, I wished to gain a viewpoint on how parents might experience the assessment process. Ten families, with a total of ten parents and one grandparent, (see table 1 for further information) were accessed via social work teams in Bristol (England) and Bergen (Norway). (As the table shows, there were 9 mothers and only 1 father in my sample. This might imply a gender bias in the material). The service context in the two cities seems quite similar in the way that front line social workers are the assessors, and if more thorough interventions are required, the case is referred to other service teams. I recruited the parents' via social work teams in the two city councils (see information letters in appendices 2.4 and 2.6). Social workers asked a broad range of clients on their lists, and the ones who accepted were interviewed. The Norwegian parents were interviewed before the English ones, and the English parents received a ten pound gift card, whereas the Norwegians did it for free. I did not think about this at first, since rewarding participants is not as common a practice in Norway as in England in my experience. This might have influenced the sample in England according to their motivation for participating. Eleven parents in total (Norway=5, England= 6) were interviewed for about one hour each, using a semi-structured topic guide (appendices 4.2 and 4.4). They were mostly visited in their homes, but two interviews took place at a café according to the interviewees' wishes. Parents were asked questions about their assessment experiences, how they viewed the process, what was good about the assessment and what could have been better, how service user participation was facilitated and experienced and what kind of assessment improvements they would suggest.

This is a brief overview of the parents interviewed:

Table 1: Sample of parents interviewed

	Norway		England
N1	Single mother, two children aged 9 and 11. Two assessment experiences	E1	Single mother, two children aged 3 and 5. One assessment experience
N2	Single mother, three children aged 3, 7 and 13. Two assessment experiences	E2	Single mother, five children; two adults and three between ages 8-16. Two assessment experiences
N3	Married mother, three children; one 16 and the two other adults. One assessment experience	E3	Parents (mother and father), one child; baby under 1 year. One assessment experience
N4	Single mother, two children aged 14 and 17. One assessment experience	E4	Grandmother (kin fostering), two children aged 10 and 12. One assessment experience
N5	Single mother, two children; one 15 and the other adult. Two assessment experiences	E5	Single mother, three children; two teenagers and one 4 year old. One assessment experience

3.3.3 The assessment documents

Since this is an exploratory study, the underlying notion is that information from several sources can shed light on the same topic from different angles, which resonates well with a Critical realist perspective on how complex mechanisms, structures and tendencies interact and counteract (Danemark et al., 2002). When approaching the city councils with interview requests, I also asked for assessment reports from the child protection system in the two cities. Reports on a total of 46 children were received, 20 from Norway and 26 from England. In the reports from Norway, each child has its own report, with the total of 20 written documents. In the reports from England, each family has a

common assessment report, with the total of 11 documents on 26 children (one unborn). All the reports are dated from 2010 onwards. The reports are strictly confidential, and to comply with this confidentiality the analysis is presented on a more general basis according to the following identified relevant themes for analysis:

- Assessment structure/framework
- Reflections on professional judgement
- Risk and need considerations
- Resources and interventions

The themes highlighted were identified through text analysis (and will be further elaborated in chapter 5), but also correspond with themes from the three papers written (paper 1-3).

3.4 Data analysis methods

Qualitative methods are usually perceived as helpful for collecting material for in-depth analysis, as I have done in this study (Patton, 2002). This is a small-scale in-depth study with a qualitative approach, which is considered meaningful when studying life-worlds in terms of individuals' own perceptions and subjective apprehensions (Berg & Lune, 2012). Qualitative research in general involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, including personal experiences, life stories, interviews, texts, observations etc. These different data sources are accompanied by a wide range of interpretive practices, always hoping to get a better understanding of the subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011:4). This is a relevant way of describing this PhD study.

This thesis is based on the three papers (1-3), together with the document analysis and an overview of the findings provided in chapter 5. Two of the three papers are empirical in origin, based on the interviews with social workers (paper 1) and parents (paper 2), whereas paper 3 is a more theoretical analysis of the comparative differences between Norway and England with regard to the role of professional judgement in child protection assessments. In terms of providing a better understanding of the subject matter, namely the phenomenon of assessment in child protection, different data sources and several interpretive practices were used:

Paper 1

Data source: research interviews with social workers.

Analytical approach: thematic content analysis.

Paper 2

Data source: research interviews with parents.

Analytical approach: narrative content analysis.

Paper 3

Data source: comparative differences in assessment.

Analytical approach: discussion and theory building.

Chapter 6

Data source: assessment reports.

Analytical approach: text analysis.

In the following, the different analytical approaches are described, as well as their appropriateness to the data source under consideration.

3.4.1 Thematic content analysis

Content analysis in general can be described as a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to

identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings (Berg & Lune, 2012:349). Krippendorff (2004:18) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use”. This latter definition stresses the context of interpretation and inferences, which I find appropriate to this study since assessments are carried out in a practical and political context. Thematic analysis is one way of approaching a content analysis; a way of analyzing data to identify and report patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main difference between thematic content analysis and more general/classic content analysis is the containing of themes within the material, not necessarily narrowing identified themes into categories (often consisting of one or two labels). I find this way of analyzing more flexible and appropriate to the social worker interviews, with the ability to be faithful to their “voices from assessment” (hence the title of paper 1).

This method was used when approaching the social worker interviews to make sense of the information, 14 interviews in total, each of 3- 5 pages of transcribed talk. In practice I read through the entire material at least three times as a starting point, to familiarize myself with the data. After this, a thorough process of reading and re-reading for themes followed. I searched for themes by looking within countries and between countries, and then proceeded to name these themes. The themes were then critically reviewed by searching for statements from the material which would support and illustrate the themes, but also statements contradicting them. This process follows Braun & Clarke’s stepwise description of how to use thematic analysis. The analytical process was supported and guided by my main supervisor Elisabeth Willumsen, who is the co-writer of paper 1 (and co- writer of paper 2) where this analysis is presented.

When analyzing paper 1, further sub-themes were identified under

each of the three main themes:

- *Assessment structure* including *assessment framework/model* and *procedures*
- *Professional judgement* including *discretion* and *reflectiveness*
- *Contextual factors* include *public debates* and *resources*.

The final analysis involved organizing a “thematic map”, illustrating connections between themes and sub-themes marked with arrows and text. The findings presented in paper 1 are based on the thematic map developed. For further elaboration, see paper 1.

3.4.2 Narrative thematic analysis

Narrative research is a way of acknowledging people as constructors of their experience, and at the same time seeing the narrations as inevitably social in character (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). A narrative may be oral or written, occur during fieldwork or an interview, or occur naturally in a conversation (Chase, 2008.) This way of analyzing qualitative material is different from traditional content analysis by a greater framing of the global story, with a resistance to fragmenting the narratives into smaller variables (Josselson et al., 2003). Riessman (2008:53) claims that all narrative inquiry is concerned with content; “what” is said, written or shown, but in narrative thematic analysis, content is the exclusive focus, to uncover and categorize thematically.

In this thesis, a narrative thematic approach has been used when analyzing the ten interviews with eleven parents in Norway and England. I started the analytical process with a classic content analysis approach, but realized early in the process that the answers in the interviews did not entirely

correspond to the questions asked. Some questions from the interview guide were about the assessment framework and procedures, but the answers were stories about emotions. After a thorough consideration of how to be “faithful” to the stories when analyzing and presenting findings, a narrative thematic analytical approach was considered most appropriate. Narrative analysis acknowledges to a wider extent that people are constructors of their experiences (Riessman, 2008). Chase (2008) states that narrators break through the interview structure and talk about what is most important to them. What comes first tells us more than anything else. All the interviews were thoroughly transcribed and read several times as a starting point. Each single interview was then approached for stories to preserve the self-presentation of each person (Chase, 2008), before turning to a more thematic narrative analytical approach (Riessman, 2008).

One of the key differences between narrative thematic analysis and content analysis in general is the greater possibility in narratives to keep a story more “intact” rather than using component categories across cases. The difference between thematic narrative analysis and narrative approaches in general, is the former’s ability to interpret data in the light of themes identified by the investigator/researcher, rather than the chronology of the narration as presented by the individual (ibid.). In this study, themes were identified across stories, both within interviews and between interviews, within one country and between the two countries, as presented in paper 2 (table 2: overview of findings). The co-author, my main supervisor Elisabeth Willumsen, was engaged in the analytical process.

Two main categories were identified:

1. Common narrations as overarching theme:
Stories of emotions and stories of power in assessment (system and relational power).
2. Differences between Norway and England in assessment expectations, social worker view, clarity in assessment, and service user participation.

For further elaborations, see paper 2.

3.4.3 Text analysis

Much of social life in modern society is mediated by written text of different kinds (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011), and the child protection system is no exception. Modern text analysis methods assume that texts are written in a context, *by* someone *for* someone, although the writer's intentions are not always coherent with the readers perception of the text (Duedahl & Jacobsen, 2010). Analyzing text in qualitative research is mostly a process of reading and rereading the empirical materials, to draw a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world of which the textual material is a product (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011:530).

In this study, assessment reports from both England and Norway were gathered as an additional data source for information and discussion. Assessment files and reports are mandatory in England, but not mandatory in Norway, although they are often written. Anonymised reports were gathered on a total of 46 children, 20 from Bergen and 26 from Bristol. In the reports from Norway, each child has its own report, with the total of 20 written documents. In the reports from England, each family has a common assessment

report, with the total of 11 documents on 26 children (one unborn). A content analysis on the textual documents was conducted based on the “world” to which the text belongs (namely child protection assessment in Norway and England), not as the core of the research but more as a subsidiary or complementary role as described by Perakyla & Ruusuvuori (2011:530). The themes emerged on the basis of the content in the reports, together with the findings in paper 1-3, and the more overall assessment discussion in this thesis. These reports are, of course, only a small sample of reports from both countries, and were chosen out of availability. I have interpreted the reports in the light of the topic for this thesis, according to relevance. The issues and categories identified within the reports are:

- Assessment structure/framework
- Reflections on professional judgement
- Risk and need considerations
- Resources and interventions

These themes were developed inductively and serve as an elaboration and expansion of the analysis in papers 1-3, a basis for chapters 5 and 6 – “Overview of findings” and “Discussion”.

3.5 Methodological reflections

As outlined above, conducting a study is a process of making considered choices about methodology, theory and analysis, based on ontological and epistemological assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Morris, 2006). Within the field of qualitative research there is an ongoing debate about the use of “reliability” and “validity” as suitable concepts for evaluating research processes and findings. Lincoln & Guba (1985) talk instead about

trustworthiness as a key concept. Trustworthiness, in their opinion, involves establishing credibility in terms of confidence in the “truth” of the findings, through reflections on transferability, showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts. This chapter on methodology together with analytical descriptions of the three papers (1-3) aims to validate the findings through transparency. In this section, I reflect on some of the choices made in this study: the comparative units under study; reflections regarding using interview as a research tool; my pre-understanding as a researcher conducting this study; and last but not least, ethical considerations. These elements are all central to the overall credibility of the study.

3.5.1 Reflections on the comparisons

In addition to simply exploring the phenomenon of assessments in child protection, this study aims to compare two practices in order to generate knowledge on mechanisms at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seems to constrain and support fruitful assessment practices. It asks what we can learn from each other (Norway and England) in this regard. Still, this thesis does not capture the entire field of assessments in Norway and England, but explores the phenomenon from different perspectives (social workers`, parents`, and assessment documents). It appeared useful to compare two different practices, namely a structured assessment model exemplified by England, and a system based more on professional judgement, exemplified by Norway. This offered opportunities to learn through considering differences and asking new questions. Cross-national research offers opportunities in patterns of differences and similarities between countries and, together with contextual factors, this gives us new perspectives and contrasts in our search for knowledge (Ragin, 1994). However, comparative research is often based on

differences and abstractions, so strictly we are not comparing "the same" (Berven, 2003). We highlight parts of the phenomenon/characteristics, thereby defining some things as more important than others (Baistow, 2000).

Is the phenomenon of assessment in child protection comparable in England and Norway? The sample is recruited from one city in each country: Bristol in England and Bergen in Norway. To what extent can these two cities represent national contexts for comparison? Although there is municipal freedom concerning implementation of assessment tools in both Norway and England, I consider that in this study they represent the overarching assessment models labelled "the structured model" (England) and "the professional judgement model" (Norway). This project is not an attempt to provide a cause-effect analysis of assessments. Nevertheless, I assume the results and discussions of this thesis may provide valuable knowledge on the different mechanisms at play in assessment practice within and beyond these two specific contexts, so this knowledge is transferrable to other contexts as well.

3.5.2 Reflections on the research interviews

The data sources for this study are interviews with social workers and parents, together with assessment documents. Therefore, the emphasis has been on interviews as the main research tool. The reason for choosing interviews as research tool originates from the overall aim of exploring the phenomenon of assessment in child protection. Interview as a data collection method, acknowledges the value of the other person's perspective and meanings, and allows the researcher to enter into and take part in these perspectives (Patton, 2002). However, I don't believe there is a "neutral truth" to be captured in interviews, only "constructed realities". The interviewer influences the conversation, with topics set in the interview guide as well as in relational and

conversational style (Aase & Fossåskaret, 2014). Two interview guides were used, one for the social workers and one for the parents, with corresponding topics regarding assessments. The interviews were carried out individually and took the form of a conversation based on a semi structured interview form with open-ended questions. The interviews were all audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim and lasted between 30-60 minutes. One of the challenges when interviewing is how to be certain that the intentions of the questions have been adequately communicated (Berg & Lune, 2012). This, again, underlines the notion of the research interview as a constructive process between the two (or more) communicators, which I experienced during the process, especially in the English interviews. Within the Norwegian context, I was more confident in the language (my first language is Norwegian), as well as the national context. I conducted the Norwegian interviews first, and had no specific problems with participants' understandings of concepts and topics. When doing the English interviews I experienced challenges in both language and concepts. I was on foreign ground in several ways. An example of this was the concept of "service user participation" in the parental interview guide (as described in paper 2). Several of the parents from England were not familiar with this concept, which made me feel a bit insecure about the use of the concept, and challenged me when I had to describe the content of the concept during the interviews. I also experienced difficulties in understanding some of the English parents with strong Bristol accents, and I am grateful for the opportunity to hearing it over and over again on the audiotapes. This interactional perspective on research interviews corresponds with the underlying epistemology for this thesis. There is no objective and neutral world to be captured, only constructed and interpreted realities from different

perspectives (Aase & Fossåskaret, 2014). Further, power structures (as stressed within the critical paradigm) also influence the interview process in the way the interviewer forms the questions and analyses the answers based on their “lenses” on the world.

3.5.3 My pre-understanding as the researcher

My starting point as a researcher originates from a genuine interest in assessment of child protection. I am a trained social worker (with social worker values) with fifteen years of experience from the practice field of child protection as case worker, family counsellor and manager. This has undoubtedly shaped my pre-understanding of the issue under study. I do not start from “zero” as a neutral and value-free researcher. This has its strengths and limitations. Being an “insider” in the research field may help me shape the questions and engage in conversations with the participants, as well as approaching the data material for analysis. However, being an insider might also challenge my “open mindedness” as researcher, and steer the project in a direction influenced by my pre-understanding and working hypothesis. This has been an ongoing topic for supervision throughout the years of this study; how to use the strength of being familiar with the topic without setting out presumptions. In addition to this, I am a mother of two children who are undoubtedly the most valuable part in my life. This evokes emotions with regard to child protection issues in general. There is no easy response to these challenges, but reflection may help us use the strengths and be aware of the pitfalls in the research process.

As a former social worker, now a social work researcher, I find it reasonable that social research should produce knowledge intended to have a positive impact on people’s life. This resonates well with how the critical

paradigm embraces a normative stance as something meaningful and productive: it is within a “Critical Realism” spirit to claim a starting point of a wish to contribute to more fruitful assessment practices for the families and social workers involved in a research project on assessment in child protection.

3.5.4 Credibility and transferability

Through descriptions of and reflections about the interview process, the analytical process, the comparative units, and my pre-understandings as the researcher, I have intended to provide transparency in the research process. A central question seems to be, why believe in the results of this study? The research process has from my point of view been thorough in every step from shaping the aim and research design, via collecting the data to analyzing them. The research project has used a design incorporating several information sources: social workers, parents and assessment reports. Using a variety of information sources (as well as different analytical methods) to study the same phenomenon may contribute to credibility by providing different perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Willumsen, 2006). Another benefit of using several data sources is the variation in perspectives amongst the respondents (Christiansen, 2011:63). As this study shows, the different roles of social workers and parents result in different experiences. This adds credibility to the study by acknowledging the complexity within the phenomenon and differences in perspective (ibid.). Lincoln & Guba (1985) further recommend “thick descriptions” of the research process as an important contribution to the trustworthiness of the study. As well as descriptions and reflections on the methodological choices, the underlying assumptions of the study with regard to ontology and epistemology form part of these “thick descriptions” serving as credibility checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Malterud, 2002). I have tried to

provide transparency and “thick descriptions” of every step of the study. I have spent four years on this process, with opportunities to discuss with my two supervisors (both professors in social work) and other research colleagues who have provided different perspectives and challenged some pre-understandings. I have also written papers on the topic in courses in qualitative method, philosophy of science and social work. The findings have been validated in the three papers (1-3) through double blind peer-reviews provided by the publishing journals.

A further question is whether a small group of social workers and parents represents the larger population. Even though representativeness is not the major intention of this study, the findings embody and give insight into what is possible and intelligible within the context of assessment in child protection in Norway and England. Trustworthiness with regard to transferability is about the applicability of the findings to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The “thick-descriptions” of the research process given above, are an important part of the reader’s evaluation of transferability (Christiansen, 2011). This is a small-scale study, the aim of which is not statistical generalization, but in-depth stories and perspectives from social workers and parents which might provide valuable insight and knowledge into the research question. In qualitative methods, as opposed to more quantitative methods, one cannot generalize the findings to “population” (Silverman, 2001). In this study, I cannot (and do not wish) to say that “this is how English/Norwegian assessments look”, but I can identify some central processes in assessment. These “generalizations about the nature of a process” (Gobo, 2004:435) are the transferable value of this qualitative study on different assessment approaches. Even though this thesis provides different perspectives on assessment, it is very important to stress that this is not an attempt to capture reality. An important perspective missing in this study is

that of the children involved in assessment. This would be a valuable contribution for further research.

3.5.5 Ethical considerations

Ethics are central in all research, and especially within the field of child protection where the families may be in a vulnerable position. This requires ethical awareness from me as the responsible researcher in this study, dealing with a potentially difficult topic. Ethical considerations cannot be limited to certain phases of the research process, but must pervade the entire study in every stage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Morris, 2006). One question that might be asked, is why the children's perspectives on assessment were not included as a data source. In the early phases of the study, I did consider including children's "voices", but because of ethical considerations together with evaluations of the realistic extent/scope for a PhD study, I kept to the perspectives of social workers and parents, together with assessment reports. However, the perspectives of children involved in assessments are very important and should be investigated in the future.

This study was approved by the Data Inspectorate of Norway (appendix 3), the Research Ethics Committee of the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, and by individual consent from the social workers and parents interviewed. Participants were recruited through the city councils/municipalities of Bergen (Norway) and Bristol (England), and due to this information letters were written to the city councils (see appendices 2.1 and 2.2). Different information letters were written to social workers and parents who enabled to make an informed decision whether to participate in the study. The social workers willing to help me recruit parents to this study passed on a letter to a variety of parents with information about the study. The

parents who were willing to participate either telephoned or emailed me, or their social worker contacted me on their behalf. Consent was written with the explicit possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time. Additional information on the study was given at the start of the interviews, and the participants were assured of confidentiality. The parent/ carer then signed a consent form, and I explained that they did not have to answer any question they did not like and that they could stop the interview or withdraw from the study if they wanted.

Most importantly, I have tried to apply the professional social work ethics as described by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) when approaching and interviewing the parents and the social workers, especially with regard to showing respect in every matter. Furthermore, in addition to the ethical principles of professional social work I have followed the Helsinki agreement drawn up in 1975 to address the human rights of people involved in research (Morris, 2006:247; World Medical Association, 1964/2004). I have striven to present the perspectives of the parents and social workers with the utmost respect, together with ensuring confidentiality by anonymizing the data. The tape recordings will be destroyed when the study is finished.

4 Theoretical perspectives

Theories in general refer to sets of transportable ideas that can be applied to different situations, composed by concepts and their relationships (Gilgun, 2010:282). In social work, theories can illuminate social processes and help observers notice aspects of the phenomena under study which they might otherwise have overlooked (ibid.). The theoretical approaches for this thesis have been guided by an attempt to illuminate the phenomenon of assessment in order to identify and discuss mechanisms at play, which might constrain or support fruitful assessment practices. In order to do this, it seemed constructive to study the phenomenon from different perspectives. Theoretical perspectives for analysis are always a construction of choices of direction; if other theoretical positions and angles were used, the consideration of the data might have been different.

I start this section by presenting an overall framework on different theoretical levels developed by Robert Merton (1949, 1968), and connect this to the theoretical perspectives of this thesis. As described in the methodology chapter, the thinking of Critical Realism has influenced this study, and the theory of this perspective will be further elaborated. I will then turn to how different problem framings of child protection influence understandings and discussions in child protection assessments, in regard to the notion of “Wicked problems”. I then move to more specific theories used as analytical tools, which have been professional judgement understandings, power related theories, and theories on emotions.

