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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a psycho-socially informed case study of information sharing across team and agency borders, carried out in three children and family social work teams within one local authority. The study investigated practitioners' understanding and experiences of information sharing, the tasks, processes and technologies involved, as well as perceived barriers and facilitators. It also considered how the emotional and social dynamics of working contexts could impinge upon information work.

Practitioners described information tasks relating to collecting, interpreting, communicating and recording information, guided by the demands of rigid organisational protocols. Performance of these tasks was, however, infused by the emotional complexities of child protection work, presenting a number of challenges for practitioners seeking robust and reliable information in the midst of ambiguity, complexity and heightened emotions. For practitioners across all teams, information work, and information itself, was both cognitive and affective, and often at odds with linear processes for its exchange across team boundaries, designed to filter out all but hard evidence. Increased recognition of the dual nature (facts and feelings) of information and information work, throughout the safeguarding process, has potential to enhance the generation of shared understandings and collaborative practice across team and agency borders.

Key words: Child protection (policy and practice); empirical research; inter-agency; policy/management

Background and Introduction

Within the context of the English child protection system, the prevalence of a managerialist approach to improve practice and manage risk has been recognised (e.g. Munro 2010). Characterised by the use of information technologies, measurable standards of performance and pre-ordained output targets, this is underpinned by the assumption that if welfare work is standardised and quality assured, the risks of harm to service users, and to governments of negative publicity, can be reduced (Burton and van den Broek 2009; Littlechild 2008).

Similarly, attempts to improve the sharing of information to protect children have focused on the introduction of systems designed to enhance rigorous, systematic and timely action. Many of these reforms stemmed from the findings of Lord Laming's (2003) report into the death of Victoria Climbié, which highlighted inter-agency information sharing as a locus for errors that ultimately led to Victoria's death. Laming made a series of recommendations about how information should be better recorded, stored, managed and communicated through the implementation of databases, procedures, timescales and performance monitoring. In making these recommendations, Laming (2003) suggested that if the 'relatively straightforward' tasks of information sharing are performed 'well', then risk to children could be avoided.

Increasingly, in view of continued breakdowns of inter-agency communication in the case of child deaths, questions are raised about the ability of rationally based, linear one-size fits all approaches to affect the desired improvements in practice. This is, in part, due to the nature

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of the information in the child protection process which may be unclear (Munro, 2005), emergent (Thompson, 2012) and constructed (White, 2002) and unsuited to rigid processes for classification and transmission. Commentators have also suggested a range of professional, organisational and individual factors which have the power to influence how information is shared in practice. These are briefly discussed below.

Hunt and van der Arend (2002) and Richardson and Asthana (2006) have highlighted the role of professional culture, with the latter foregrounding the different breadth in medical and social models of care. In the medical model, the focus is on the patient him/herself, heightening concerns about patient confidentiality and limiting willingness to share. In contrast, the social work model is concerned with the service user, their families, communities and wider society.

Bellamy, 6, Raab, Warren, and Heeney (2008), showed that different organisational structures affect information sharing behaviours, especially the existence, or absence, of formal structures and policies for information sharing. Without these, practitioners could feel less confident about sharing information or even actively resist it. Richardson's (2007) research highlights influences on information sharing practices at the *Environmental* (e.g. central government policy), *Systems* (e.g. leadership and team management, accountability) and the *Individual