4.1 Social theories – different levels

As early as 1949, the well-known sociologist Robert Merton wrote the following in his book *Social theory and social structure*:

“The word theory threatens to become emptied of meaning. The very diversity of items to which the world is applied leads to the result that it often obscures rather than creates understanding” (1949:5)

He developed theoretical levels in order to “create understanding”, and differentiated between the level of grand theories, middle-range theories, and more micro/practical theories (Merton, 1949; Merton, 1968). Grand theories are broad postulates and frameworks developed from relative abstract concepts. These theories are quite difficult to operationalize and test empirically. The main function for these theories is to provide a more general context for inquiries. Middle-range theories are more limited in area of application, and address more specific phenomena with fewer concepts and contexts. Micro theories have a narrower and more practical focus on specific phenomena and contexts. The theoretical perspectives used as frameworks in this thesis are situated on all three levels. The theories of Critical Realism and Wicked problems might (from my point of view) be placed within the label of grand theories. These theories serve as overarching perspectives with relative abstract concepts, but with a clear uttered value position and world view. The theories on professional judgement, power and emotions can both be placed within middle-range and micro theories depending on how they are applied. I would say the concept of professional judgement is an example of a middle-range theory with more possible application areas and contexts than a micro theory, but with a less overarching perspective than a grand theory.

4.2 Critical Realism in relation to theory

Critical Realism contains both a general, philosophical aspect and a more social scientific aspect (Danemark et al., 2002). There are many different perspectives and developments within this movement. The originator, Roy Bhaskar,

moved towards a more philosophical development from 1993 onwards, whereas other developers have emphasized other dimensions (Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005). I will not capture the entire movement of Critical Realism in this thesis. In the methodology section, the ontological and epistemological starting point of Critical Realism was stressed. In this section I will concentrate on the theoretical angle rather than the more philosophical and methodological aspects of Critical Realism, but at the level of “grand theory”, it is difficult to separate the philosophical and theoretical dimensions in its more overarching point of view.

Critical realists separate reality into two dimensions: the transitive and the intransitive. The transitive dimension consists of knowledge already produced. It is the knowledge we build upon as scientists. Theories are thus the transitive objects of science. They constitute the dimension that indirectly connects science with reality (Danemark et al., 2002:23). In this point of view, science is an ongoing social activity, since theories can always be surpassed by new theories (ibid.). The other dimension is called the intransitive dimension. This is the unchanging objects in the world; regardless of the way our theories develop, these things continue to exist in their original form. Bhaskar (1978; 2008) claims that the intransitive dimension does not change even if the transitive dimension changes; it is just the ongoing knowledge production that develops. In addition to these two dimensions Critical realist theory introduces a third dimension: “the real”. This refers to structures and mechanisms, causality potentials waiting to happen. This is the link between the independent existing world, and our study of this world. The underlying mechanisms generate phenomena both in the real world and in our study of the real world. A Critical realist point of view is that these mechanisms are the real aim of science. Science is not about predicting the future, because that is not possible. Science is about explaining existing events with the aim of

learning, the ongoing social activity that is science (Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005). Within a Critical realist stand, the object itself does not change, but our knowledge of the mechanisms influencing the phenomenon develops. So, Critical Realism is not one theory or one method, but an overarching world view with implications for theories as a starting point and for theory building. In my study, the exploration of mechanisms which may hinder or help fruitful assessment practices is within a critical realist notion.

In social science we often find a separation of methodology and theory. As we can see (referring back to the presentation on Critical realist ontology and epistemology in the methodology section), it is not easy to separate the philosophy and theory of Critical Realism. However one should regard theorizing as an integrated part of methodology (Danemark et al., 2002). One of the main reasons for keeping theory and method integrated is the importance of conceptualizing within the social sciences. The conceptual abstractions stand out as a central activity for social science, and such abstractions are characterized by aiming to identify the necessary, constituent properties of the study object since these characteristics define what actions the objects can produce (Danemark et al., 2002:70). These conceptual abstractions guide and identify the generative mechanisms of the object, which in turn is the main object of science (Bhaskar, 1978). The most significant task for Critical realist researchers is to explain the phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produces them (Danemark et al., 2002). The level of ambitions within Critical Realism has been challenged in terms of its ability to reveal these mechanisms. It is always possible to choose other theoretical angles for explanation and discussion, which in turn may lead to the identification of other mechanisms (Christiansen, 2011:53). However, to be able to detect meanings and relation between our object of study and the research aim, one has to conceptualize in some way in order to reason. In this

study, the framing of child protection assessment as “Wicked problems” has been one way of conceptualizing the phenomenon, together with perspectives and theories on the concepts of professional judgement, power and emotions.

4.3 Wicked problems

Wicked problems refer to problems that are very complicated and not easily solved. For me, this makes sense in the context of assessments in child protection. The concept was first used by Rittel and Webber in 1975, to describe problems in social planning. They discovered and conceptualized that some problems are not solved successfully by traditional linear approaches. Wicked problems are the opposite of “Tame problems”. Tame problems are not necessarily easily solved problems, but problems which are easier to define and handle. Tame problems can be treated systematically, with an analytical and linear approach (Australian government, 2007).

Wicked in this context does not mean evil, but characterizes problems which are very complicated to solve. There is no “quick fix” to these kinds of problems and challenges. The hall marks of Wicked problems are disagreement about causes and solutions. Wicked problems are multi causal, unstable and unpredictable (Brown, Harris, & Russel, 2010). One issue that illustrates many of the characteristics of Wicked problems is the current debate about the causes of and solutions to climate change (Australian government, 2007). Devaney and Spratt (2009) have argued that child protection is a Wicked problem. They claim that the way the child protection system tries to manage and measure child protection issues do not take into account the complexity of the problems. When faced with uncertainty and complexity, the approach and solutions have to be creative and innovative (Brown et al., 2010). One way of trying to solve Wicked problems is by

transdisciplinary approaches, since the knowledge base we have in our society is so fragmented that it is not possible to see “the whole picture” (ibid.). A focus on risk and short-term outcomes in child protection services tends to fit with a technical-rational approach to the management of child abuse. A focus on needs and longer-term outcomes, however, moves away from the idea of a technical response and suggests an understanding of child abuse as an altogether more complex issue (Devaney & Spratt, 2009). The different ways Norway and England have responded to the same problems in child protection (and assessments) can be understood as reflecting different interpretations of the problem of child abuse. Following Devaney and Spratt (2009), I suggest that Rittel and Webber’s (1973) distinction between Wicked and Tame problems might be helpful in this matter.

4.4 Professional judgement in assessment

Professional judgement has been a central concept throughout this thesis, as a major theoretical perspective especially in papers 1 and 3. Professional judgement is clearly important in assessment: social workers are constantly in situations where a decision based on complex, multifaceted and often contradictory information has to be made (Turney et al., 2012). “Professional judgement might be defined as to be when a professional considers the evidence about a client or family situation in the light of professional knowledge to reach a conclusion or recommendation”. (Taylor, 2013:10).

In the initial phase of developing this PhD project, I stressed differences in decision making between social workers in different structured decision making systems, versus decisions based on more professional judgements. A number of studies show how basic human error influences decision making under uncertainty (Munro, 1999; Stewart & Thompson, 2004; Tversky &

Kahneman, 1974). However, I will not follow this path of strengths and weaknesses in decision making, since this is already well documented (ibid.). In this study, a picture of professional judgements as “the space before action”, referring to the processes through which social workers make choices about how to proceed, makes sense (Goldman & Foldy, 2015; 166,167).

Professional judgements might be seen as difficult to predict and control. The same case can be judged differently by different professionals with the same knowledge base and experiences, because of different logic and reasoning (Molander, Grimen, & Eriksen, 2012). The discretionary powers of welfare state professionals can be troublesome in different ways: They can threaten predictability, legality and equality of treatment and this raises some democratic issues about public control. However, professional judgement can also be seen as an “opportunity” in the way it allows room for autonomy in judgements and decisions (ibid.). In assessments, we can never be absolutely certain we are “getting it right”, but sound professional judgement, supported by analytical and critical thinking, can help us reach a good quality judgement (Brown, Moore, & Turney, 2014). Conducting an assessment is a complex process of making sense of a large amount of information about a child and family:

“Assessment requires more than just collection of facts. It must, of course, involve systematic and purposive gathering of information, but this needs to be processed in some way – synthesised, analysed, reflected upon, interpreted – to allow the practitioner to come to a view about the meaning of the material” (Turney et al., 2012:81).

To sum up, professional judgement is a complex task, to make sense of a mass of multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory material. It is not possible,

nor desirable, to remove professional judgements in assessment, but merely to shed light on what supports fruitful decision-making amongst social workers. I will move on to two different, but related, perspectives on the exercise of professional judgement in child protection assessments, which have provided theoretical conceptualizations especially in papers 1 and 3.

4.4.1 Accountability theory

The concept “accountability” has leapt to prominence and become identified with one of the core values of democratic governance (Mulgan, 2003). Accountability in relation to professional judgement is about professionals being held responsible for their decisions and actions. This is seen to be a method of keeping the public informed (ibid.). A synonym could be “answerability”, illustrating the need for public control of professional judgements (Molander, 2013). There are different ways a government can make a profession accountable. A main distinction is between structural accountability, targeting the space in which professional judgements can be made; another is epistemic accountability, focusing on reasoning and reflectiveness as the basis of professional judgement. The primary goal of structural accountability is to restrict the space for professional judgement, whereas the main objective of epistemic accountability is to improve the conditions for professional judgement (ibid.). In child protection, examples of mechanisms for structural accountability are laws, regulatory agencies and fragmentation of tasks within the organization. Mechanisms for epistemic accountability in child protection are the formal education of social workers and support systems, such as supervision.

4.4.2 Epistemic responsibility

“To be epistemically responsible is to display in one’s reasoning the virtue (or virtues) epistemic internalists take to be central to warrant or justification, e.g., coherence, having good reasons, fitting the evidence” (Bishop, 2000:180).

If we consider child protection issues as Wicked problems, and then establish the challenges related to accountability in professional judgement, we are left with the question “what to do then”. It is important to recognize that social workers cannot have perfect knowledge. But not knowing everything is not the same as knowing nothing at all (Mason, 2005), and the fact that there is often no single right answer to the situations practitioners encounter need not consign us to a world where “anything goes”. Conceptualising uncertainty as a rigorous, intellectually robust and ethical position, rather than a sign of weakness is a position of epistemic responsibility that comes with an obligation to act respectfully upon the uncertainty in professional judgements (Daniel, 2005: 60). Professionals will bring expertise and experience to bear on each new situation and there may still be yardsticks for assessing the relative merits of different potential responses, to help practitioners to make the best decisions they can in difficult circumstances. Indeed, social work ethics requires practitioners to think critically and reflectively about their own processes of reasoning and the grounds on which they base their professional judgements.

4.5 Power and emotions in assessment

The “power” and “emotions” turned out to be central aspects when the interviews with parents were analyzed (see paper 2). This might be linked with the overarching perspective of Critical Realism, where power structures are often at the core, along with concepts of professional judgement and the

implications of an epistemic responsibility position. In the child protection literature, power is mostly referred to as the formal power of the system to intervene (Kirton, 2009). The role of social workers performing child protection assessment is commonly linked to this legislative mandate: if a child is at risk, an out-of home placement is a possible outcome of the assessment. This fact is, for most parents, an ultimate power exercise by the state, enforced by social workers. A different perspective is seeing power as more relational (Shaw et al., 2013). When we consider power as relational, it is not just a “fixed state” linked to roles and mandates, but is present in every moment and every relation in various forms (Nissen, Pringle, & Uggerhøj, 2007). Relational power implies constant “power negotiation” between social worker and clients (Shaw et al., 2013). Social workers appear to have the relational and interactional power of how to define situations when they represent the system, by using their knowledge, skills and role to define a situation or make knowledge claims (Jarvinen, Larsen, & Mortensen, 2002). Child protection assessment is at the heart of one of the most problematic issues in social work: the duality of both helping and controlling families. A referral, based on concerns about a child, is to be investigated at the same time as help is to be provided for the family. This problematic duality of help and control will be further elaborated in the discussion section.

When turning to perspectives on emotions, I would like to stress the inductive approach to this matter during the analysis and writing of paper 2. When realizing the “powers” of emotions from the parents’ perspectives, the need for perspectives and theories on how one might understand and explain these powerful emotions emerged. The powers of social workers to make assessments are again linked with potentially strong levels of emotions in parents. Assessment in child protection is known to be a stressful situation for the parents involved (Midjo, 2010; Thrana & Fauske, 2014), and stressful

situations tend to generate strong emotions. Emotions are understood to be something we feel internally that can have an external expression. Emotions are explained as primarily social because they often occur in interactions between people (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In order to understand parents' strong internal feelings when under assessment, I turned to more biological and psychological explanations: Regardless of how parental capacity is exercised, intuitive parenting as biological capacity and preparedness is a universal phenomenon occurring in caregivers across age, gender and cultural background (Smith, 2010). Emotions between children and parents may be approached from different points of view. Attachment theory is one way to consider these strong emotional ties between a caregiver and a child, and explains them as crucial for the survival of the child, but also for psychological belonging and wellbeing in a mutual understanding (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007). This attachment behaviour includes maintaining proximity and displaying separation anxiety when apart, and is also affected and supported by hormones (eg. oxytocin). From my perspective as a mother, I can very well identify with these strong emotional ties, regardless of differences in maternal practices. While social workers expect parents to be a secure base, providing safety and security for their children, (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007), the parents' need for social workers to act as a secure base might be underestimated (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Security is closely linked to trust, and assessments often generate insecurity because of the stressful nature of the situation. However, other perspectives on emotions have been considered without being included in this study.

I will now turn to an overview of the findings.

5 Overview of the findings

The findings presented in this thesis are mainly based on those reported in papers 1-3, together with the findings from the assessment reports. They are related to the overall aim, which was to explore the phenomenon of assessment in child protection by comparing two different assessment practices, the Norwegian and the English. Additional aims have been to generate knowledge by interpreting findings from the perspectives of professionals and parents who have experienced assessment, and to contribute to the identification of central aspects of the use of professional judgement in child protection assessments. The guiding research questions throughout this thesis have been: what mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seem to constrain or support fruitful assessment practices? Additionally, what can we learn from each other (Norway-England) in terms of such practices? Paper 1 is an empirical presentation of interviews with social workers from England and Norway, discussed in terms of accountability theory. Paper 2 is an empirical narrative presentation of interviews with parents from England and Norway, discussed in the light of power issues and emotions in assessment. Paper 3 is a theoretical analysis of the different characteristics illustrated by Norway and England regarding the role of professional judgement in child protection assessments. This paper explores and discusses the different ways in which professional judgement is understood and addressed in each system. In addition to these three papers based on the interviews, assessment reports were gathered from both countries as a source of information on assessment practice. The findings from these reports will be presented after papers 1-3, before I turn to a discussion of the over-arching findings.

5.1 Paper 1

This study is an empirical grounded analysis, addressing social workers' perspectives from the two practices. The paper explores social workers' experiences with two different assessment frameworks: "the professional judgement model" exemplified by Norway, and "the structured assessment model" exemplified by England. Fourteen social workers in total were interviewed about their views on their assessment practice, for example, what constrains and what supports fruitful assessments. Thematic content analysis was used as an analytical tool to make sense of the data. The findings were divided into three main themes: 1. Assessment framework, 2. Professional judgements, and 3. Contextual factors. The findings were then discussed in the light of accountability theory, with a distinction between structural and epistemic accountability mechanisms, and then related to the two specific and distinct practices of assessment. This is a summary of the findings:

England	Norway
Assessments as:	
"Thorough bureaucracy"	"It depends"
Structure:	
Common assessment frameworks	No mandatory assessment framework
Many procedures	Few procedures
Professional judgement :	
Not emphasized	Emphasized
Little space for	The most important component
Ambivalent attitudes towards	Positive attitudes towards
Various level of reflectivity	Reflectivity as quality check
Context:	
Many public debates	Few public debates
Who to blame? (fear)	What can we learn?
Enquires	Few/no enquiries
Media: scapegoating	Media: discussing
Negative social worker role	More neutral social worker role
Fewer resources: liberalistic system+ "austere times"/cut backs	More resources: Social democracy + no financial crisis

Accountability strategy:	
Structural emphasized over epistemic	Epistemic emphasized over structural
Reducing professional judgement by emphasizing procedure (NPM)	More resources to support professional judgement
National policy discussions:	
Munro review: need for change	Report of audit: need for change?
Less bureaucracy /procedures and more professional judgement	More equality in services, more structure?
Participating social workers' suggestions:	
Keep the assessment framework	Provide some structure
Reduce the rigidity in procedures	Avoid rigidity
Support professional judgements	Keep the space for professional judgements
More of a learning culture than blame	Keeping the "systemic responsibility approach"
More resources in staff and interventions	Even more resources in staff and interventions

Concluding remark:

It seems that the challenge in assessment processes is getting a constructive balance between structural and epistemic accountability, in order to allow the best possible decision based on the information gathered. Enough structural support in information gathering and writing, together with adequate epistemic support to critically analyze professional judgements before making decisions, might help improve assessment processes. Once the assessment has been carried out, there has to be enough resources to meet the needs of the family and child.

5.2 Paper 2

This is an empirical grounded narrative analysis of parents' experiences of being assessed. Eleven parents in total from both countries were interviewed for about one hour each with the aim of getting their perspective on assessment in child protection. The analysis of these interviews resulted in the

two overarching themes of “emotions” and “power” in assessment. When asked about their opinions of the current assessment framework, families in both countries talked more about feelings than about framework and procedures. The parents’ experiences of assessment were similar in both countries, and seemed to go beyond national borders. First and foremost they experienced strong emotions in a stressful situation: anxiety, frustration, powerlessness, but also relief. Despite similarities in the emotions experienced, some differences were identified in the way social work is acted out according to the national assessment framework and policy context. In England, the framework and procedures seemed to provide clarity with regard to process and power within the system. In Norway, the assessments were characterized by professional judgement accompanied by more resources, which seems to enable helpful decisions from a family perspective. However, this heavy reliance on relationships using professional judgement was also seen as informal power by the parents.

This is an overview of the findings:

Similarities between England –Norway:		
Identified common narrations as overarching theme: Power in assessment; stories of emotions 1.System power 2.Relational power		
Differences between England – Norway: “ <i>Risk</i> ” ----- “ <i>Need</i> ”		
	England	Norway
Assessment expectations	Small expectations of help High expectations of placement/risk assessment	High expectations of help Low expectations of placement/risk assessment
Views on social workers	“We hate social workers”	More neutral view on social workers, including “social workers as helpers”
Clarity in assessment	Clear assessment, lot of standard questions	Lack of clarity in assessment. Honesty as risky
Service user participation	Low expectations of participation, Limited knowledge of the concept, Did not experience participation	High expectations of participation, Aware of participation rights, Various experiences of participation

Concluding remarks:

From the perspective of parents in this study, assessment is re-told as a strong emotional experience. Regardless of country, the most crucial experiences of these caregivers are the emotional aspects of assessment. This provides us with information on how stressful an assessment can be, and emphasizes the

importance of social workers' taking this fully into account when assessing. However, it seems that assessments in England are clearer; the families know what to expect and the questions are the same for everyone. The risk dimension in England is quite explicit, and this can be viewed as positive in the sense that system power is more explicit. However, the English families interviewed had little expectation of help. The assessment framework in Norway is characterized by professional judgement, and the findings from the interviews reflect this: It appears that professional judgement allows room for good decisions and assistance, because the families who are pleased with their assessment are very pleased, and explain this by talking of "tailoring" of interventions. However, the families with negative experiences in Norway connect professional judgement with power and tell stories about their sense of powerlessness because of the lack of clarity in the assessment.

5.3 Paper 3

This is a theoretical analysis and discussion of the role of professional judgement in assessment in a comparative perspective England-Norway. Professional judgement seems to be an important component when social workers carrying out assessment are processing all the information available. Professional judgement as a concept can appear vague and, as paper 1 and 2, showed there are different and sometimes ambivalent attitudes toward professional judgement in assessment. The aim of this paper was to explore the different ways in which professional judgement is understood and addressed in each system, and ask what we can learn from this in terms of fruitful assessment practice. Unfettered or unchallenged use of professional judgement is potentially as problematic as over-reliance on protocols and procedures. So how can we frame a use of professional judgement that is

flexible and sensitive to the particularities of the unique situations practitioners encounter but nonetheless reliable, robust and accountable? Acknowledging child protection as a “wicked problem”, I and my English co- author, Dr. Danielle Turney, propose a model of Grounded Professional Judgement (GPJ) based on notions of epistemic responsibility and accountability to support the exercise of professional judgement in situations of uncertainty. This occupies a defensible middle position between the current assessment systems in England and Norway. Introducing the notion of epistemic accountability brings with it a requirement to think about what we know and how we know it – what claims social workers can make about their knowledge base and what it is based on. This includes acknowledging the limits of knowledge, “owning” our own uncertainties, and conceptualising uncertainty as a rigorous, intellectually robust and ethical position, rather than a sign of weakness. While this position retains a commitment to the use of professional judgement, it nonetheless provides a structure within which judgement can be exercised more rigorously, transparently and in a way that can be called to account. In this way, Grounded Professional Judgement provides a counterbalance to the potential idiosyncrasies of decision-making in a context where professional judgement might be elevated beyond challenge or critique. At the same time, in a system where the space for professional judgement has been reduced at the expense of increased procedure and bureaucracy, Grounded Professional Judgement provides a framework within which professional judgement can be “reclaimed” by social workers and built back in to practice.

5.4 Additional analysis of assessment reports

Assessment reports from both England and Norway were gathered as an additional data-source. As a former social worker with experience from child protection I knew that reports were important in assessment. Assessment

reports are not mandatory in Norway, and I have not yet been able to identify the number/rates of reports written, mainly because these do not form part of mandatory reports to the County governor (Fylkesmann). However, the legal duty to report the case direction (The Administration Act of 1967) sets some guidelines for reporting in general. Because reports are not mandatory, they occur in different forms. In England, assessment reports are mandatory, and follow a common setup following the CAF (triangle).

I gathered reports on a total of 46 children, 20 from Norway and 26 from England. In the reports from Norway, each child has its own report, giving a total of 20 written documents. In the reports from England, each family has a common assessment report, with a total of 11 documents on 26 children (one unborn). The reports were gathered from the cities of Bristol and Bergen (see methodological reflections for further information and discussion on sample and recruitment), and are strictly confidential. To comply with this, I present some general findings about essential themes and issues:

- Assessment structure/framework
- Reflections on professional judgement
- Risk and need considerations
- Resources and interventions

This chapter presents a content analysis of the documents, and the themes emerged as a logic prolongation of the significance for the findings and the more general assessment discussion in this thesis. These reports are a selected presentation based on reports from both countries, and were selected out of availability. I have interpreted these reports in the light of the topic for this thesis, according to relevance.

Assessment framework:

The documents mirror differences in the assessment frameworks between England and Norway in terms of assessment as structured (England) versus a lower degree of structure (Norway). All the English assessment reports follow the same setup according to information sources and themes. There are boxes to be ticked and case directions to be made. It seems that the database programmes have a common setup ready with boxes to be filled in with text. The CAF/triangle leads the themes and sources for information, and each theme (for example, education) is followed by a two-step description of first the “child’s needs”, and then “the parenting capacity”. After reporting information required by the three sides of the triangle, a summary and analysis is conducted, followed by a section of decisions following assessment. The reports are quite similar in length, with a distinction between initial and core assessments (initial assessment as the first step, deciding whether a more thorough core assessment is to be carried out.) The distinction between initial and core assessment is now going to be removed from the English system, but this dimension will not be further elaborated in this thesis.

The reports in Norway do not follow a similarly consistent setup as they do in England. The reports from Norway differ in length and thoroughness, as well as in topics and structure. For example, two of the twenty reports are written as a one-page letter to the parents, with a summary of the assessment process: a concern was received, and then the social worker had meetings with both the parents and the youth, and the final conclusion is to close the case. In contrast, another social worker has written a six page report structured in several topics: the background for assessment, description of the child, description of family and community, family interplay, and

summary/conclusion. So to sum up, all the English reports follow the same setup and structure, whereas the Norwegian assessment reports differ in length, thoroughness and content, and do not follow a set structure.

Professional judgement in assessment:

Regardless of the assessment framework, professional judgement is an important component when social workers conduct an assessment. After gathering a lot of information, this has to be sorted and handled in some way to inform a decision. In the assessment documents analyzed, there are differences between England and Norway in how the professional judgements are addressed. In the English reports, we find a specific section at the end of the reports called; “Summary and analysis”. In this section, the social workers aim to analyze the implications of the information gathered (as they are explicitly told in the “box” in the set document). Some of the reports analyzed lack a “real”/thorough analysis before the boxes “Social workers recommendation” and “Decisions following assessment” are filled in. We see merely a litany of the case information, before a decision is presented. However, there are differences between the English reports in the level of professional judgements and thorough analysis. Overall, there are less professional judgements made in the English reports than in the Norwegian reports. In the Norwegian reports, the professional judgements seem to be more interwoven into the text/information gathered and it is sometimes difficult to separate information and facts from the social workers’ interpretations. Some of the Norwegian reports constantly move between information gathering, analysis and recommended decisions. I find that these different presentations of professional judgement in the reports mirror the findings in papers 1-3.

Risk and need considerations:

The concepts of “risk” and “need” are more explicitly stated in the English assessment reports, due to the set form. The information to be gathered is structured in terms of the “child’s needs” in different areas. Risk evaluations are not explicit in a heading, but most of the reports deal with “risk factors” in the analysis, together with “protective factors”. I also find more references to research and to knowledge claims made by the social workers in the English assessment reports compared to the Norwegian reports. In the Norwegian reports, it seems that the need and risk considerations are more implicit in the writings, but inform the analysis and decisions in the same extent as in England. In the Norwegian reports, the term “risk” is not present at all, but we find extensive use of the concept of “need”.

Resources and interventions:

An evident difference between the English and Norwegian assessment reports is the space for analysis, discussion and recommendation of interventions and resources to meet the family problems and needs. In the English reports, this is mentioned in a “box” at the end of the report, where different suggested outcomes are set out with boxes to be ticked: E.g. “Strategy discussion”, “Specialist assessment”, “Place into Accommodation”, “Referral to Other Agency” etc. In the Norwegian reports, the interventions are more interwoven in the presentation and discussions. Some of the Norwegian reports have a separate section called “The family’s need for interventions”, where the issues are discussed in a more classic “family therapeutic orientation” focusing on the interplay of problems and solutions. If the family is refusing the suggested

interventions, for example, counselling, then this is a topic in the reports. These different approaches towards intervention may also reflect differences in the resources available after assessment, with more resources available in the Norwegian system in terms of money and staff to provide tailored interventions.

Summary of findings from the assessment reports:

I have presented the major findings from the analysis of the reports with regard to four selected themes: “structure”, “professional judgement”, “risk and need”, and “interventions and resources”. These findings have been presented from a comparative perspective England-Norway. Of course, there are also differences within the two countries which are not highlighted in this context (see methodological reflections). The comparative perspective on these four selected themes was chosen to pinpoint differences in the reports which give depth to the findings from papers 1-3 and the overall aim of this thesis. The most significant differences, for me, are the differences in structure in the documents and thereby the level of similarity and inequality within a country/assessment context, together with the different focus on interventions to meet the needs of the family and child.

I will now turn to a discussion of the findings from the study overall.

6 Discussion

In this last section, I will return to the starting point of this thesis; the curiosity which started this explorative process of studying different assessment approaches. In order to compare the different levels of structure/procedures and the use of professional judgement in assessment, two specific assessment frameworks and practices were studied. In Norway, a group of social workers and parents from Bergen were interviewed and, in the same manner, a group of social workers and parents from Bristol in England were interviewed. Assessment reports from both these cities were collected and analysed as an additional information source on the two assessment practices. Within a Critical Realist approach, one of the most central aspects in research is explaining phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce them (Bhaskar, 1975; Danemark et al., 2002). The results of the empirical material have served as characteristics and form a starting point for identifying mechanisms at play in assessment so we can compare and discuss different approaches to assessment. I neither can nor wish to say that this is “the English way of assessing” and “this is the Norwegian way of assessing”. However, making this comparison of two different assessment contexts and practices may help shed light on the dynamic of some central mechanisms in child protection assessment in general, and how they are impacted differentially by several contextual factors.

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore the phenomenon of assessment in child protection by comparing two different assessment practices, the Norwegian and the English. Additional aims have been to generate knowledge by interpreting findings from the perspectives of professionals and parents who have experienced assessment, and to contribute to identify central aspects of the use of professional judgement in child protection assessments. The

guiding research questions throughout this thesis have been: what mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts, and what seem to constrain and support fruitful assessment practices? Additionally, what can we learn from each other (Norway-England) in terms of such practices? To shed light on the aims and research questions, the discussion will concentrate on the following four points;

1. The role of problem framing in assessment
2. Contextual factors in assessment
3. Fruitful assessment practices – for whom?
4. The “pendulum swing” – towards a fruitful balance?

I will end this section with some concluding reflections on implications for assessment practice within and beyond the two specific contexts under study.

6.1 The role of problem framing in assessment

When I undertook this study, one of the issues I wondered about was why different countries have chosen different approaches to the same problem of child abuse and neglect. Without attempting to address this complex question fully, I will now turn to the role of problem framing in child protection in order to understand the different assessment approaches better, with the contexts of Norway and England as examples of this comparison.

6.1.1 Child protection assessment - “wicked” or “tame” problems?

England and Norway seem to have chosen different strategies to target and respond to child abuse and neglect. How can we account for these different approaches to the same problem? One explanation may lie in the way the “problem” is initially defined. Assessments in England seem to have a greater

emphasis on risk predictions to detect and prevent maltreatment, whereas assessments in Norway focus more broadly on families' needs for tailored services to prevent further negative developments (Christiansen, 2011). The focus on risk and short-term outcomes may be viewed as fitting with a more technical-rational approach to the management of child abuse (Featherstone, White, & Wastell, 2012). A focus on needs and longer-term outcomes, however, moves away from the idea of a technical response and suggests an understanding of child abuse as an altogether more complex issue, which may be called a "Wicked problem" according to Devaney and Spratt (2009). These different ways of responding to the same problems might be understood as reflecting different interpretations of the "problem" of child abuse. When "Wicked problems" are discussed and targeted, a variety of interpretations and responses may be identified; each version of the problem has an element of truth, but no version captures the whole picture, because the whole picture may not be possible to capture (Brown et al., 2010, see also paper 3 for further elaborations). Targeting one problem may give rise to another problem, because of internal conflicting goals and disagreement among stakeholders (Australian government, 2007). "Ensuring safety" is an expression used in the context of assessment in England (Department of Health et al., 2000). With that assumption, the introduction of standardized procedures to control the situation through risk-minimising, offer a plausible solution (Featherstone et al., 2012; Munro, 2011). In Norway, when child abuse is debated, rather than introducing standardised procedures, an increase in resources is registered in terms of staff, interventions and post-qualifying education and training, as an attempt to target the same problem (NOU 2000:12). These different approaches sit at opposite ends of a continuum and arguably reflect different ways of framing the problem.

The empirical material showed such differences in orientations towards child protection issues. The social workers who were interviewed in England used the expression “covering our backs” when referring to the need for framework and procedures. Overall, they talked about the fear of not recognising dangerous situations, which could lead to their faces on the cover of newspapers with the headline, “She killed baby...” (This actually happened after the death of Peter Connelly in 2008). In Norway on the other hand, the social workers who were interviewed talked more about how complex issues were being handled in the best possible ways. They referred to the child protection office as being responsible for the children under assessment, and did not express fear over this responsibility to the same extent as the English social workers did. This might reflect more general social policy orientations in differences of “child protection” – “child welfare” (Gilbert et al., 2011), but might also serve as an illustration of differences in how child protection issues in the two countries are framed as problems.

6.1.2 Structural and epistemic accountability orientations

With regard to problem framing, given the notion of child protection as a wicked problem is accepted, then the rationale for having proceduralised responses in situations of uncertainty becomes less secure, and the need to develop ways to navigate the room for professional judgements becomes even more important. On the other hand, if one believes in the ability of child protection assessment to “ensure safety”, then research regarding risk predictions as more reliable than human reasoning might be pushed forward as the best solution. The concept “accountability” has leapt to prominence and become identified with one of the core values of democratic governance (Mulgan, 2003). Accountability in relation to professional judgment is linked

to a process where professionals are made responsible for their decisions and actions, and this is seen to be a method of keeping the public informed (ibid.). A synonym could be “answerability”, illustrating the need for public control with regard to professional judgments (Molander, 2013). There are different ways a government can make a profession accountable. A main distinction is between structural accountability, targeting the space for professional judgments; another is epistemic accountability, focusing on reasoning and reflectivity as the basis for professional judgment. The primary goal of structural accountability is to restrict the space for professional judgment, whereas the main objective of epistemic accountability is to improve the conditions for professional judgment (ibid.). In the empirical material, accountability orientations were illustrated in the way the English respondents talked about the huge number of procedures controlling and restricting their professional judgement, and how they experienced the room for professional judgements as being minimized by the box-ticking mentality. This might mirror an emphasis on structural over epistemic accountability in the English child protection system. In the Norwegian context, the findings from this study indicate that professional judgement is a key component in assessment. Along with this emphasis on trusting and supporting professional judgement, the social workers identified the need for more helpful structures in assessment. These findings might illustrate how the Norwegian accountability approach may be regarded as more epistemic than structural. From my point of view, a combination of these two accountability approaches may represent a potentially fruitful contribution to child protection assessments (which is introduced in paper 3).

6.2 Contextual factors in assessment

A central aspect of this thesis has turned out to be how the assessment practice is impacted by contextual factors at play, and the comparative perspective raises opportunities to see how different contextual factors may influence a phenomenon such as assessment (Baistow, 2000). This focus on contextual factors resonates well with the critical paradigm's focus on the role of systemic factors in social work research and practice (Morris, 2006), and also serves as a prolongation of the discussion with regard to differences in problem framing. As outlined previously, one of the most central aspects within a Critical Realist approach in research is explaining phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce them (Bhaskar 1978; Busch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005; Danemark et al., 2002). I will now turn to a discussion based on some identified contextual factors in assessment; frameworks and professional judgement, the role of public debate, and differences in resource situations. Again, the specific contexts of assessments in Norway and England serve as illustrations for the presentation.

6.2.1 Assessment frameworks and the role of professional judgement

Most societies want to protect and help their children in the best possible ways, and in terms of child protection assessment various attempts have been made to find the "best" solutions (Holland, 2011). Arriving at the most appropriate decisions in child protection seems to be difficult, and often results in criticism of the system either for being too invasive into family life, or too neglectful in protecting vulnerable children (Christiansen, 2011:19, Kirton, 2009). As outlined in the introduction section, one of the key issues in the international discourses on child protection assessments, is the tension

between frameworks/structures and practices aiming to provide measurable scientific validity and those focusing more on each family and child's individual situation (Holland, 2011). One can ask if this tension is constructive, or if it is more fruitful to ask how these two parameters may be combined. As this study outlines, professional judgement seems to be an important component regardless of framework and procedures. At the end of the day, as decision has to be made on the basis of the information gathered throughout the assessment process (Turney et al., 2012). One way to express this element of professional judgement regardless of frameworks and approaches is:

“At the heart of the humane project of social work are a range of informal, moral rationalities concerning care, trust, kindness and respect. These rational aspects of practice create a range of practical-moral dilemmas that are difficult to systematize” (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010:1046).

However, the discretionary powers of welfare state professionals can be troublesome in different ways: they can threaten the predictability, legality and equality of treatment, and a metaphor for this discretionary power is “the black hole of democracy”, describing the lack of public “control” over decisions which are based on professional judgment (Eriksen, 2001; Rothstein, 1998). On the other hand, professional judgements can also be seen as “opportunities” in the way they designate room for autonomy in judgments and decisions, and their “tailoring abilities” to individual services and approaches (Molander et al., 2012). In this thesis, accountability perspectives have been applied in order to reflect on the two different assessment frameworks, how professional judgement is viewed and handled, and how these different practices influence the role of professional judgement in assessment. In the empirical material of this study, professional judgement in assessment was highlighted both by social workers and parents as an important component in

assessment (paper 1 and 2). The group of English social workers showed ambiguities regarding professional judgment in assessments. They acknowledged professional judgment to be a central part of assessments and, at the same time, they considered the term to be controversial. The Norwegian group of social workers also showed ambiguities about the use of professional judgement in assessment, but in a different way from the English social workers. In Norway, professional judgement seemed not to be controversial in assessment, but some of the social workers problematized the amount of these judgments in assessments, especially the huge variation in practice, due to the lack of universal standards which leads to variation in quality.

The two assessment frameworks illustrated by Norway and England are, in many ways different, and the empirical material showed how social workers and parents from the two contexts had experiences reflecting the differences in the frameworks. The group of social workers in Norway presented professional judgement as a core element of assessment in child protection but were looking for helpful structures to support their decisions. The group of social workers in England said the assessment triangle was of major importance in assessment, almost like a “point of reference” when collecting and reflecting on the case information. The parents from England referred to assessments as social workers asking a set of fixed questions to evaluate the parental qualities and potential risks involved, and this seemed somehow to provide an overview of the assessment purpose and process. In Norway, the parents interviewed all expressed high expectations of help from the child protection services, but appeared more uncertain about the content and purpose of assessment with regard to child protection concerns. The duality of help and control in assessment seemed even more problematic to the Norwegian group of parents.

6.2.2 Public debates and opinions

An interesting difference is the extent and content of the debates regarding child protection assessments. The media responses in England and Norway to high-profile child death cases show the substantial differences in the public discourses between the countries, especially with regard to cultures of blame and responsibility. In England, tragedies like the deaths from maltreatment of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and Peter Connelly (“Baby P”) in 2007 have been extensively debated in the media (Warner, 2014). In these cases, the media have played an important role in orchestrating the public debates about child protection and the role of social work. The government response to these debates has been to implement major reviews of services, which have, in turn, led to social policy reforms, introducing more structures and procedures to be followed, in order to “control” case directions, professional judgements and decisions (hence differences in problem framings). In Norway, comparable cases have elicited very different public responses. When Kristoffer Kihle Gjerstad (aged 8) died at the hands of his parents in 2005, the case did not reach the level of heated public debate as in England. In terms of public reaction, the only individuals who were directly blamed were the killer (the stepfather, who was convicted of his murder) and Kristoffer’s mother (who was convicted for not protecting her son) (Gangdal, 2010). When child protection services are criticised in Norway, the authorities do not to the same extent try to control processes by introducing frameworks and procedures to be followed. In contrast to the English governmental responses, more resources are transferred into the system as support for social workers (NOU, 2000:12). Findings from this study show the importance of both the content and the level of these public debates. The English social workers who were interviewed all referred to these public debates as creating fear. They told

stories about lying awake at night, thinking about ongoing assessments and the possibilities of “getting it wrong”, with the tragic result of children dying, and the social worker being held individually responsible in public. The Norwegian social workers did not highlight this issue. When they talked about responsibility or blame if something goes wrong, they referred to the system being at fault as opposed to individual blame. Equally, the English parents talked about how we all “hate social workers” as reflecting public opinion, whereas the Norwegian parents` interviewed expressed a more neutral attitude towards social workers. Child protection issues in general, as well as specific cases, are also publicly debated in Norway and often with negative framings. However, there appear to be major differences in the intensity of these debates between the two countries and in turn how the debates “push forward” policy changes.

6.2.3 Different resource situations

The broader economic context in each country affects public services generally and social work in particular. Traditionally there has been a difference in public resourcing between the social democratic policy systems and more liberal policy systems (Kirton, 2009). The Scandinavian “child welfare” system of which Norway is a part is based more on redistribution of resources through higher taxes than the English more liberalist “child protection” system (Gilbert et al., 2011). In England, since 2010, there has been a sustained period of government spending cuts because of the difficult worldwide economic situation. This has led to reductions in welfare services, tighter eligibility criteria for access to services, and decreasing levels of resources. Along with this “squeeze” on local government services, there has been increased pressure on the voluntary sector, where funding streams have also been affected.

Norway on the other hand, is still perceived as a wealthy country, and had not yet experienced the economic difficulties facing most other European countries at the time of the interviews (even though Norway has experienced difficulties in the oil industry from 2014 and onwards, especially with regard to cutbacks in employment). A high level of taxation combined with well-established public services eg in health care and schooling, has maintained a level of social equality, with low differences in income levels.

The findings from this study seem to reflect the differences in welfare – protection orientation in general, but also the specific economic situation in particular. In these findings, social workers in England were generally frustrated that when service users' needs were revealed through assessment, they were unable to implement the necessary interventions to meet these needs. They referred to the more family-based interventions as a “resource battle” with their managers, and referred to long waiting periods before the interventions took place. Some of the English social workers also described the current financial crisis in Europe as leading to visible cutbacks in family support and services providing interventions, and they were faced with a compassion dilemma between the families they worked with and the national economy. They believed the need for cut backs, as stated by the government, but saw how children and families directly experienced disadvantages from these cutbacks. The Norwegian group of social workers did not experience a national financial crisis, and were far more “demanding” in terms of wanting more resources to be made available. They showed little concern for saving the government money, only a wish for interventions to meet the child's and family's needs. Differences with regard to workloads between the two groups were found. The English social workers had higher workloads and longer working hours than the Norwegian social workers, but highlighted this to a lesser extent than the Norwegian social workers did. The perspectives of the parents interviewed are

in accordance with the social workers' perspectives: The parents from Norway expected tailored services, based on a good resource flow in the system. Several of the parents interviewed contacted the child protection services in order to receive help and support. The English parents did not expect help or support from the system, only assessment based on risk and control. Some of the English parents were surprised when they actually received helpful services.

6.3 Fruitful assessment processes – for whom?

Within a critical paradigm, the emphasis on different interests in society is outlined as important in social policy, research and practice (Morris, 2006). This implies that different stakeholders have different perspectives and interests towards a phenomenon such as assessments in child protection. Critical Realism follows this emphasis on different and conflicting interests as an influential force in society (Danemark et al., 2002). One of the contributions of a Critical realist perspective, from my point of view, is its practical orientation; what works for whom in what circumstances? As we have seen in this study, the social workers and parents stress different aspects of the assessment process. It is important to bear in mind how the families often consist of several family members, not always with coincident perspectives, opinions and needs (Kildedal et al., 2011:164 ; Samsonsen, 2009). Children's perspectives on assessment are not part of this study (see methodological reflections for elaborations), so the following section discusses the social workers' and the parents' perspectives on assessment. However, it is very important to stress that "the best interest of the child" should be at the centre of every decision, and this can lead to situations of serious disagreement between social workers and parents.

6.3.1 The social workers perspectives on assessments

The main findings regarding assessment frameworks from the social workers' perspective showed that social workers in Norway and England experienced differences in the levels of professional judgment and structure in their assessment framework/model. Social workers in Norway presented professional judgement as a core element of assessing in child protection, but looked for more structured ways of achieving good judgments. Reflective thinking in assessment was viewed as very important with regard to decision making by all the social workers interviewed. This process of reflective thinking was linked to colleague support and formal supervision. In Norway, the social workers linked the concepts of professional judgment and reflectivity together, and viewed them as a total "package" in the individual tailored approach to assessment. In England, the social workers' experiences regarding the room for reflectivity differed more between offices, but was nevertheless highlighted as a key component when exercising professional judgement in assessment.

With regard to the question of what a fruitful assessment would look like, the group of Norwegian social workers highlighted the need for structures that work, for example, good computer systems. Still, they were afraid of more structure leading to more bureaucracy with the result that they would have more paperwork and less time to spend with families. These missing structures from the social workers' perspectives appeared to be mirrored in the reports I studied. All the English reports followed a similar structure according to information sources and themes, following the setup of the CAF, were quite similar in length and had to choose a case direction based on a common range of recommendations. The Norwegian reports, by contrast, appeared very differently; they differed in length and thoroughness as well as

in topic and structure and seemed to be based on how the individual social workers chose to write the report. While the group of social workers in England was proud of their triangle model for assessment and the general thoroughness in the system, they longed for more trust to use professional judgement in assessment, and more resources to meet the families' needs after assessing. They felt overwhelmed by the procedures accompanying assessment, especially the time needed, and they seemed frustrated about the "box ticking mentality" fragmenting the flow of professional judgement in the reports. The findings from the reports, showed that professional judgements were "saved" to the end of the report, in a specific section called "summary and analysis". This seemed to amplify the separation of information and reflectivity with regard to the information present. The group of English social workers also emphasized the fear with regard to cultures of blame, feeling the need for "covering their backs" with structures and procedures, linking this to the need for trusting the ability of social workers to use professional judgement in assessment. The need to be trusted was found in the way several of the interviewed social workers presented a more "open assessment" as an ideal situation, especially with regard to less proceduralised reporting systems. Based on the empirical material, heavy caseloads and long working hours seemed to characterise the situation for the social workers in England to a larger extent than for the Norwegian social workers, with the paradox that all the Norwegian social workers underlined the need for smaller caseloads and only one of the English participant emphasized the need for more resources in terms of staff.

6.3.2 Parents' perspectives on assessment

When asked about their opinions of the current assessment framework, parents

in both countries talked more about feelings than about framework and procedures. There were similarities between the two groups of parents in their experiences of assessment. The empirical material showed how they first and foremost experienced strong emotions such as anxiety and frustration in the assessment process. From parents' perspectives, the formal powers of the system to intervene appeared somehow interlinked with the approaches of the social workers involved, which imply professional judgement as an influential factor in assessment. The parents in both countries told stories of how a change of social worker had altered the assessment process either in a negative or positive direction. Since assessment represents a duality between help and control, parents might wonder whether the social worker is a friend or an opponent. This gives rise to emotions such as fear, despair and anger (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In this way, assessment is potentially a very stressful situation for families regardless of the national context. This duality seems to be a basic dilemma in assessment, and this tension cannot be easily removed or solved because of the different perspectives of the parties involved. However, the social workers set the agenda, both by prioritizing the topics at stake, and by requiring the parents to express their own views and opinions. This underlines the asymmetric power relationship (Midjo, 2010). Resistance from parents to social workers' definitions of the situation tends to increase the level of friction in negotiations (ibid.). In this study, the parents talked about the relational aspect of assessment as important to both process and outcome. The professional judgements in assessment seemed to be either the most difficult part of assessment giving rise to extreme emotions such as fear and anxiety, or the gateways to helpful decisions and tailored services. The findings from this study support the notion of power as relational (Nissen et al., 2007).

Regardless of these similarities amongst the parents from the two

contexts, some differences were identified in the way social work was acted out according to the national assessment framework and policy context. The English framework and procedures seemed to provide clarity with regard to process and power within the system. The Norwegian framework, characterized by room for professional judgment and individual tailoring, and accompanied by more resources, seemed to enable helpful decisions from a family perspective. However, this heavy reliance on relationships using professional judgment might also be viewed as source of informal power. From the parents' perspective, it seems of major importance to address the emotional aspects, as well as having clarity of purpose and process in assessment. In addition, it seems that both formal and informal powers needs to be communicated and taken into account by the social workers involved. Last, but not least from the parents' perspectives, good quality services in terms of proper interventions to meet the complex needs of the families seem to be of major importance in order for the parents to believe that fruitful changes are a possible outcome of assessment.

6.4 The “pendulum swing” – towards a fruitful balance?

The discourse on the level of structure versus the component of professional judgement in social work in general, and in child protection assessment in particular, is ongoing both internationally and in the two countries studied here. A recent government-commissioned review of child protection in England (Munro, 2011) emphasised the need to reduce mechanisms of top-down control, to make space for reasoning and reflectivity, while an Auditor report in Norway dealing with child protection decisions and services across the country, highlighted issues raised by a lack of agreed or generally accepted process (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012). During the same period,

a more structured assessment framework (Kvello, 2010) has been locally implemented in several municipalities in Norway, which may be seen as an attempt to increase structure in assessment.

As this study shows, assessment practice seems to be influenced by contextual factors such as public debate and resources. Frameworks in assessment might be viewed as a contextual factor in the way they structure the process, providing support for or hindering the room for professional judgements. The way child protection issues are framed may lead to different responses to solve the same problems. In a Critical realist perspective, these structural mechanisms have to be taken into account when discussing fruitful assessment practice. If not, the impact of the individual aspect of social workers' assessing a family might be overestimated. On the other hand, unfettered or unchallenged use of professional judgement is potentially as problematic as over-reliance on protocols and procedures. Challenging the content of professional judgement, the notion of "epistemic responsibility" (paper 3) tries to address this complexity through epistemically responsible processes of critical thinking and reflection on an individual level. At the same time, the concept of epistemic responsibility stresses the notion of child protection issues as something to be handled, not solved, which implies governmental response supporting these complex judgements and not only controlling them. From the parents' perspectives, it seems arriving at a fruitful balance between reliance on structure and reliance on judgements is equally important. When the assessment framework is less structured and relies more on professional judgment, it seems more informal powers in relationships downplay the system powers. This sometimes results in lack of clarity of purpose of assessment and vagueness in the duality between help and control. Although, the use of professional judgment accompanied by resources gives raise to helpful tailored decisions, structures in assessment may provide

additional clarity and support the notion of legal rights. In contrast, if the room for professional judgement is minimized and there are few resources in the system, parents may not believe that any helpful decisions will be forthcoming. In achieving a fruitful balance between the two assessment approaches, these different perspectives must be taken into consideration.

6.5 Concluding remarks and implications for practice

In this explorative study on assessment, the comparison of two different contexts has offered opportunities to reflect on strengths and weaknesses, by identifying and discussing structures that facilitate and constrain fruitful assessment practices. In order to achieve different perspectives on these questions, several data sources have been chosen. Even though a small group of social workers and parents cannot represent the larger population, the opportunity to present their “voices” through the in-depth interviews has given valuable insight and knowledge into some influential mechanisms at play in assessments within and beyond the two studied contexts. Assessment documents and research literature have provided useful additional information on the issue. The findings illustrate that the two contexts have different characteristics with regard to assessment practice and policy context. This allows reflection on why the two different practices have developed, as well as how they seem to answer their target questions. I would say this study’s relevance is not limited to assessments in the two specific countries. The discourse on structures/procedures and professional judgement is a central question within the broader context of social work (and other professions). The contextual frame of policy system and resource situation will also be transferrable to other contexts and issues.

So, what can we learn from each other in terms of fruitful assessment

practices in order to frame complex child protection issues, with interventions which are sensitive to the particularities of the unique situations but nonetheless reliable, robust and accountable enough to handle the serious nature of the issues? A rather general answer to this question would be to work continuously for a constructive balance of structure and professional judgement, accompanied by resources to meet the identified need of the families involved. Additionally, the need to focus on the content and process of professional judgement, with the aim of supporting this key factor in assessment, seems important. However, there appears to be no easy and exact answer where to find this fruitful balance. English assessment practice has moved to one side of this continuum, relying on structures and procedures in order to prevent maltreatment, reducing the component of professional judgement. The government commissioned report by Munro (2011) points out the challenges in the English child protection system caused by this. Even though the Munro review set out a way forward with fewer procedures and more tailored services, one central question remains: *How* to make these recommended changes in a system of scepticism towards social workers, where fear, individual blame and lack of resources influence practice? From my point of view, the most important contribution from Norwegian assessment practice seem to be a supportive system approach, and the acknowledgement of child protection issues as complex problems which are not easily solved but only managed in the best possible ways. Social workers faced with the complex task of assessment seem to need proper epistemic support, such as reflective supervision supporting professional judgements, manageable caseloads, and public trust. If (when) something goes wrong, a more fruitful approach may be “what we can learn” instead of “whom to blame”. Norwegian assessment practice on the other hand, seems to be at the other side of this continuum, relying on professional judgement as *the* main component of assessment. When

professional judgement is seen as being, in some way, above challenge, then there is no requirement to clarify what kind (or quality) of thinking processes are involved. Having few structures and procedures may therefore be naïve in terms of epistemic accountability and responsibility, and set up professional judgement as a kind of “black box”: inputs and outputs can be identified, but the internal processes connecting them are not available for understanding, or challenge. As we have noted in the Norwegian context, there have been moves towards locally implemented frameworks which may provide structures in assessment. However, these local implementations like the Kvello approach (Kvello, 2010), might move assessments towards more reliance on objective measurements at the cost of losing the emphasis on the subjective position and viewpoint of the families involved (Kildedal et al., 2011:166), without the national government being involved in this shift. On this point, it appears that Norway is at a crossroads and one can ask whether a thorough government-commissioned review of assessment in child protection is necessary (focusing, among other things, on the task of balancing structural and epistemic approaches in assessment). The main contribution from the English context with regard to facilitating factors in assessment practice seems to be the thoroughness in the system, drawing on international research on assessment. The English triangle system (CAF), which has been approved by the English social workers and parents in this study, has served as the basis for other countries which needed structural support in assessment, for example the Swedish assessment framework (Dahlberg & Forsell, 2006).

The parents in this study stressed the emotional aspect of assessment, which is important to bear in mind when we discuss the more “technical” aspects like structures, models and procedures. Assessments are carried out with *real* people in a vulnerable situation, and must therefore be handled with care. In my opinion, core social work values like empathy and respect will

always be of major importance.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Paper 1-3

1.1 Paper 1: Assessment in child protection: Social worker's voices in England and Norway

1.2 Paper 2: Narratives from parents in England and Norway:-power and emotions in child protection assessments

1.3 Paper 3: The role of professional judgement in social work assessment: comparison between Norway and England

Article:

Assessment in Child Protection

Social worker's voices in England and Norway

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Accountability, assessment model, Child Protection, England-Norway, professional judgment, social workers

Abstract

Good quality assessment in Child Protection is crucial to ensure adequate protection and provision. This article explores social workers' experiences with two different Child Protection assessment models: the "professional judgment model", exemplified by Norway, and the "structured assessment model", exemplified by England. The aim is to explore the experiences of social workers who carry out assessments in England and Norway, and compare and discuss these experiences in light of "accountability" theory.

Fourteen Child Protection social workers were interviewed about their experiences with assessment. A thematic analysis revealed three main themes that are the focus of the comparison: 1. assessment structure, 2. professional judgment, and 3. context.

Social workers in Norway see professional judgment as a core element of Child Protection assessment processes, but would like a more structured framework to help them to make good judgments. However, they are fearful of excessive bureaucracy and a mass of paperwork, and they are anxious about having less time to support families.

While the social workers in England are proud of their triangle model of assessment and the thoroughness of their structured system, they long to be trusted more in using their professional judgment, and for more resources to be available to meet the needs of families.

These findings are discussed in light of contextual factors, and analysed in relation to the concept of accountability: How does the government in each country restrict and support social workers' professional judgment?

This study indicates the need for both an adequate structured assessment model and an emphasis on reflective processes in the use of professional judgment. The study also highlights how crucial contextual factors such as resources and public trust are in enabling good quality assessments.

Assessment in Child Protection

– social workers' experience in England and Norway

Over the last 50 years, the focus on abuse and neglect has increased in the Western world. National Child Protection and Child Welfare are organized differently in different parts of the world because they are “social configurations rooted in specific visions for children, families, communities and societies” (Cameron & Freymond, 2006). However, a common feature in Child Protection systems is the process of early assessment after a referral of concern is received. At its simplest, the process of assessment refers to the gathering of information to provide the basis for decision-making, planning and resource allocation (Kirton, 2009). One of the most controversial and complex areas in Child Protection is the assessment of a child and their family in terms of risk and need (Holland, 2009). Since 2000, the number of referrals to Child Protection has increased in several Western countries: Australia, Canada, the US, England and Norway (Kirton, 2009; Studsrød et al., 2012). This highlights the importance of assessing the “right” referrals, and the need for good quality assessment to reveal and prevent child abuse and neglect. Several assessment models and procedures have been developed, and most Western countries (e.g. Australia, the US) have chosen risk assessment models that can be defined as: “The systematic collection of information to determine the degree to which a child is likely to be abused or neglected in the future (English & Pecora, 1994). Risk assessment models have been chosen on the basis of public debates, which have followed several tragic deaths of abused and neglected children in the respective countries.

The “professional judgment model” is primarily a Scandinavian social democratic model. It is characterized by few guidelines and a strong emphasis on children’s and families’ needs. There is little focus on the type of risk assessment evaluation that is the focus in England, which has one variation of a risk assessment model. The assessment models in the two countries differ greatly in terms of assessment procedures. The recent Munro Review in England (2011) emphasized the need to refocus on social work and professional judgment in assessments, as well as the fact that English social workers spend too much time on procedures. An equivalent report in Norway (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012) stated that an overemphasis on professional judgment, with too few procedures, may be a problem in Norwegian

assessments, in part because the services offered differ greatly in their organization and content, both between social workers and between municipalities.

This article explores the experiences of social workers conducting assessments in England and Norway. These experiences are compared and discussed in light of “accountability” theory, and we aim to find out: What can we learn from these different assessment practices?

Earlier research documents the division between liberalistic “Child Protection” systems and social democratic “Child Welfare systems” in terms of “risk” and “need” (Khoo, 2004; Parton & Skivenes, 2011). The number of Norwegian studies of assessments is limited, and the Scandinavian literature mostly focuses on the service user’s perception of assessments (Uggerhøj, 2011). Thus, in this study, we present a comparative contribution to areas that are not well documented, such as differences in governmental support for- and restrictions on professional judgment, in addition to contextual factors that affect assessment such as public debate and resourcing. This study provides opportunities to study assessment as a social work practice in two different countries, contrasting and comparing different practices.

First, we present some basic information about assessment in the two countries, and introduce the concepts of professional judgment and “accountability” in relation to assessments. After a brief presentation of our research method, we present the empirical findings in three themes:

1. Assessment structure
2. Professional judgment
3. Contextual factors

Thereafter, we discuss the findings in terms of accountability, and reflect on the level and form of governmental support provided to social workers conducting assessments. Lastly, we provide a conclusion on what we can learn from this comparative study.

Background

The English assessment framework

As a result of serious cases of abuse and neglect, England has implemented national procedures for assessment in Child Protection. Between 1970 and 1985, 35 public inquiries were conducted in relation to cases of serious child neglect or abuse by their caregivers, in which the Child Protection system failed to reveal and prevent the mistreatment (Bochel et al., 2009). This led to extensive public debates, and social workers were criticized for not recognizing the symptoms of child abuse, and for putting too much of an emphasis on cooperating with the adults at the cost of the children. The UK Department of Health introduced the publication, "Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment" (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, 2000), which followed the introduction of the "Children Act" of 1989. The new assessment framework was designed to "provide a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context in which they live" (ibid., cited from Department of Health, Department of Education and Employment and Home Office, 2000 p. 8). This is the basis for the current assessment model, "the Assessment Framework". Following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, the public inquiry led by Lord Laming (see the Laming Report, 2003) resulted in the "Every Child Matters" policy. This rearrangement of social services was one of the biggest social political reforms in England (Simon & Ward, 2010), with the main aim that children's care should be "everybody's business".

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) came as a result of the "everybody's business" approach, and is designed to promote early preventative intervention that coordinates assessment across multiple childcare professionals. A simple assessment form is used, and it is possible for other professionals and agencies to identify and register whether a CAF has been completed (Holland, 2009). This is a "lighter" form of assessment than the more thorough version undertaken by the Child Protection system, and there is also a distinction between what is called the "initial" and "core" assessment within Child Protection, according to the time and depth of the assessment. Core assessment is the thorough, in-depth assessment based on information gathered through "the Assessment Triangle" (Fig. 1). The guidance for

this model is evidence-based (Holland, 2009), and the triangle consists of three equally important elements: the child's developmental needs, the parenting capacity and family and environmental factors. As the figure shows, every side of the triangle has further specific sources of information and issues to be investigated. In addition to this triangle, national and local procedures are developed, as well as computer systems, including timescales and mandatory written reports. Hence, English Child Protection assessments constitute a structured model that emphasizes procedures and specifically designed computer systems.

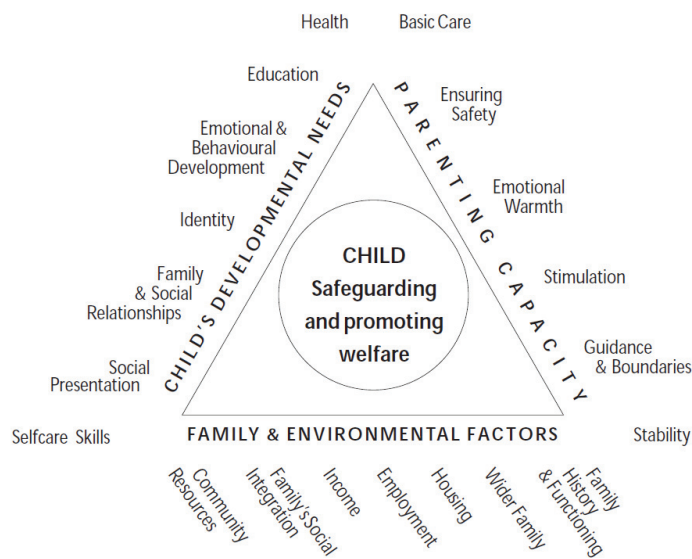


Figure 1: The Assessment Framework
 Source: Department of Health (2000a: 17).

The Norwegian assessment framework

Historically, Norway was the first country in the world to establish a public Child Protection/Welfare system (Stang-Dahl, 1978). Unlike the English “risk-based” model, the Norwegian system is centred on children’s and families’ broad needs for services and interventions (Christiansen, 2011). In the 1980s, the Norwegian Child Protection system was criticized in the media because of children receiving insufficient help after referrals: the so called “folder children”. This public debate has influenced how the system handles referrals and assessments, with timescales enacted in the Child Welfare Act of 1993 (Bunkholdt & Sandbæk, 2008). The main assessment guidelines are the basic principles of the Child Welfare Act itself,

combined with a deadline of three months for completion. The principles are: “in the best interest of the child”, combined with the “least intrusive act” and “the biological principle”. As these principles show, Norway does not have an explicit assessment model or mandatory procedure. This underpins the idea that professional judgment is the primary component when social workers assess referrals based on concern or when the child appears to have a “special need for interventions and support” (Kane, 2006). Moreover, there are no specific national guidelines or procedures for carrying out Child Protection assessments in Norway.

However, municipalities have the power to implement Child Protection assessment frameworks independently for the purpose of structuring the information gathering process on the basis of risk factors (Kvello, 2011), which has resulted in local variations throughout the country. The Child Protection office at the local level has the opportunity to consider the best way to investigate concerns, meaning that the amount of information gathered and the extent of family contact will depend on the specific situation and professional judgment of those involved. Municipalities often develop procedures in cases where there are major concerns such as child abuse, and although it is not mandatory to write a final assessment report, a report is often produced or written in the child’s journal. In summary, the Norwegian assessment model is characterized by “professional judgment” because there is no common framework for structuring assessments and no standard national procedures. Although the “Children’s Act” sets timescales and provides some juridical principles, assessment is still carried out on the basis of the social worker’s professional judgment and according to municipal frameworks.

Assessment in England and Norway - contextual factors

In terms of preventing and detecting child abuse, the governmental response in England over the last two decades has been through risk assessments and bureaucratization (Munro, 2011). The Norwegian governmental response to criticism of its Child Protection service has been to transfer more resources into the system in the form of staff, interventions and continuing professional development for social workers already employed (NOU, 2000:12 p 111). The terms “risk”, “need” and “abuse” may be regarded as socially constructed phenomena, in which the content is culturally and normatively defined (Parton et al., 1997). This implies that a country’s

social policy reflects its values, and in the case of Child Protection, these values have an impact on how social workers carry out assessments (Bochel et al., 2009). The ideal of Norwegian social democracy is based on solidarity and a high degree of government intervention, whereas the more liberal English system, is underpinned by values of personal privacy (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kirton, 2009). The Child Protection literature is commonly divided between “Child Protection” in the liberal Western countries (e.g. the US, Canada and England) and “Child Welfare” in a social democratic context (e.g. Norway and Sweden). Traditionally, “Child Protection” systems focus on risk assessment, while “Child Welfare systems” tend to have a more therapeutic orientation towards families’ needs (Christiansen, 2011; Khoo, 2004).

The child population in England consists of 13,000,000 children, with approximately 50-100 of these children dying every year because of mistreatment (Kirton, 2009). Terrible tragedies such as the death of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Baby P) have been extensively debated in the English media. The government response to these debates has been to implement major reviews of services, which in turn led to social policy reforms with direct impacts on Child Protection assessments. The child population in Norway consists of approximately 1,120, 000 children (SSB, 2012), though the authors have not succeeded in identifying the estimated number of child deaths due to abuse in Norway, but it certainly occurs. One tragic event was the death of 8-year-old Kristoffer Kihle Gjerstad, who was beaten to death in 2005. His stepfather has been convicted of the killing, which led to a public debate about the responsibility of children’s services. However, unlike the debate in England, this Norwegian debate did not lead to a national review of services, responsibilities and an identified need for change.

The public debates in England, especially in relation to the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Baby P, almost took the form of a witch hunt against the social workers, doctors and managers involved. Several people were sacked or resigned from their jobs, and their names and faces were on the front pages of national newspapers and magazines, as well as on the radio and TV news. In Norway, the public debates related to the death of Kristoffer Kihle Gjerstad did not reach this personal level. No individual, other than the killer, was directly blamed except for Kristoffer’s mother,

who was convicted of not protecting her son. Kristoffer's grandmother has led the debate, asking: "What can we learn from this? How can we prevent this from happening again?" (Gangdal, 2010). Green (2008) provides a thorough analysis of the differences in public debates between Norway and England; different political cultures and the structures that sustain them create different incentives to respond to crimes. In England, both majority parties have been impelled to respond loudly and clearly to high-profile cases. Any opportunity to exploit weaknesses in political opponents is used for one's own party gain. In contrast, Norway has a multi-party system based on consensus and compromises, and there are fewer incentives to attack political opponents. Crimes are less likely to become a means to gain political capital than in England. When it comes to the media, there is a highly competitive press market in England, with the need for catchy headlines, and less trust in expert comments on cases. This is not the case in Norway, where even the tabloid press presents a wide array of views of claim makers including experts, which has led to more balanced reporting and discussion (Green, 2008). There appear to be differences between the public debates in England and Norway, particularly with regard to cultures of blame and responsibility.

In many respects, a recent review of Child Protection in England (Munro, 2011) is very different from earlier reviews of Child Protection (Parton, 2011). It stresses the need to refocus social work and professional judgment in assessments, while also emphasizing that English social workers spend too much time on procedures (Munro, 2011). This involves moving from a system that has become over-bureaucratized, with a focus on compliance, to one that values and develops professional expertise and focuses on the safety and welfare of children and young people (Munro, 2011). Parton (2011) calls this an attempt to bring about a paradigm shift in English Child Protection. By contrast, a recent national report in Norway states that too much of an emphasis on professional judgment and too few procedures may be a problem in Norwegian assessments, partly because Child Protection services differ significantly between municipalities and between different social workers (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012). This report showed that a large number of shelved referrals across the country were evaluated as requiring an assessment when they were reviewed by other social workers. Thus, from the ongoing debates in England

and Norway, we see the pendulum swinging between risk assessments/procedures and professional judgment.

Theoretical approach

“Accountability” and professional judgment in Child Protection

Professional judgment, also known as discretionary work, is a clinical consideration based on intuitive evaluations informed by knowledge and practice (Hanssen et al., 2010). The discretionary powers of welfare state professionals can be troublesome in different ways: They can threaten the predictability, legality and equality of treatment, which raises some democratic issues concerning public control (Molander et al., 2012). A metaphor for this discretionary power is “the black hole of democracy”, describing the lack of public “control” over decisions based on professional judgment (Rothstein, 1998; Eriksen, 2001). The tensions of professional judgment cannot be removed, only ameliorated (Molander et al., 2012), but discretionary work can also be seen as an “opportunity” in the way it designates room for autonomy in judgments and decisions (ibid.). The delegation of professional judgment is based on trusting the willingness and ability of professionals to make good decisions (Molander, 2013). As a professional group, social workers are trained to handle general rules based on knowledge, but these general rules do not cover all the decisions related to individual needs that may be necessary for a social worker to act, e.g. “in the child’s best interest”. This indeterminacy creates room for normative personal evaluations and decisions (ibid.). “At the heart of the humane project of social work are a range of informal, moral rationalities concerning care, trust, kindness and respect. These rational aspects of practice create a range of practical-moral dilemmas that are difficult to systematize” (Broadhurst et al., 2010, p. 1046). At the same time, extensive research shows how heuristics leads to biases and faults in human professional judgment, as people tend to reduce complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations based on a limited number of heuristic principles (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). One argument for professional judgment in social work is the need for flexibility and an adjustment to individual needs and situations. An argument against the use of professional judgment is the possibility of arbitrariness and/or poor decisions based on biases. However, eliminating professional judgment in professions such as social work and

Child Protection is not an option because it is not possible to make rules that cover such complex situations (Molander, 2013).

The concept of “accountability” has leapt to prominence and become identified with one of the core values of democratic governance (Mulgan, 2003). Accountability in relation to professional judgments is connected to a process in which the professionals are made to be responsible for their decisions and actions, and this is seen to be a method of keeping the public informed (ibid.). A synonym could be “answerability”, thus illustrating the need for public control with regard to professional judgments (Molander, 2013). There are different ways a government can make a profession accountable. One main distinction is between structural accountability, targeting the space for professional judgments; another is epistemic accountability, focusing on reasoning and reflexivity as the basis for professional judgment. The primary goal of structural accountability is to restrict the space for professional judgment, whereas the main objective of epistemic accountability is to improve the conditions for professional judgment (ibid.). In Child Protection, examples of mechanisms for structural accountability are laws, regulatory agencies and the fragmentation of tasks within the organization. The mechanisms for epistemic accountability in Child Protection are the formal education of social workers and more support systems, such as supervision.

We can discuss the debates in Child Protection in Norway and England in light of accountability. For example, when criticizing the over-bureaucratization of the English assessment model, the Munro review emphasizes the need to reduce the mechanisms of structural accountability in order to enhance epistemic accountability, thereby underpinning the need for more reasoning and reflectivity in Child Protection (Munro, 2011). Broadhurst et al. (2010) argue that English Child Protection practice is at a crossroads, and that the government is willing to acknowledge that improvements cannot simply be made at the level of organizational structures, but that there is a need for a re-professionalization of social work. The Norwegian Riksrevisjon’s Report (2012) cites the problem of extensive variation in the level of services across Norway, which may substantiate the need for a more structural accountability in Child Protection so that the present epistemic accountability can be more efficient.

Methods

A qualitative research design was chosen to explore social workers' experiences of assessment. Qualitative methods are usually perceived as helpful for collecting material for in-depth analysis, as we have done in this study (Patton, 2002).

Sample and analysis

The main data source for our analysis was a series of interviews with social workers who were conducting assessments in Child Protection in Norway and England. Fourteen social workers in total (Norway=8, England= 6) were interviewed for approximately one hour each, using a semi-structured interview guide. The sample was recruited through the city councils/municipalities in Bergen, Norway (258,000 inhabitants) and Bristol, England (433,000 inhabitants). Both cities have well-established local authorities, as well as the social workers recruited work in the Child Protection services in the two municipalities that constitute the selection criterion. The social workers interviewed were qualified social workers with at least three years of work experience.

The questions concerned the social workers' experiences with the assessment work and their points of view regarding assessments, e.g. what promotes and what inhibits good quality assessments. A pilot study was conducted before the data collection started, in which two social workers, one from Norway and one from England, were interviewed. The pilot study helped us formulate the interview guide and shape the research focus in data collection. All the interviews were transcribed analysed using a stepwise structured thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings were presented and discussed with a range of research fellows on several occasions. Thematic analysis is a way of analysing data to identify and report patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and we familiarized ourselves with the data in different ways: By reading and re-reading, by comparing within countries and between countries and by searching for themes within the material, coding these themes and naming them. We then critically reviewed the themes emerging from the material by searching for statements from the material that would support and illustrate the themes. Throughout the process, it has been very important for us as researchers to be "faithful" to the aims of the study: to explore social workers' own experiences, perspectives and views regarding assessment in Child Protection.

During this process, we have also discovered new and unexpected themes in the material, such as the presence of emotions in the English dataset. Overall, three main themes were identified and chosen for analysis according to our research aim:

1. Assessment structure;
2. Professional judgment;
3. Contextual factors.

During the analysis, further categories were identified under each of the three main themes: “assessment structure” includes an “assessment framework/model” and “procedures”, “professional judgment” includes “discretion” and “reflectivity”, while “contextual factors” includes “public debates” and “resources”. The final analysis involved organizing a “thematic map”, with connections between themes and categories illustrated with arrows and text. The findings presented in this article are based on this thematic map, and the quotes presented are marked according to the social worker being interviewed (e.g. E1=English participant 1, N1=Norwegian participant 1).

Methodological reflections

Cross-national research offers opportunities in patterns of differences and similarities between countries and, together with contextual factors, this gives us new perspectives and contrast in our search for knowledge (Ragin, 1994). In our study of assessment as a social work practice across two countries, the two different ways of practicing offer opportunities to reflect on differences and similarities (Baistow, 2000). However, is the phenomenon comparable in the two countries? Our sample is recruited from one city in each country: Bristol in England and Bergen in Norway. Then to what extent can these two cities represent national¹ contexts for comparison? Although there is municipal freedom concerning implementing assessment tools in both Norway and England, we consider that in this study they represent the overarching assessment models labelled “the structured model” (England) and “the professional judgment model” (Norway). We identify differences between assessment tools within each of the two countries, but we also find data

¹ In a strict sense, because it is part of the UK England is not a nation/country. However, within the UK there are different models concerning the Child Protection assessment. In this article, we choose to focus on the model in England.

material from Bristol and Bergen to help illustrate differences in contextual factors between the countries that may explain such differences. This is not an attempt to provide a causal-effect analysis of assessments. Instead, our concern is how to generalize our finding in relation to our research question based on a relatively small sample in this study. Nevertheless, we assume the results may provide valuable knowledge in contributing towards improving child protection services across countries, which was the overall purpose of the study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Data Inspectorate of Norway (ref. no.29993) and the Board of Ethics at the University of Bristol, and managers in both city councils/municipalities have approved the study. Written consent was provided by the participants, who were assured that all information would be treated confidentially, and that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time and have their statements deleted. All data were rendered anonymous, and will be deleted at the end of the project.

Findings

Introduction

We have divided the description of the empirical findings into three sections, representing the three main themes in the analysis. We begin each section by presenting the English findings, and then follow with the Norwegian findings.

Theme 1: Findings regarding assessment structure

Assessment as a structure was divided into two main categories in the analysis:

Assessment structure as a specific framework/model;

Assessment structure as procedures.

England

“Thorough bureaucracy” constitutes a core description of how the English social workers viewed their existing assessment framework. They described the assessment model as consisting of the Assessment Framework (triangle) and the procedures to be followed.

1.1: Assessment framework

The assessment triangle is unanimously referred to in a positive manner:

E3: *"For me, the triangle is a point of reference to make sure everything is covered. Some form of memory aid almost, so I will go out with that in mind that I need to cover all these issues."*

E1: *"The assessment triangle reflects what lies at the heart of our assessment process. We will never lose that because I think it is extremely helpful and useful."*

Despite the positive attitudes toward the triangle in terms of its usefulness for gathering information and covering all the issues, it does not provide "answers" with regard to difficult decisions that have to be made:

E3: *"I don't think it helps me necessarily to come to a decision. It helps me gather information, but it does not help me analyse it."*

1.2: Procedures to be followed in assessment

The English social workers interviewed talked about the number of procedures that had to be followed when making assessments, both national- and local procedures. When it comes to these procedures following the assessment triangle, the comments are more negative than those about the triangle as an assessment framework. Typical verbs used were "over-complex" and "box-ticking".

E1: *"The reality is you sit there with this enormous thick thing of guidelines. It can completely freeze your mind. There is an awful lot of information to read about how to carry out an assessment, guidelines, etc. It is complete overkill, but it is a response over things that happened in the past and the need to make sure every last corner is covered."*

Some of the social workers have different assessment experiences from other districts, both better and worse, and they would say that this is partially due to variations in local procedures. The computer system seems to be especially important with regard to how they view local procedures for assessment. Bristol City

Council recently changed their computer system, and this was a theme across the interviews. The social workers stressed the importance of a functional and helpful computer system in assessment: To register information, to write reports, and most important from their point of view, to support reflective thinking and decision-making, and not restrict them to “boxes”, i.e. where computer systems fragment the information into time-consuming boxes to be ticked, hence making it difficult to keep the holistic view of the family.

E2: “I cannot get the flow, and I cannot get my ideas down, because I am too busy thinking about the boxes. What is the parent capacity and so on. They are all interwoven in some way, so how do you separate them? It is fragmenting.”

An ongoing theme among the English social workers is the wish to be able to write in a more flexible document, without having to fit in with the boxes that have to be ticked.

E5: “So, if I was in charge I would literally just have the headings, and you got to be creative in how you use it. It feels like it is ticking boxes rather than... It takes too long. You have got the information, and you just want to write it down so it makes sense, and have an analysis in pulling everything together.”

In sum, the English social workers interviewed found the Assessment Framework (triangle) to be helpful; however, they felt that the guidance following assessment to be overwhelming, and the box ticking in the computer system to be fragmenting.

Norway

“It depends” constitutes a core description of how the Norwegian social workers approach assessment. They present their existing model as a (national) lack of a specific framework (although recent locally implemented framework) and office “procedures”.

1.1: The assessment framework

N1: “The assessment process will depend on the referral. Is it sexual abuse or violence? How are we going to approach it? Who is it natural to invite to the first

family meeting? It depends on the age of the child, whether the parents are living together...

N7: *"We start with a meeting with the parent. It all depends on the referral."*

As previously described, Norwegian social workers conducting assessments do not have an explicit assessment model or many procedures in relation to assessment. The municipality of Bergen has recently implemented an assessment model called "Kvello". The social workers interviewed were all part of this implementation, but were "free" to choose whether they want to use this model from case to case. However, they do not distinguish between the use of "Kvello" and not using this framework when describing the "it depends" category. The main difference is the information gathered. The "Kvello" model functions in a similar way to the English triangle in prompting the social worker about the areas of information to gather in assessments. The Norwegian social workers interviewed welcomed this structure, and overall they appreciated the ability of the model to systematize information. This "it depends" way of assessment was described in terms of the possibilities for creativity and the lack of standardization as in set standards and processes. The Norwegian social workers talked about "travelling ideas": Ways of approaching or structuring assessment that occurred to them as a result of a good idea passed on by a colleague from another office, or from experience in another district office using different procedures. Two "travelling ideas" mentioned were: the possibility of having a meeting when gathering information instead of writing letters to ask for information as they usually do, and the possibility of using written assessment plans to inform/plan together with the family in the assessment process.

1.2: Procedures to be followed in assessments

When it comes to assessment, there does not seem to be many specific procedures to be followed. The social workers refer more to juridical principles such as the duty of confidentiality when talking about procedures in assessment. A common feature in the Norwegian interview material was talk about "office procedures". These are procedures that apply at a level below the local level. Bergen would be a local level, but the procedures developed are office-based (Bergen has eight Child Protection offices).

N4: *"We have something we do regularly. I have never gotten a set formula, but the way we do it in our office is to have a first meeting with the parents presenting the referral. Then gather information, do home visits, observe. We agree to always meet and talk with the child."*

Even though the social workers refer to these procedures as office procedures, one can see that the procedures are quite similar between different offices. Concerns regarding sexual abuse and violence seem to have more explicit procedures at the office level. Additionally, the Norwegian social workers stressed how computer systems influence their ability to perform good quality assessments, and how the computer system can hinder them and be time consuming. The new "Kvello" framework was mostly commented on in relation to the computer system accompanying the implementation of the model. At best, the new computer system was viewed positively in terms of its systematization of information, but it was also viewed negatively in terms of being too time consuming because it lacks the ability to duplicate information in different documents.

So in summary, the Norwegian social workers viewed their assessment framework as offering possibilities for choosing different approaches and methods depending on the features of the case. But on the basis of statements about the new "Kvello" model that had been implemented locally, it seems as if the social workers are welcoming more structure in their assessment, particularly in relation to information gathering. They currently refer to few procedures when they carry out assessments, and barely know where to find written procedures.

Theme 2: Findings regarding professional judgment in assessment

The categories of discretion and reflectivity in assessment are part of one theme because both aspects relate to clinical considerations. Professional judgment was previously described as clinical considerations based on intuitive evaluations informed by knowledge and practice. In this context, reflectivity refers to the analysis and critical thinking that takes place before deciding the direction of a case. It has been difficult to separate the terms of discretion and professional judgment, although professional judgment in this study is a more overarching concept that also includes

reflectivity processes. When analysing the empirical material, we divided this theme into two categories:

Discretion in assessments;
Reflectivity in assessments.

England

2.1: Discretion in assessment

In England, the terms *professional judgment* and *discretion* are not frequently used when talking about Child Protection assessments. The English social workers varied in their perception and attitudes toward professional judgment and discretion, and viewed the concepts as complex.

E6: *"I think professional judgment is controversial. I think it is really important, and I think it is important to value experience. It is controversial when you have people who think their professional judgment overrides everything. It is, and has been, undervalued, but also our society is terrified of litigation. So everything is about let's cover our backs, and I think that is why we are so bureaucratic. People can get sued or... Professional judgment is going to be a big cultural shift for people."*

E1: *"Regardless of the complexity of the form we have to complete, in the end we have to produce a summary and an analysis, so at the end of the day, on the basis of all the information you have pulled together, you have to form some sort of professional judgment about it".*

Professional judgment is explicitly separated from the process of personal judgments by most of the English respondents, e.g.:

E5: *"A professional judgment is very different from a personal judgment. That is because you are going on the guidelines, the law, your experience, what you know about risk and evidence, research, things like that."*

2.2: *Reflectivity in assessment*

Although every English social worker interviewed regarded reflectivity in assessment as crucial for good quality decisions, they differed in how they presented and viewed the level of reflectivity in their workplace when conducting assessments. Two of the six social workers were very pleased with the level of reflective support and discussion, describing this as a reflective office culture with open doors. The other four English social workers complained that there was not any room for reflectivity in assessment, and only in case management. The following two quotations illustrate both experiences regarding the level of reflectivity:

E4: *"I think we are lucky with the management which we have. Her door is always open, and you can change your mind. We are very much allowed to talk about every bit of that, so it is a sort of thought process. So I think having that opportunity to talk through decisions... I am lucky, but I know that not everybody is."*

E2: *"There is not a culture of reflection in our team, there is not much space. We are trying to improve it and to take ownership, because we need to be reflecting on the work, but it is much about case management and case directions. What would be really useful to have is the good quality reflections in supervision, but there is not the space or capacity in my team, and my view is that it is not good enough actually."*

The social workers who were not pleased with the level of reflectivity in assessment referred to this as a non-reflective office culture, and related this to high workloads and pressure. One of the social workers stated that she totally understands why reflective supervision is not possible in her system, with her manager being responsible for 350 children.

In summary, the English social workers showed ambiguities regarding professional judgments, in particular discretion in assessments. They acknowledged professional judgments to be a central part of assessments and, at the same time, they considered the term to be controversial. Reflective thinking in assessment was viewed as very important in decision-making. However, the social workers' experiences regarding reflectivity differed between offices.

Norway

2.1: Discretion in assessment

The Norwegian social workers commented on discretion and professional judgment in their assessment: "That's what we do when assessing." They stressed how professional judgment is required and supported in the Child Protection system, and how this judgment is a "red line" throughout the assessment from receiving the referral to concluding the assessment.

Words they use to describe what professional judgment consists of are "gut feeling", "personality" and "subjectivity", all of which are informed by their knowledge and previous experiences.

N3: "Professional judgment is about our pre-understandings regarding the specific issues in the case, and how we use our knowledge. It is often subjective."

N2: "It is always complicated and you never get a set formula. You have to start with what the parents are expressing, gather information, see what the children express, and then it depends on yourself actually, how you are feeling, thinking... A bit of professional judgment and a bit of gut feeling."

But some of the social workers raised objections to the high level of professional judgment involved in making the assessments.

N6: "Professional judgment in making assessments for me is the fact that every social worker has to make some choices about how to conduct an assessment. Even though every assessment is about assessing, I think there are huge differences between assessments. Some assessments being too thorough, others too superficial, not revealing the problems and issues".

Almost every Norwegian social worker interviewed linked professional judgment and reflectivity, considering that good quality judgments are based on reflecting on the case together with other professionals.

N1: *“You have to evaluate every single case on the basis of the information you have got, and fortunately most often there are two social workers assessing together, so we can discuss the case. And the other social worker might see something different.”*

In summary, the Norwegian social workers also show ambiguities about the use of discretion in assessment, but in a different way from the English social workers. In Norway, discretion seems not to be controversial in assessment, but some of the social workers problematize the amount of professional judgments in assessments, especially the huge variation in practicing assessment and the lack of universal standards leading to quality variations.

2.2: Reflectivity in assessment

In the Norwegian interviews, the social workers did not explicitly separate the concepts of professional judgment and reflectivity. The two concepts seem to be viewed as part of the same “tailoring”/individual approach to assessment. This quotation illustrates the perceived connection between reflectivity and professional judgment:

N3: *“There are several fora to discuss the decisions: Supervision once a week, discussions with your team, other colleagues and the head manager. So, we always have other people to talk to, and we don’t have to make difficult decisions alone, and in my opinion that is very important and is related to professional judgment, how we view things differently.”*

In the Norwegian interviews, all eight social workers described reflectivity through various discussions in several fora as a matter of course in assessment to “quality check” professional judgment.

In summary, both professional judgment and reflectivity seem to play a key role for social workers conducting assessments in Child Protection in Norway.

Theme 3: Contextual factors influencing assessment

The third main theme, “contextual factors influencing assessment”, is coded in two categories:

Public debates related to the role of social workers;

Available resources.

Our findings support the traditional division of “Child Protection” and “Child Welfare”. All the social workers interviewed in England used the term “risk” when describing the assessment process. Only one out of eight Norwegian social workers used the term risk, while the other seven talked about fulfilling the child’s and the family’s “needs”. The English social workers talked about uncovering abuse, while the Norwegian social workers referred more to therapeutic intervention to prevent future damage, and help fulfill the psychological needs of the child. However, in our analysis, we choose not to focus on this aspect, because this has been well documented in previous research (Khoo & Nygren, 2002; Parton & Skivenes, 2011). Our interview material has additional richness with regard to social workers’ description of other contextual factors influencing their assessments, such as public opinion and the available resources.

England

3.1: Public debate related to the role of social worker

As described above, the debates about Child Protection in England have been very influential in creating today’s system. The children who have died while under Child Protection and the media debate that followed have had a major influence on the assessment process:

E2: “There is a real culture of people hating social workers in the UK. We are the enemy, and that’s the way it is seen, and that’s the way the British media portrays social workers, and the fact that whenever there is a child death the social workers will be more blamed than the police.”

E6: “There is not a day goes by that you don’t hear the phrase, “you have to make sure you have covered that, just in case this happens or somebody accuses you of that”, and it can really inhibit good practice. I think the media has a lot to do with that, it is very media driven. It is a witch hunt culture, which is horrible. People want someone to resign whenever there is a crisis or an accident. I go into work every single week and think that could be me all over the newspaper.”

All the English social workers referred to the way public opinion towards social workers influenced their professional and personal life. They experienced fear and anxiety about the possibility of failing to recognize risky situations professionally, and personally, for instance, they tended not to present themselves as social workers at parties to avoid the personal stigma connected to the role.

3.2: Recourses available:

Traditionally there is a difference in public resources between the social democratic policy systems and more liberal policy systems (Kirton, 2009). The Scandinavian "Child Welfare" system, of which Norway is a part, is based more on the redistribution of resources through higher taxes than the more liberal English "Child Protection" system. The findings seem to reflect this. In our material, social workers in England were generally frustrated that when service users' needs were revealed through assessment, they were unable to implement the necessary interventions to meet these needs. They referred to the more family-based interventions as a "resource battle" with their managers, and referred to long waiting times before the interventions took place. Some of the English social workers also described the current financial crisis in Europe as leading to visible cutbacks in family support and interventions, and they were faced with a compassion dilemma between the families they worked with and the national economy. They believed in the need for cutbacks, as stated by the government, but saw how children and families directly experienced disadvantages from these cutbacks.

E5: "For the moment, resources are difficult because we are living in this austere time, and for the next five or so years. So I understand there needs to be more cutbacks, but unfortunately that does not always meet the needs of children. There are services, but they are for people in extreme..., the thresholds are so high."

Other resource issues highlighted by social workers as influencing assessments were in relation to workload and supervision. Several of the English social workers related the lack of reflectivity in supervision to high workloads and pressured managers, illustrated by one manager being responsible for 350 children. Expressions like "being stretched" were used, and social workers talked about working until 10 o'clock in the evenings, as well as weekends. On their "wish list", the

English social workers put more time to spend with each family in order to allow better assessments, but they did not suggest smaller workloads as a solution to help achieve this. When they were directly questioned on this issue, some of the social workers laughed, and this quote illustrates their perspective:

E4: *"It would be important for caseloads to be much lower, and threshold needs to be lower as well. But we have given up..."*

In summary, assessments in England are undertaken in a culture of scepticism towards social workers, within a public context of blaming individuals. In addition, limited resources and cutbacks undermine the quality of assessments.

Norway

3.1: Public debate related to the role of social workers

The Norwegian social workers did not refer to public debate or public opinions about social workers in Child Protection. This makes sense in a national context, where there are few debates about child deaths and a more "learning approach" towards this issue. But in our interviews they referred to perceptions of the power social workers have as an issue, in the sense that people in general are afraid of the Child Protection system and its power to remove children from their homes. The Norwegian social workers interviewed did not express any feelings of anxiety or fear about the difficult process of uncovering abuse. When it comes to responsibility or who to blame if something goes wrong, the Norwegian social workers refer to the system as opposed to individual blame.

3.2: Resources available

Every Norwegian social worker wanted more resources available in relation to assessments, suggesting smaller workloads and more time to spend with each family. They did not experience a national financial crisis influencing Child Protection, and were far more "demanding" in terms of wanting more resources to be made available for doing good quality assessments. They showed no concern for saving the government money, only a wish for interventions to meet the child's and the family's needs.

In summary, the Norwegian assessments are barely debated at all in the media. Nonetheless, there are discussions about power and the overall system. The Norwegian Child Protection system seemed to provide interventions to meet the needs revealed in assessment. Although the Norwegian social workers would like a higher degree of individual “tailoring” of interventions, and talked about interventions as an obvious outcome of assessment in a different way from the English social workers, the feeling of being “over-stretched” because of the high workload was not expressed as desperately as in the English material.

Discussion and implications of findings

In this part, we discuss the findings presented above in light of “accountability” understood as governmental trust in the professional judgment of social workers. Structural accountability targets the space for professional judgments with a primary goal of restricting it, whereas epistemic accountability aims to improve the conditions for professional judgment (Molander, 2013). Depending on the purpose of the procedure, procedures in Child Protection can enhance either structural or epistemic accountability. The effect of mechanisms for structural accountability can have epistemic consequences, and mechanisms for epistemic accountability can depend on structures to be effective (ibid.).

The Munro Review emphasizes the need for reducing the mechanisms of structural accountability to enhance reasoning and reflectivity (Munro, 2011). Such a change may be regarded as a paradigm shift in England, and it might be too easy to target these rooted mechanisms of structural accountability by simply stating the fact that the government “allows” and wants professional judgment; thus, other contextual factors will be highly influential. Both negative public perception of social workers and their ability to make good professional judgments, and the “blame culture” on a personal level, seem to hinder professional judgment. Social workers may need the confidence created by structured accountability mechanisms because the possibility of making the “wrong” professional judgment seems terrifying. When it comes to epistemic accountability, such as governmental support to improve judgments, reflectivity is highlighted by both Munro and our informants as highly important, although the effect of reflective supervision can be questioned (Carpenter, 2013). For English assessments to be based more on professional judgments, the level of

structural accountability may have to be reduced and replaced by more epistemic accountability, while recognizing that Child Protection is a complex field. It is almost impossible to “cover our backs” when dealing with risk in such a field. It may also be problematic to remove some aspects of the structure, such as boxes to be ticked or procedures to be followed, without replacing them with other support mechanisms, e.g. increasing the systems that support reflectivity.

In Norway, assessments in child protection are rarely debated. The Norwegian governmental accountability approach is that an epistemic accountability is superior to a structural accountability. This approach is supported by the social democratic resources available for staffing and interventions. In Norway, there appears to be a more constructive public opinion towards social workers in Child Protection, with reference to Green’s (2008) analysis of the differences in public debates. Even so, it is time to ask whether this trust in professional judgment in Norway is a bit naïve and oversimplified for such complex tasks as carrying out Child Protection assessments. This question can be raised based on the fact that clinical judgments are shown to be full of biases (Stewart & Thompson, 2004), and there needs to be a debate about the faith in professional judgments as the “gold” standard for good quality decision-making.

Another issue that needs to be raised is the major differences between municipalities in Norway. In our study, the municipality of Bergen had just implemented an assessment model to improve the structure in decision-making. It seemed that the local government acknowledged social workers’ need for structural accountability support to increase the quality of professional judgments, or to restrict the room for making “bad” professional judgments. However, the fact that an individual person (Kvello) has developed and initiated the assessment model implemented in several municipalities, without any national authority involved, can be questioned. This study may imply the need for a national debate and governmental decisions in Norway about a more general assessment approach. As the implementing process of the Kvello model illustrates, the lack of national debates and policy decisions about assessment models and procedures pushes this debate and decision to the local level. This demonstrates the need for more structured assessments in municipalities,

which in turn increases casual implementation and differences between municipalities that was not the intention of the Riksrevisjon's Report.

The debate in both countries can be enriched by comparing the two assessment models, given that the Munro Review implies the need for changes in the UK toward Norwegian standards, whereas the Riksrevisjonen's Report implies the need in Norway for more structure to support equality in services. Our study show the importance of both structural accountability mechanisms such as good assessment models *and* epistemic accountability with room for- and support of structures for professional judgment in assessment. Also, the assessment model has to be accompanied with recourses according to staff and interventions to be perceived as helpful from the social workers' point of view. We find the responses of different governments toward supporting social workers making Child Protection assessments to be of major significance.

Conclusion – what we can learn from the comparison

For *assessment structure*, the English social workers interviewed found structural support in their current Assessment Framework (the triangle). Even so, the accompanying procedures were regarded as overwhelming. The computer system led to the fragmentation of information into small boxes to be ticked, which was not seen as helpful, but rather as an obstacle to high quality assessment. The Norwegian interviews showed how assessment in Norway was built on professional judgment, with few guidelines and procedures. There seemed to be no standard process or structure for performing assessments, but approaches varied between cases and social workers. The Norwegian government has given the municipalities the freedom to determine the structure of Child Protection assessments, although direction is given on timescales and juridical principles. The Norwegian social workers mirrored this "freedom" by taking individual approaches, which was reflected in huge differences in office cultures. At best, these individual approaches contribute to "tailor-made" assessments, but overall the social workers interviewed would welcome more structure in assessment processes. They would appreciate a standard framework when gathering information. They also spoke of the benefits of planning assessments and providing a copy to the family, as well as having a final written assessment report that is currently not mandatory.

Professional judgment in assessment seems to differ between England and Norway. The English social workers presented the concept of discretion as controversial and a culture shift for Child Protection. At the same time, they expressed the view that professional judgment is an important component of decision-making. Nevertheless, they did not want professional judgments linked with subjectivity and feelings, but to be based on knowledge and experience. The Norwegian social workers spoke of discretion and professional judgment as the main components in assessment, and expressed the concept in terms of subjectivity and gut feeling. However, social workers from both countries underscored that regardless of the model used, a decision about the direction of the case and the interventions have to be made by social workers, with professional judgment forming a large component of that decision. Across the two countries, reflectivity throughout the entire assessment process, especially in relation to decision-making, was emphasized as being crucial for good quality assessments. Our findings point to the different level of reflectivity between- and within the countries. Part of the English material suggests that reflectivity in assessments is not a central part of the process; at least it does not seem to be a standard procedure to include reflectivity in decision-making. It appears that the emphasis on professional judgment in Norway is accompanied by a culture of reflectivity, and the two concepts are interwoven.

Contextual factors influencing assessment differed greatly between the two countries. In England, a national culture of individual responsibility and blame toward social workers seemed to have a major influence on Child Protection. The social workers expressed feelings of anxiety because of the high levels of personal responsibility they would feel if they failed to prevent or uncover risk situations, particularly given how the media has handled previous cases of child deaths, identifying them as misconduct on the part of the social workers involved. This culture of blame, combined with high workloads and structural demands in the system, seemed to constitute a "squeeze" and an intolerable pressure over time. In addition, the social workers we interviewed were feeling pressured by the economic crisis in the country, thereby leading to cutbacks in already hard-pressed services for children and families. In Norway, the contextual factors influencing assessment seemed to differ a lot from the English factors. There has not been the same amount of debates in the Norwegian media, and the component of personal blame is almost

absent in the public debates. Additionally, Norway is not experiencing an economic crisis at the moment, and the broad and well-developed services for children and families are not being cut. The workloads and demands also seem to differ, with higher workloads and longer working hours apparent in the English interviews. There are stark differences between these two systems of Child Protection shown by the themes investigated in this study, and each system has its strengths and weaknesses.

In terms of what we can learn from the study of these two different practices, we would like to highlight the importance of focusing on both the model/framework and the professional judgment component of assessments in child protection. Regarding the framework, the English over-bureaucratized child protection system might be a warning when discussing the Riksrevisjon's Report regarding the inequalities of services in Norway. Interestingly, at the moment, we register a casual implementation of a structured assessment framework (Kvello model) in many municipalities, although this is based on an individual commercialized initiative. This might be a value shift in Norwegian assessments towards a risk evaluation that focuses on structural accountability, away from the current national epistemic accountability approach, and without a national involvement to ensure the quality. However, the thoroughness and helpfulness in the English assessment triangle may serve as an inspiration for the Norwegian government when implementing a possible national framework for assessment, with the aim of achieving structural support. In England, Munro is highlighting the need for a paradigm shift in child protection. Still, this change may imply an over-simplifying in the focus on professional judgment, unless a serious discussion of epistemic contextual factors such as the "blame culture" and limited resources regarding staff and interventions are taken into consideration. This study indicates the need for supportive structures, as well as room for making professional judgments in assessments. There appear to be pitfalls on both ends of the pendulum, and the most constructive discussions on structure and professional judgment in assessment seem to be on getting the proper balance.

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Article:

Narratives from parents in England and Norway: Power and emotions in child protection assessments

by

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Abstract

The framework for assessment in child protection, as well as the context of the welfare state, differs between England and Norway. Assessments in England are structured in terms of a set model (the triangle) and procedures to be followed, whereas in Norway there are few national guidelines and not a set model for assessments. This underpins professional judgement as the most important component in Norway. This is a study of parents' experiences from assessment in these two contexts, and patterns and themes of assessment experiences have been identified in the two countries through a narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with parents. When asked about their opinions of the current assessment framework, parents in both countries talk more about feelings than about framework and procedures, as their experiences of assessment are similar in both countries. First and foremost, they experience strong emotions in a stressful situation, including anxiety, frustration and powerlessness, but also relief. These cross-national emotions might provide information about how assessment is a stressful situation for the parents involved. However, we find some differences in the way social work is acted out according to the national assessment framework and policy context. In England, the framework and procedures seem to provide clarity with regard to process and power within the system. In Norway, the assessment is characterized by a professional judgement accompanied by more resources, which we find enables helpful decisions from a family perspective. However, this heavy reliance on relationships using professional judgement might also be viewed as a source of informal power. These findings are discussed in relation to theories of emotions and the concept of power. Regarding implications for practice, we would recommend a more explicit awareness of help and control in assessment among social workers involved, together with a clear communication on the topic of emotions and power in assessment.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, service user perspectives have gained increased political and social interest, also in the field of child protection (Willumsen, 2005). The child protection literature is commonly divided between "Child Protection" in the liberal western countries (e.g. the US, Canada and England) and "Child Welfare" in the social democratic context (e.g. Sweden and Norway). Traditionally, "Child Protection" systems focus on risk assessments, while "Child Welfare systems" tend to have a wider therapeutic orientation

towards families' needs (Christiansen, 2011; Khoo, 2004). However, not many studies in England and Norway have assessment in child protection as their primary focus (Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2012; Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). In this study, we focus on parents' experiences on assessment in the child protection context in the two countries (we refer to "parents" even though one of the interviewed is a grandparent, see Table 1). How do parents retell their assessment experiences?

Assessment in child protection has a significant role to play in contributing to better outcomes for children and their families in terms of protection and provision (Kirton, 2009), as England and Norway have adopted different approaches towards assessment. In England, governmental responses to perceived failings in the child protection system have led to a system characterized by high levels of proceduralization and bureaucratization, as well as a downplaying of the role of professional judgement (Munro review, 2011; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). In Norway, the exercise of professional discretion and judgement has been seen as key to the assessment process, while the governmental response to the criticism of child protection practice has taken a different direction. Rather than introducing standardized procedures, there has been an increase in resources in terms of staff, interventions and post-qualifying education and training (NOU, 2000:12, p. 111).

We have not yet identified any comparative research in Norway and England on the parents' perspectives of assessment processes. In this small-scale, in-depth comparative study, parents from both England and Norway presented narratives of the emotions they experienced in the assessment process. When describing and discussing the parents' experiences, we turn to power theories and discuss power as both systemic and relational, together with theories on emotions. An overarching issue reflected in our interviews is the well-known duality in child welfare regarding help and control. The aim of this study is to develop knowledge on assessment from parents' experiences in order to contribute to improve practice in social work. What can we learn from these experiences that will facilitate a more fruitful practice in assessment?

Contexts for assessment: Structures and practices in Norway and England

Cross-national research offers opportunities to look at patterns of similarities and differences between countries and, together with different contextual factors, this gives

us new perspectives in our search for knowledge (Ragin, 1994). In our study of assessment as social work practice in Norway and England, the two ways of practicing offer us opportunities to reflect on the differences and similarities (Baistow, 2000). Although our focus is on assessment practice, this practice is influenced by policy systems that have to be taken into account when making comparisons (Bochel et al., 2009). Between Norway and England, there are differences in both policy and practice in assessment frameworks. In Norway, there is no national assessment model/set framework for social workers to follow, whereas in England there is a national set model/framework that informs practice. Norway has few national mandatory procedures accompanying assessment, but has various local procedures and computer systems. On the other hand, England has a lot of national and local mandatory procedures accompanied by various computer systems (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). However, both countries have child protection assessments anchored in a specific law: in Norway, it is the “Child Welfare Act” of 1993, in England the “Children Act” of 1989. In this section, we set out the context for assessments in child protection in the two countries by looking at the different approaches in Norway and England.

The English assessment framework: As a result of serious cases of abuse and neglect, England has implemented national procedures for assessment in child protection. Between 1970 and 1985, 35 public inquiries were conducted in relation to serious cases of child neglect and abuse by caregivers, in which the child protection system had failed to reveal and prevent maltreatments (Bochel et al., 2009). This led to extensive public debate, and social workers were criticized for not recognizing the symptoms of child abuse and for putting too much emphasis on cooperating with the adults at the cost of the children. The UK Department of Health introduced the publication, “Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment” (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, 2000), which followed the introduction of the “Children Act” of 1989. The new assessment framework was designed to “provide a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context in which they live” (ibid., p. 8). This is the basis for the current assessment model, “The Assessment Framework”. The assessment model is called “The Assessment Triangle”, which works as the basis for assessment topics. In addition to this triangle, there are both national and various local procedures for doing

assessment, as well as computer systems to support the process. This triangle has three equally important sides: the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors. As the figure shows, every side of the triangle has further specific sources of information and issues to be investigated, including procedures regarding timescales to be followed and mandatory assessment reports to be written. The guidance for this model is evidence-based (Holland, 2011). Hence, at least in principle, we can say that English child protection assessments follow a structured model that includes procedures and specifically designed computer systems to support the use of the model.

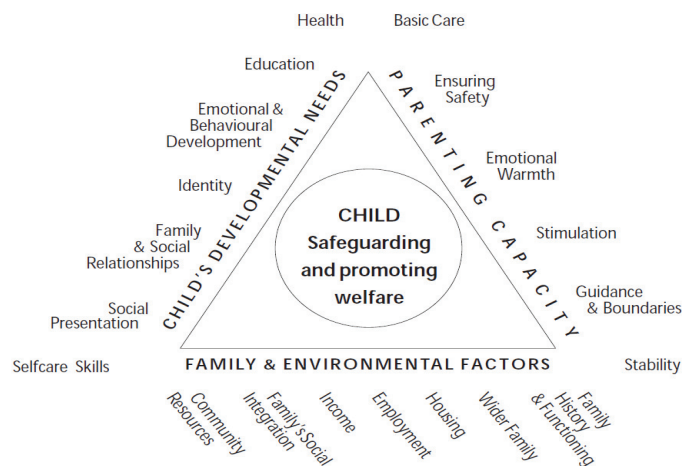


Figure 1: The Assessment Framework, Source: Department of Health (2000a: 17)

The Norwegian assessment framework: Historically, Norway was the first country in the world to have a public child protection/welfare system (Stang-Dahl, 1978). The Norwegian system is generally described as less risk-based than other Western child protection systems (e.g. US, Canada and England) and more centred on children's and families' broad needs for services and interventions (Christiansen, 2011; Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). In Norwegian, the term for the child protection system incorporates both the protection and welfare dimensions that are separate in the English language. This mirrors how the system is organized with no formal division between child protection and child welfare. The main guidance for social workers doing assessments lies in the fundamental principles of the "Child Welfare Act" itself, combined with a deadline of three months for completing assessments. The fundamental principles are to work "in the best

interest of the child”, to do the “least intrusive act” and to adhere to “the biological principle”. The first of these, the “best interest of the child”, is at the centre of every issue in child protection. Norway does not have an explicit assessment model or mandatory procedures for social workers to follow. Broadly speaking, the lack of an externally imposed structure is consistent with the idea that professional judgement is the primary component in social workers’ assessments when there are child protection concerns. The system should assess when the child appears to have a “special need for interventions and support” (Kane, 2006), though there are no further specific national guidelines or procedures to be followed when carrying out child protection assessments in Norway. However, there is freedom for municipalities to implement child protection assessment frameworks. Some municipalities have recently implemented an assessment model, structuring the information-gathering process on the basis of risk factors (Kvello, 2011), which is based on a private initiative that is not anchored in any national authority. The Norwegian assessment framework allows the local child protection office to decide on the best way to investigate any concern. The amount of information gathered, and the extent of family contact, will depend on the individual situation and on the professional judgement made about the situation. Although it is not mandatory to write a final assessment report, it is common for there to be some kind of record after an assessment is finished, either in the form of a report or in the form of a child’s file.

As we have set out, the framework and guidelines for social work assessment differ strongly between the two countries in terms of a standardized framework and procedures. A recent discourse in the two countries sheds some interesting light on these differences: In England, a government-commissioned review of child protection (Munro review, 2011) emphasized the need to reduce mechanisms of top-down control to help create space for reasoning and reflectivity. At more or less the same time, a similar report in Norway focusing on child protection decisions and services across the country highlighted issues raised by a lack of an agreed or generally accepted process. The report identified a heavy reliance on professional judgement as a potential problem for public justice in terms of differences in services and decision-making (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012).

Previous research on the topic

What do we already know about parents' perspectives on child protection assessments? Earlier research on the child protection system highlights how important it is to take account of parents' experiences of their contact with this system (Chapman, Gibbons, Barth, McCrae, & NSCAW Research Group, 2003; Willumsen & Severinsson, 2005; Hardy & Darlington, 2008). There is a limited amount of knowledge about how those who have had involvement with the child protection system view their experience (Baker, 2007), as studies show inconsistent results about parents' perceptions of the child protection services (Studsrød, Willumsen, & Ellingsen, 2012). Research findings differ in both the experience of the process and in the outcomes of these services, with findings ranging from major satisfaction among parents (Winefield & Barlow, 1995; Dale, 2004) to major critical concerns (Bolen, McWey, & Schlee, 2008; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Houghes, 2008; Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In a recent study (697 respondents) of parents' perceptions of the Norwegian child protection system, 40.6% of the parents reported having only positive experiences and 30.7% reported having solely negative experiences, while 24% of the parents described having both positive and negative experiences (Studsrød et al., 2012). When it comes to assessment related findings in England, Turney et al. (2012) suggest that key factors in receiving a positive perspective from parents are the relational ability of the assessor, such as a willingness to listen and to demonstrate empathy and respect, as well as clarity about the specific purpose of the assessment. Assessment-related studies in Norway are limited, but findings from Scandinavia support Turney et al.'s review on the importance of relational skills (Samsonsen, 2009; Uggerhøj, 2011). A recent Norwegian study highlights the emotional aspects of parents' encounters with the child protection services and the importance of taking these emotions into consideration. The study shows that parents' rational arguments and their emotions are inextricably linked to each other (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Clarity about the purpose of the assessment has not been identified as equally important in the Scandinavian literature as in the English, although a Norwegian PhD study stresses the informal powers of social workers in assessment, and connects these powers with low levels of clarity in the communication (Midjo, 2010). The child protection literature is commonly divided between "Child Protection" in the liberal Western countries (e.g. US, Canada and England) and "Child Welfare" in a social democratic context. Previous research comparing these two contexts documents this division in terms of "risk" and "need" (Khoo, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2011). There are limited findings from comparative studies on assessment in child protection, and we have not yet been able

to find any comparative studies about parents' perspectives between "Child Protection" and "Child Welfare" systems.

Theoretical approach

The aim of this study is to develop knowledge on the assessment from parents' experiences in order to contribute to an improved practice in social work. What can we learn from these experiences that will facilitate a more fruitful practice in assessment? With this explorative starting position, the research process developed in an inductive manner in regard to theoretical perspectives as a means to supplement and extend the analysis of the interviews. Two main themes that were identified in the material, namely "emotions" and "power", will be further elaborated in the section of findings and discussion.

Emotions in assessment

Emotions are understood to be something we feel internally, and that can have an external expression. Emotions are explained as primarily being social because they often occur in interactions between people (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Assessment in child protection is known to be a stressful situation for the parents involved (ibid. Midjo, 2010; Uggerhøj, 2011), and stressful situations tend to generate strong emotions. A small minority of caregivers will seriously harm a child, but these cases do not represent typical child welfare practice as they only constitute the most extreme cases (Holland, 2011). Regardless of how parental capacity is exercised, intuitive parenting as biological capacity and preparedness is a universal phenomenon occurring in caregivers across age, gender and cultural background (Smith, 2010). Emotions between children and parents can also be approached via different perspectives. Attachment theory is one way to consider these strong emotional ties between a caregiver and a child, explaining them as crucial for the survival of the child, but also for psychological belonging and well-being in a mutual understanding (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007). From a more biological perspective, this attachment and emotional union is something humans share with other mammals to reproduce and survive as a species, and it is characterized by nest-building and territorial defence (Fisher, 1998). This attachment behaviour includes maintaining proximity and displaying separation anxiety when apart, and is also affected and supported by hormones (e.g. oxytocin). This primal force of parenting does not ensure good quality parenting, but has to be taken into account when dealing with the caregiver-

child entity. What happens when the nest is “under attack” by child protection assessments? While social workers expect parents to be a secure base, providing safety and security for their children, (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007), the parents’ need for social workers to act as a secure base might be underestimated (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Security is closely linked to trust, and assessments often generate insecurity because of the stressful nature of the situation. The duality lies in the question of whether the social worker is a friend or an opponent, and this duality may give rise to insecurity, which in turn may create anxiety, frustration and anger. Thrana and Fauske (2014) stress the importance of acknowledging these emotions as possible obstacles, and of addressing the fear by serving as the parents’ secure base. However, a fundamental problem in child protection assessment is the tension between parental rights and the fundamental needs of the child, which can be in conflict, and may be a genuine obstacle in the assessment process.

Power in assessment

Child protection assessment seems to be at the heart of one of the most problematic issues in social work: the duality of both helping and controlling families. A referral, based on concerns about a child, is to be investigated at the same time as help is to be provided from the family’s perspective. As previous research shows, there are different orientations toward helping and controlling in England and Norway (Gilbert et al., 2011). In a comparative perspective, one can say that England is more risk oriented in its assessment, while Norway is more therapeutically oriented. The available resources underpin these differences. In England, families’ broader needs are revealed during assessment, but targeted interventions are not always available because of a scarcity of resources in the system. In Norway, there are more tailored interventions available to meet the complex needs of families after assessment (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). In the child protection literature, power is mostly referred to as the formal positional power of the system to intervene (Kirton, 2009). The role of social workers performing child protection assessment is commonly linked to this legislative mandate: if a child is at risk, an out-of-home placement is a possible outcome of the assessment. For most parents, this is the ultimate exercise of power from the state, which is enforced by social workers, though a different power perspective sees power as more relational (Shaw, 2013). When approaching power as relational, power is not just a “fixed state” linked to roles and mandates, but instead is present in every moment and every relation in various

forms (Nissen, Pringle, & Uggerhøj, 2007; Midjo, 2010). Relational power implies a constant “power negotiation” between social worker and clients, with different sizes of power “battles” being present (Shaw, Briar-Lawson, Orme, & Ruckdeschel, 2013; Midjo, 2010). Through the use of their knowledge, skills and role to define a situation or make knowledge claims, social workers seem to have relational and interactional power as representing the system (Jarvinen, Larsen, & Mortensen, 2002). Professional judgement in assessment could be an example in which both formal- and relational power are played out. If we consider power to be relational, the power issues in assessment are both complex and influential, and may be used to help as well as to control.

Method

This is a small-scale, in-depth study with a qualitative approach, which is considered meaningful when studying lifeworlds in terms of individuals’ own perceptions and subjective apprehensions (Berg & Lune, 2012). We started out the analytical process with a classic content analysis approach, but realized early in the process that the answers in the interviews did not entirely correspond with the questions asked. Quite a few questions from the interview guide were about the assessment framework and procedures, but the answers were stories about emotions. After a thorough consideration of how to be “faithful” to the stories when analysing and presenting findings, a narrative thematic analytical approach was considered most appropriate. Narrative analysis acknowledges to a wider extent that people are constructors of their own experiences. It sees narratives as a way of making sense of- and presenting these experiences (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). Chase (2008) states that narrators break through the interview structure and talk about what is most important to them, as what comes first tells us more than anything else. All the interviews were thoroughly transcribed and read several times as a starting point. We then approached each interview for stories to preserve the self-presentation of each person (Chase, 2008), before turning to a more thematic narrative analytical approach (Riessmann, 2008). In general, one of the key differences between a narrative thematic analysis and a content analysis is the greater possibility in narratives to keep a story more “intact”, instead of using component categories across cases. The difference between a thematic narrative analysis and narrative approaches is the former’s ability to interpret data in light of the themes identified by the investigator/researcher, rather than the chronology of the narration as presented by the individual (ibid.). In this study, themes were

identified across stories, both within interviews and between interviews, within one country and between two countries. We present selected quotes to illustrate the themes and findings, with the quotes presented labelled according to the parents being interviewed (e.g. E1=England participant 1, N1=Norwegian participant 1).

Recruiting the interviewed

The main data source for this analysis was 10 interviews with 11 parents (actually one of them was a grandparent) who had experienced at least one assessment in child protection from 2010 onward. The sample was recruited through the city councils in Bergen, Norway (258,000 inhabitants) and Bristol, England (433,000 inhabitants). These cities share a similar maritime heritage and are relatively affluent. The service context seems quite similar in the way that frontline social workers are the assessors, and if more thorough interventions are the outcome of assessment, the case is referred to other service teams. We accessed the parents via social work teams in the two city councils. Social workers asked a broad range of clients on their lists, and the ones who accepted were interviewed. The Norwegian parents were interviewed previous to the English, and the English parents received a 10 pound gift card, whereas the Norwegians did it for free (we did not think about this at first, since in our experience it is not an equally common practice in Norway as in England). This might have influenced the sample in England according to a motivation for participation. In total, 11 parents (Norway=5, England= 6) were interviewed for approximately one hour each, with using a semi-structured topic guide (see Table 1). They were mostly visited in their homes, but two interviews took place at a café according to the interviewees' wishes. Parents were asked questions about their assessment experiences, how they saw the process, how they felt, what was good about the assessment and what could have been better, how service user participation was facilitated and experienced and what type of assessment improvements they would suggest.

This study is part of a larger research project exploring assessments in Norway and England, which includes interviewing social workers (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014) and analysing assessment reports (Samsonsen & Turney, 2015).

Table 1: Sample (parents interviewed)

	Norway		England
N1	Single mother, two children aged 9 and 11. Two assessment experiences.	E1	Single mother, two children aged 3 and 5. One assessment experience.
N2	Single mother, three children aged 3, 7 and 13. Two assessment experiences.	E2	Single mother, five children; two adult and three between ages 8-16. Two assessment experiences.
N3	Married mother, three children; one 16 and two adult. One assessment experience.	E3	Parents (mother and father), one child; baby under 1 year. One assessment experience.
N4	Single mother, two children aged 14 and 17. One assessment experience.	E4	Grandmother (mother's mother), two children aged 10 and 12. One assessment experience.
N5	Single mother, two children; one 15 and the other adult. Two assessment experiences.	E5	Single mother, three children; two teenagers and one 4 year old. One assessment experience.

Methodological reflections

In our study of assessment from the parents' perspectives across two countries, the two different ways of practicing offer opportunities to reflect on differences and similarities (Baistow, 2000). We have validated the analytical process through transparency and through discussions between the authors and other research colleagues. Within narrative research, accountability and credibility lie in the narrators' experiences. But why should we believe it? Narrative as a research tool is viewed as stories from reality and not on reality (Riessman, 2008). The question is whether a small group represents the larger population: Even though representativeness is not of major importance, narratives are significant because they embody- and give insight into what is possible and intelligible within a special context (Chase, 2008). This is a small-scale study, the aim of which is not generalization, though the in-depth stories and perspectives from parents nonetheless yield valuable insight and knowledge into our research question. Ten of the interviewed were female with only one male, which may imply a gender-bias in the study. Validity checks can also be made through correspondence: Are the findings supported by other results on the topic? As our section on previous research shows, we have not yet been able to find comparative research on the specific topic. Thus, previous research on assessments supports our findings.

Findings

As presented in Table 1, 11 parents were recruited, and none of them withdrew their consent during the study. When telling about their assessment experiences, stories of emotions became the overall story, as patterns of similarities and differences, both between countries and within countries, were identified in the stories told (Table 2). Even though the interview guide set some thematic questions, the responses were not answers directly corresponding to the questions in the interview guide. The families primarily told stories about emotions.

Table 2: Overview of findings

Similarities between England –Norway:		
Identified common narrations as the overarching theme: Stories of emotions; power in assessment System power Relational power (informal power)		
Differences between England – Norway:		
“Risk” ----- “Need”		
	England	Norway
Assessment expectations	Limited expectations of help; High expectations of placement/risk assessment	High expectations on help; Limited expectations of placement/risk assessment
Social Worker view	“We hate social workers”	More neutral view on social workers; include “social workers as helpers”
Clarity in assessment	Clear assessment, lot of standard questions	Lack of clarity in assessment; Honesty as risky
Service user participation	Little expectations of participation; Limited knowledge of the concept; Did not experience participation	High expectations of participation; Aware of participation rights; Various experiences on participation

We will now turn to an integrated section on findings followed by a discussion.

Similarities between England and Norway, overarching theme:

Stories of emotions, power in assessment

Stories of emotions

The parents interviewed in England and Norway openly shared their experiences, and their motivation for telling these stories was primarily a wish for child protection services

to improve their assessments so that other people would benefit. The stories were not always told chronologically; the interviewed often told fragments of the process, stressing the emotional aspects, but this differed between the interviewed parents.. Overall, the respondents seemed confident about the importance of their stories, and had different levels of intensity and feelings when telling them, from very agitated to a very calm appearance. They were all in an emotional state when telling their stories, because the emotional pressure in assessment was strongly felt and expressed:

It was very stressful. (E3)

I have got mental health problems after the assessment, it ruined me. (N1)

I was devastated, terrified and panicking. (N4)

I got desperate about the situation. (E4)

The parents told that they were either in a state of fear when starting the assessment process or that the feeling of fear appeared during the process. The feeling of fear when going into the process seems to be based on general perceptions of child protection as being scary, as well as on the actual experiences in assessment. Therefore, negative feelings may either diminish or escalate during the assessment:

I was so scared. I had heard so many stories. They told me not to worry, but when I was honest, they removed my child. (N5)

I was very pleased with the assessment and the help. I had a feeling of being listened to, and believed in, and they were easy to understand. Standing outside their office made me feel small, but it changed when we got to know each other. (N3)

When parents talked about their assessment story, the role of the social worker conducting the assessment was emphasized, and was linked to the parents' feelings during the assessment period. Families were in a very emotional state at this point, and the ability of the social worker to ensure clarity and a good working relationship seemed very important in order to avoid or reduce strong negative emotions.

How can we understand these cross-national emotions?

The parents' experiences of assessment seem to go beyond national borders. First and foremost, they are experiences of strong emotions in a stressful situation: anxiety, frustration, powerlessness, but also relief. These emotional aspects "break through" the narrations, regardless of the questions being asked about structure and procedures. In line with earlier findings on parents' stories from child protection experiences, these findings show that rational arguments and emotions are inextricably linked to each other, and must be considered as influential in terms of how parents engage in and define the process (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). How can we understand this? Assessment can be viewed as a situation full of power, and these findings may illustrate how the power in assessment influences the parents. A possible outcome of assessment in child protection might be the loss of your child to an out-of-home placement. In light of attachment theory, which emphasizes the natural bonds between children and parents, one can see that the psychological preparedness to attach is present regardless of the quality of the attachment (Schore & Schore, 2007). Together with more biological perspectives on human nature (Fisher, 1998), this perspective could help shed light on this matter. If we view parents as strongly connected to their children, regardless of their parenting capacities, and as having a natural disposition to defend their "nest" and territory, an assessment can be viewed as a threat and put parents in a vulnerable situation. Another perspective to be considered is the parents' own need for a secure base during assessment and the social worker's ability to create a safe and trusting environment. Since assessment represents a duality between help and control, parents might wonder whether the social worker is a friend or an opponent. This gives rise to emotions such as fear, despair and anger (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In this way, assessment is potentially a very stressful situation for families regardless of the national context, which supports the theoretical idea of parents' emotional bonds with their children and their preparedness to defend their "nest". Furthermore, the findings from this study support previous research findings in which parents emphasized the importance of the relational ability of the assessor in addressing emotions and in their willingness to listen and demonstrate empathy and respect (Turney et al., 2012). Parents' emotions play an important role in the process of assessment, and can represent both obstacles to successful cooperation or the path to change for parents and their children (Thrana & Fauske, 2014).

Power in assessment

In the interview guide, there were no specific questions about power issues, apart from the questions regarding the levels of service user participation. When telling their stories, the parents frequently brought up power issues. Two levels of power issues were identified in the stories told: “system power” as in the power of child protection as a system and “relational/informal power” as the power of the social worker involved in defining the situation and exercising professional judgement:

I kind of felt a bit invaded. It was almost like I didn't have any opportunity or personal life. It was like going on some sort of, "This is your life". There are all these powers they have. They don't come in and say we are going to/not going to take your children. They ask a lot of questions, you answer and then you think, Oh God! Have I said the right things. Terrifying and fear, because they are in my life and they have a higher power. (E1)

When I first got in contact with them, they told me nothing about rights, just asked questions and told me they knew what I was going through. They told me to open up, and I did, and it was turned against me in court, even though they told me that nothing would be used against you, just tell us. This terrified me. They ruined my head and my feelings, I was a wreck. (N1)

We had a horrible social worker. I could not sleep, I was sick, it was really bad. It was how you approach people, really. (E2)

So, it depends on who you are talking to, what day, and what state that social worker is in. They treat their reports as if it is the truth, and it doesn't matter what you say. Child protection has to be more honest and less judgemental. (N5)

These quotations illustrate the complexity in power issues in child protection assessments. The formal powers of the system to intervene seem somehow interlinked with the approaches of the social workers involved.

How can we understand these cross-national “powers” in assessment?

The parents interviewed are all aware of the formal power of the system to intervene (Kirton, 2009), but at the same time they talk about more tacit/informal power, such as relational and interactional power in how situations are defined by using knowledge claims and personal variables in professional judgement (Jarvinen et al., 2002). Social workers set the agenda in the process by setting out the topics of conversation, and also require arguments from the parents about the parents' views and opinions. This

underlines the asymmetric power relationship (Midjo, 2010). Resistance from parents to social workers' definitions of the situation tends to increase the level of frictions in negotiations (ibid.). The findings from our study support the notion of power as relational (Nissen et al., 2007). In their stories, the parents in our study seem to appreciate it when power is an explicit topic, whether system power or relational power. They are aware that power issues are always present in child protection assessment, and explicit and honest talk about power seems to help reduce these issues. This again could be linked with the emotions in assessment. Since the emotional encounter between parents and social workers acts as either an obstacle or a facilitator to fruitful processes, it has to be addressed. We find both system and relational power issues present in the English and the Norwegian interviews, but we also find differences in how this is handled.

Differences in assessment experiences and expectations in England and Norway

Even though the overarching theme is similar across the interviews, we find some differences between the two countries in the experiences from assessment and expectations regarding assessments in child protection (see Table 2).

Assessment expectations

The participants from Norway described expecting help from the system both during and after assessment, and had little expectations of risk evaluation as part of the assessment.

I referred myself. I was ill and needed help. How they could support me. I was sceptical but it felt good at the same time to receive help. I believed they would help us. (N2)

I took the first phone call, because I needed help and support in my decisions. (N3)

In England, the parents expected less help and resources than the Norwegians, and had a higher awareness of risk assessment. This is a quote that illustrates this:

They are seeing how good a mum I could be. The safety of the children, they are there for the children I suppose to see if there is any risk where the children are living. (E5)

These differences in the expectations of risk and help seem to be closely connected with resources in terms of money and interventions available in the child protection system:

I am absolutely furious because of the hypocrisy of the social services saying they care when they are not prepared to put money where their mouth is. The ticking box mentality is prior to peoples' health. (E4)

In Norway, the parents seem to expect help in terms of interventions to meet their needs, whereas in England they seem more aware of the risk assessment, but are positively surprised when they experience help and support in assessment:

I became aware of my bad situation, and they pressured me into a break up. They helped me change locks and got me into a freedom programme, put me in touch with a family liaison officer and put my smallest in kindergarten. They encouraged me and said don't beat yourself up, you are a nice mum, and keep doing it. (E1)

Views on the social worker role also differ between the two countries:

Here in England, we think that social workers are going to take the kids. You think the worst things are going to happen. (E2)

When I first came into contact with the social workers I was very open and honest, and believed I could tell them everything. (N1)

If I meet people struggling with their child, I tell them to contact social workers in Child Protection to get advice. (N3)

Regarding clarity in assessment we find quite big differences between the two countries. This is most likely a reflection of the differences in the assessment framework. In the stories from Norway, there are several instances of a lack of clarity in assessment. The parents do not understand the dynamics of the assessment, especially the shift from help to control:

Even though they told me to tell everything, we will not use this against you. They are like wolves in sheep's clothing. (N1)

I suppose every question has to be answered. I have gone through questionnaires and got to tick things, but I could leave it if I did not feel comfortable. It doesn't bother me, they just try to get answers. (E5)

Service user participation as a concept and as an element in assessment was also reported very differently between England and Norway. Knowledge about- and awareness of service user participation in social services seems more grounded in Norway than in England:

It was very stressful. The 24 hour supervision, that was the hardest, no privacy. We had no deciding. As far as I understand, we were taken over. It was like being watched from a glass window. How can you blame us for being frustrated in that situation? (E3)

These parents did not recognize the term “service user participation”. When the concept was defined as “how the social services listen and take your opinions into account”, they said: “*We didn’t have any of that.*” Participant E2 had also not previously heard about the concept. She elaborated on her opinions: “*They don’t ask you, they just say come to this meeting. They have a plan and a decision and you just have to go with it.*”

Consequently, the English participants did not have high expectations of service user participation, as only one out of the five English families experienced some elements of participation. Overall, the Norwegian families reported more satisfaction with service user participation, and all of them recognized the concept and what it constituted:

I had a feeling of being listened to. They acknowledged what we were saying. It is important in this situation to be listened to and believed, not the social workers being moralistic about you and your children. (N3)

When they contacted me over the referral, I was scared and everything felt out of control. I felt we talked about different realities. But I felt listened to, and we had some really good conversations, and it felt very professional. This was not about me as a person, but about the case. It was safe and it was thorough. (N4)

How can we understand these differences in experiences of power in assessment?

England and Norway differ in their assessment frameworks regarding structure, procedures and the space for professional judgement (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). Research also shows that differences in the policy context influence social work practice in terms of the risk or needs the focus of child protection (Gilbert et al., 2011). The impact of assessment frameworks seems to be mainly on the level of the clarity and structure

of the assessment process and the level of power in the child protection system. Contextual factors such as resources seem to influence expectations of the outcome, with parents telling emotional stories about power in assessment, regardless of country. However, when these stories are further analysed, we find differences that might mirror differences in the assessment frameworks and contexts. The English parents talk more explicitly about system power and “hating social workers” as a group, whereas the Norwegian parents talk more about implicit power forms such as the informal power to define a situation. It seems that the differences in assessment frameworks frame differences in power issues; when the structure in assessment is clear and defined (a lot of set questions and procedures), the formal system power seems more explicit and the space for relational power seems diminished. When the assessment framework is less structured and relies more on professional judgement, the more informal powers in relations downplay the system powers. The use of professional judgement in social work reflects the need for flexibility and an adjustment to individual needs and situations. At the same time though, the use of professional judgement raises the possibility of arbitrariness and/or poor decisions based on personal biases. In this study, different levels of professional judgement in the two countries could help explain some of the differences in the parents’ experiences of the informal powers of social workers. In addition, this might also be a reflection of differences in expectations. The English parents seem to expect risk assessment and intrusion into family life, and have low expectations of help, which may make them far less likely to engage voluntarily with social services in the first place. The Norwegian parents tell stories of a more positive attitude to assessment in the starting point, and of expecting help from the social workers and the system. This could reflect differences in the orientation of child protection, with the Norwegian context being more therapeutic and need oriented, and the English more resource-constrained and risk-oriented. In this way, the classic duality of help and control in child protection might be even more complicated in Norway than in England: When the shift is made from therapeutic- to more risk-oriented action in assessment, the change in the situation is hard for the Norwegian parents to understand. The strong parental emotions about relational power in assessment could be explained in part by this change from help towards control without explicit communication. However, this relational power accompanied by more resources may represent a productive power force when social workers use their freedom for professional judgement to intervene according to the family’s needs and wishes.

Concluding remarks

Regardless of country, the most crucial experiences from the perspective of the parents are the emotional aspects of assessment. This provides us with information on just how stressful an assessment can be, and emphasizes the importance of social workers taking this fully into account. In our material, it seems that assessments in England are clearer because the parents know what to expect and the questions are the same for everyone. The risk dimension in England is quite explicit, and this can be viewed as positive because the system power is more explicit. Nevertheless, the English parents had little expectation of help. This may be explained by the more constrained resources in the system and the general orientation in assessments towards risk above need. The assessment framework in Norway is characterized by professional judgement, and the findings from the interviews reflect this; it seems that professional judgement leaves room for helpful decisions. The parents who are pleased with their assessment are very pleased, and explain this with reference to the “tailoring” of interventions. Still, the parents with negative experiences in Norway connect professional judgement with power and tell stories about their own feeling of powerlessness, partly because of a lack of clarity in the assessment. Previous studies show inconsistent results on parents’ perceptions of the child protection services (Studsrød et al., 2012; Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Our study supports the variations between satisfaction and critical concerns, even when the same assessment framework is applied country-wide. However, this is a small-scale study with a single setting in each country, and care should be taken in generalizing the finding. Nonetheless, regarding the implications for practice, we would highlight that explicit communication about the topics of emotion and power seems vital, as is a more open awareness about the duality of help and control in assessment. This could contribute to a more fruitful assessment experience from the parents’ perspective.

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The role of professional judgement in social work assessment: a comparison between Norway and England.

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Appendix 2: Information about the project

- 2.1 Brev til Bergen kommune ved byrådsavdelingen**
- 2.2 Letter to Bristol Social Service**
- 2.3 Forespørsel om å delta i prosjektet til profesjonelle i Norge**
- 2.4 Forespørsel om å delta i prosjektet til familier i Norge**
- 2.5 Research request professionals in England**
- 2.6 Research request families in England**

Appendix 2.1

Bergen kommune,
Byråd for helse og omsorg,
Barnevernet, v/etatsjef Anne-Lise Hornæs

Ulset 13.03.2012

Henvendelse vedrørende forskningsprosjekt innen barnevern: Forespørsel om datatilgang/informasjonsinnhenting

Hei! Jeg er doktorgradstipendiat i barnevern, ved Universitetet i Stavanger, Samfunnsvitenskapelig fakultet, Institutt for sosialfag. Jeg skal gjennomføre en komparativ forskningsstudie av undersøkelsesfasen i en barnevernssak. Studien sammenligner skjønnsbasert praksis, som er den modellen vi bruker i Norge, og mer strukturerte risikovurderinger, som de fleste vestlige land har valgt som undersøkelsesmetode. Disse to ulike modellene blir eksemplifisert ved barnevernpraksis i Norge og England.

Interessen for undersøkelsesfasen springer ut av egen praksis som barnevernsarbeider i 15 år, de siste 12 årene som ansatt i barneverntjenesten i Bergen kommune. Mens det de senere år har blitt utviklet og implementert stadig nye metoder i barnevernets tiltak, har det ikke vært tilsvarende utvikling når det gjelder metoder i undersøkelsesfasen. Dette til tross for at kvaliteten og utfallet av undersøkelsesfasen er av stor betydning for at barn skal få tidlig og riktig hjelp.

Mitt spørsmål til Bergen kommune:

Kan kommunen bidra med 15 anonymiserte sluttrapporter fra undersøkelser, samt gi meg anledning til å intervju 5 saksbehandlere i barneverntjenesten, og i tillegg bistå med kontakt med 5 familier som har blitt undersøkt?

Prosjektet er meldt Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste (NSD) og følger dermed forskningsetiske retningslinjer. Det betyr at kommunen ivaretar taushetsplikt og personvern ved å følge studiens retningslinjer.

Dersom det er ønskelig med mer informasjon (for eksempel full prosjektbeskrivelse eller et møte), så kan undertegnede kontaktes på tlf 47057922, eller på mail: vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no.

Håper på et positivt svar!

Med vennlig hilsen

Vibeke Samsonsen, doktorgradstipendiat ved UiS,
Adr:Bruskedalsreset 102, 5115 Ulset

Appendix 2.2

Bristol City Council

Bergen/Norway, 01.06.2012

Request about research access:

Hello! I am a Norwegian PhD candidate in Child Protection, and I am currently performing a comparative research study of the assessment process in Child Protection/Child Welfare.

The PhD research project is aiming to produce further knowledge about strengths and weaknesses between different assessment models in the child protection area. Two different assessment models are to be explored: The sense making assessment model (exemplified by Norway), and the structured assessment model (exemplified by England).

The sense making model is mainly a Scandinavian social democratic model. Its characteristics are few guidelines and strong emphasis on children's and family's needs, but with little focus on risk assessment evaluations. Other western countries (eg US, Australia, UK), have in general chosen more structured assessment models. The structured models are based on risk assessments, and a belief in early determination of revealing children at risk. However, there is still a large margin of error when using predictive instruments with human beings.

My question to Bristol City Council:

Will it be possible to get access 15 anonymous assessment reports, and the opportunity to interview 5 professional Social Workers about assessment practice and also 5 families who has undertaken an assessment?

This research project is approved by the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee, and is also approved by University of Bristol's Board of Ethics.

The project is registered in "Norwegian Social Science Data Services" (NSD) and follows research ethics guidelines. Required confidentiality and privacy guidelines will therefore be safeguarded.

If more information is necessary, do not hesitate to contact me at:
Phone number +47 47057922, or e-mail: vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no.

I hope for a positive outcome of this request, and that Bristol City Council will provide useful information regarding the assessment process. Hopefully both England and Norway can get new perspectives of their current practice, and learn from each other.

Best regards from Vibeke Samsonsen, PhD candidate

Appendix 2.3

Forespørsel om å delta i forskningsprosjektet "Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder".

I forbindelse med min doktorgrad gjennomfører jeg et prosjekt om undersøkelsesfasen i barnevernsarbeid. Studien er komparativ (Norge og England) og sammenligner skjønnsbasert undersøkelsespraksis (Norge) og mer strukturert beslutningsfatning (England). Hensikten med studien er å frembringe kunnskap om disse ulike undersøkelsesmåtene, om styrker og svakheter, for å kunne lære av hverandres praksis.

Jeg vil intervju 10 barnevernsarbeidere (5 i Norge og 5 i England), med hovedspørsmål om vurderinger knyttet til risiko, tiltak og brukermedvirkning i undersøkelsesarbeidet. Intervjuet varer i 30-60 minutter. I tillegg vil jeg intervju til sammen 10 brukere (5 i hvert land), og studere 30 sluttrapporter i undersøkelsessaker (15 i hvert land).

Det blir ikke lagret personopplysninger i forbindelse med studien, kun samtykkeskjema hvor navnet ditt står, som du fyller ut i starten av intervjuet. Samtykkeskjemaet vil sammen med intervjuet (innspilt på bånd, og etterpå renskrevet) bli makulert ved studiens slutt. Deltakelse i studien er frivillig, og du kan når som helst trekke deg uten å gi begrunnelse. Dersom du ikke vil delta i studien, så har det ingenting og si for ansettelsesforholdet ditt i barneverntjenesten. I fremstillingen/publiseringen av studien, så vil ingen person kunne knyttes direkte til funnene. Alle opplysninger som gis i studien blir behandlet strengt konfidensielt.

Prosjektet er tilrådd av Personvernombudet for forskning, Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste (NSD).

Dersom du vil delta i studien, så er det fint om du kan ringe eller maile meg slik at vi kan lage en avtale. Du kan også kontakte meg om du har spørsmål til studien utover dette informasjonsskrivet. Du vil selvfølgelig få tilgang til studiens funn dersom du ønsker dette.

Med vennlig hilsen Vibeke Samsonsen, phd student ved Universitetet i Stavanger

Tlf: 47057922, mail: vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no

Appendix 2.4

Forespørsel om å delta i forskningsprosjektet "Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder".

I forbindelse med min doktorgrad gjennomfører jeg et prosjekt om undersøkelsesfasen i barnevernsarbeid. Studien er en sammenligning av norske og engelske barnevernsutredninger, da disse to landene utfører undersøkelser på ulike måter. Hensikten med studien er å få mer kunnskap om undersøkelsesarbeidet: Hvordan barnevernet vurderer risiko og tiltak og legger til rette for brukermedvirkning. Nyttan av studien er at barnevernet kan lære av hverandres utredningsarbeid, og gjøre mer av det som fungerer bra innenfor de ulike undersøkelsesmetodene.

Jeg vil intervjuer til sammen ti foreldre som har opplevd at barnevernet har gjennomført en undersøkelse som ble avsluttet i 2011 (5 i Norge og 5 i England). I tillegg vil jeg intervjuer 10 barnevernsarbeidere, og studere 30 sluttrapporter fra undersøkelsessaker. Når jeg intervjuer deg som bruker, er jeg interessert i å høre om de erfaringer du har med undersøkelsesarbeidet i barneverntjenesten, med særlig fokus på din opplevelse av brukermedvirkning i saken. Intervjuet varer mellom 30-60 minutter.

Det er barneverntjenesten som tar denne førstekontakten for meg, så jeg vet ikke hvem du er. Det betyr at dersom du sier ja, så får jeg først vite navnet ditt når du signerer samtykkeerklæringen. Jeg er i utgangspunktet ikke avhengig av personopplysninger, så navnet ditt lagres kun i form av samtykkeerklæringen inntil prosjektet er avsluttet. Jeg bruker båndopptaker under intervjuet, og skriver det ut til tekst etterpå. Når studien er avsluttet slettes alle opplysninger forsvarlig. Dersom du ikke vil la deg intervjuer, så har det ingen betydning for din videre kontakt med barneverntjenesten. Det er helt frivillig å delta, og du kan når som helst trekke deg uten å måtte begrunne dette. De opplysningene du velger å oppgi til meg, behandles strengt konfidensielt, og ingen opplysninger skal kunne knyttes til deg i fremstillingen/publiseringen av studien.

Prosjektet er tilrådd av Personvernombudet for forskning, Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste (NSD).

Dersom du vil la deg intervjuer, så er det fint om du signerer vedlagte samtykkeerklæring og returnerer den i den ferdig frankerte konvolutten så snart som mulig.

Har du spørsmål om undersøkelsen og/eller vil bli informert om resultatene fra studien når de foreligger, så kan jeg kontaktes på tlf 47057922, eller mail vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no

Med vennlig hilsen Vibeke Samsonsen,

Phd stipendiat ved Universitetet i Stavanger

Samtykkeerklæring:

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om prosjektet "Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder", og er villig til å delta i studien.

Signatur:

Tlf:

Appendix 2.5

Research project regarding the assessment process in Child Protection

I am a PhD student and my research area is assessments in Child Protection. I have worked for 15 years as a Social Worker in Norway, and have an interest of assessment from both a practical and research point of view. The PhD research is aiming to produce further knowledge about strengths and weaknesses between the different assessment models in the child protection area: The sense making assessment model (Norway), and the structured assessment model (England).

The sense making model is mainly a Scandinavian model. Its characteristics are few guidelines and strong emphasis on children's and family's needs, but with little focus on risk assessment. Other western countries (eg US,UK), have in general chosen more structured assessment models.

My working hypothesis in the PhD research project are the following questions: Is the sense making assessment model used in Norway based on naivety and vagueness? And, are the structured model used in England based on too strong belief in risk assessment and procedures? Is it possible to combine and use the strengths from both models to meet the complex questions regarding protection, provision and participation for the children and families in need?

I will interview 10 Social Workers (5 in England and 5 in Norway) .The interviews will last approximately 30 minutes. In addition to interviewing professionals, I am interviewing 10 families who have undertaken an assessment. Also, 30 reports from assessment cases in the Child Protection/Child Welfare from the two countries will be studied in detail. Finally, all the information will be combined to evaluate the models in use.

All information given during the interview process will be handled strictly confidential and anonymous. Participants must sign a consent form before the interview, but names will not be linked to any information given in the interviews. For practical reasons, all interviews will be taped and later transcribed to written form. All information from interviews will be maculated after the project is finished (estimated in 2016). Participation is voluntary and you can at any time withdraw without any given reason. If you do not want to participate in this study, it will not affect your current work situation.

This research project is approved by the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee, and by the Board of Ethics at the University of Bristol.

If you want to participate in this research study please contact me on email: vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no or phone number 47057922.

Thank you in advance,

Best regards, Vibeke Samsonsen, PhD student

Consent:

I have been informed about the research project "Assessments in Child Protection: Sense making- and structured methods", and I am willing to participate in the study.

Signatur:

Appendix 2.6

How do social workers assess families where there are child protection concerns?

Hello,

I am a researcher from the University of Stavanger in Norway. I am studying for a PhD.

My project is comparing the child protection systems in Norway and England. It seems that social workers in these two countries have very different ways of assessing families. I want to find out what these systems are like from the parent or carers' point of view.

I have already talked to 5 families in Norway and now I want to talk to five families in Bristol.

You are getting this letter because you have had an assessment by a social worker from Bristol City Council. Please read it and let me know if you would like to take part in my research.

If you agree, I would like to talk to you for about your experience of being assessed by a social worker. I have some questions I'd like to ask. Also you can tell me anything else. What you say will be confidential. I will not pass on any information to Bristol City Council - unless you tell me something which indicates that children are at risk of harm.

The meeting will take around 30 minutes of your time. As a "thank you" for your time, I will give you a shop voucher for £10 which you can spend as you choose.

You do not have to take part in this research. Whether you agree or not won't make any difference to any services you receive. If you agree to an interview but then change your mind later, that's OK. If you want to stop the interview at any time, that's OK too. You do not have to give a reason.

If you agree, I will ask you to sign a consent form before the interview. Your names will not be linked to any information given in the interviews. For practical reasons, all interviews will be taped and later transcribed in writing. The written versions will not have your names or the names of anyone else you mention. All information from interviews will be destroyed at the end of the project (estimated in 2016).

The PhD research project is approved by the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee and the School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bristol.

If you have any questions, please contact me on email: vibeke.samsonsen@uis.no or phone your social worker.

Thank you in advance,

Best regards

Vibeke Samsonsen, PhD candidate

Appendix 3: Approval by the Data Inspectorate of Norway



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Vår dato: 29.03.2012

Vår ref:29993 / 3 / HIT

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 26.02.2012. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

29993 *Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder*
Behandlingsansvarlig Universitetet i Stavanger, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig Vibeke Samsonsen

Etter gjennomgang av opplysninger gitt i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon, finner vi at prosjektet ikke medfører meldeplikt eller konsesjonsplikt etter personopplysningslovens §§ 31 og 33.

Dersom prosjektopplegget endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for vår vurdering, skal prosjektet meldes på nytt. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk_stud/skjema.html.

Vedlagt følger vår begrunnelse for hvorfor prosjektet ikke er meldepliktig.

Vennlig hilsen

Vigdis Namtvedt Kvalheim

Hildur Thorarensen

Kontaktperson: Hildur Thorarensen tlf: 55 58 26 54

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Personvernombudet for forskning



Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

Prosjektnr: 29993

Basert på de opplysninger vi har mottatt om gjennomføringen av prosjektet, kan personvernombudet ikke se at det behandles personopplysninger med elektroniske hjelpemidler, eller at det opprettes manuelt personregister som inneholder sensitive personopplysninger. Prosjektet vil dermed ikke omfattes av meldeplikten etter personopplysningsloven.

Prosjektets omfatter innsyn i anonymiserte rapporter fra barnevernet og intervju med barnevernansatte og brukere i Norge og England. Prosjektleder oppgir at ingen personopplysninger vil bli registrert i forbindelse med datamaterialet.

Personvernombudet legger til grunn at man ved transkripsjon av intervjuer eller annen overføring av data til PC, ikke registrerer opplysninger som gjør det mulig å identifisere enkeltpersoner, verken direkte eller indirekte. Alle opplysninger som behandles elektronisk i forbindelse med prosjektet må være anonyme.

Med anonyme opplysninger forstås opplysninger som ikke på noe vis kan identifisere enkeltpersoner i et datamateriale, verken direkte gjennom navn eller personnummer, indirekte gjennom bakgrunnsvariabler eller gjennom navneliste/koblingsnøkkel eller krypteringsformel og kode.

Appendix 4: Interview guides

4.1 Intervju guide profesjonelle i Norge

4.2 Intervju guide familier i Norge

4.3 Interview guide professionals in England

4.4 Interview guide families in England

Appendix 4.1

Prosjektet "Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder."

Intervjuguide til profesjonelle (saksbehandlere på kommunalt barnevernkontor).

Det vil bli brukt åpne og reflekterende spørsmål for å få frem den intervjuedes egne erfaringer og syn på undersøkelsesarbeidet. Samtalene vil bli tatt opp med båndopptaker og transkribert. Denne intervjuguiden viser tema for spørsmålene. Oppfølgingsspørsmålene vil avhenge av svaret til den intervjuede. Det jeg kan garantere er at jeg ikke vil bevege meg inn på andre tema (sensitive) enn de som står oppført her.

Tema 1: Kan du innledningsvis si noe om dine erfaringer generelt med undersøkelsesarbeid i barneverntjenesten?

Tema 2: Kan du si noe om hvordan barneverntjenesten vurderer begrepene risiko og særlige behov i undersøkelsesfasen?

Tema 3: Hvilke føringer opplever du å ha i undersøkelsesarbeidet? Hva er klare regler/retningslinjer og hvor mye er skjønn?

Tema 4: Hvem støtter/hjelper deg i vurderingene/beslutningene i saken?

Tema 5: Kan du si noe om brukermedvirkning i undersøkelsesarbeidet? Hva fremmer/hemmer?

Tema 6: Hvis du skal trekke frem noe du synes fungerer bra med norsk undersøkelsesarbeid, hva ville det vært? Hvis du kan være med å forbedre/forandre noe i undersøkelsesarbeidet, hva kunne det vært?

Appendix 4.2

Prosjektet "Barnevernets undersøkelsesfase: Skjønnsbaserte og strukturerte metoder".

Intervjuguide til brukere (foreldre som har opplevd en undersøkelsessak i barneverntjenesten, avsluttet i 2011)

Introduksjon: Vi snakker om den første tiden du hadde kontakt med barnevernet, det som kalles undersøkelsesfasen..

- 1.Kan du gi noen stikkord om hva du synes om den første tiden du hadde kontakt med barnevernet?
- 2.Kan du si kort hva du tenker på når jeg sier ordene: bekymring.. og risiko...
- 3.Var du på det tidspunktet selv bekymret for barnet ditt?
- 4.Hvordan opplevde du at barneverntjenesten vurderte risikoen for barnet ditt?
- 5.Synes du at barnet ditt på det tidspunktet hadde spesielle hjelpebehov? Hvordan opplevde du at barneverntjenesten så på/vurderte behovene til barnet ditt?
6. Hva legger du i brukermedvirkning i barnevernets undersøkelse?
- 7.Kan du si noe om din opplevelse av brukermedvirkning i saken? Hvordan la barneverntjenesten til rette for dette? Hvem medvirket i saken og på hvilken måte?
- 8.Hva synes du var bra med måten barnevernet undersøkte saken på?
- 9.Har du noen forslag til hvordan undersøkelsesarbeidet i barnevernet kan bli bedre?
- 10.Er det ellers noe du vil si om undersøkelsessaken din?

(Disse temaene vil utforskes med åpne spørsmål. Dersom den intervjuede trenger mer informasjon eller et annet spørsmål for å kunne svare, så vil jeg legge til rette for dette, uten å gi føringer for svarene. Jeg vil signalisere til den intervjuede at ingen svar er "feil", at jeg er interessert i subjektiv opplevelse og erfaring.)

Appendix 4.3

Interview guide social workers:

Introduction: About assessment...

1. Can you give some keywords regarding your thoughts of assessments in Child Protection?
2. Have you any reflections regarding these words/concepts: concern, special needs/needs, risk
3. Can you say something about how you are balancing / thinking about risk and need in assessment?
4. What guidelines do you have regarding assessment?
5. What are you thinking about/what reflections run through your mind when I say professional judgment in assessment?
6. Who assists and supports your decisions in assessments?
7. Do you think it is easy to know if parental care is good enough for a child or when it is neglect?
8. Some say that Child Protection is a complex field. What do you think about this and why?
9. What do you think service user participation in assessment consists of?
10. What do you think promotes or hinder user participation in assessments (how you/your office practice assessment)?
11. In your opinion, what is good about the English way of assessment in Child Protection?
12. If you could choose freely to improve assessments, what would the changes consist of?
13. Is there anything you will add regarding assessment? Anything I should have asked you about?

Appendix 4.4

Interview guide families: "Assessment in Child Protection. A comparative study of two different assessment models: Norway – England."

Introduction: This is about the assessment...

1. What are the first things that come to your mind when you think back to the assessment period (some keywords)?
2. What do you think about when I say the words: concern.. risk..
3. At that time (assessment), were you worried yourself about your child?
4. In your opinion, how did the social worker consider the risk situation for your child?
5. At that time (assessment), did your child in your opinion have some (special) needs? How did the social worker consider the needs of your child?
6. What do you think service user participation in assessment consists of?
7. How did you experience user participation during your assessment? How did the social worker promote your families participation in your assessment? Who participated in the assessment and how?
8. What did you like about the assessment?
9. Do you have any suggestions of assessment improvements? (to improve the quality?)
10. Is there anything you would like to add about the assessment? Anything I should have asked you about?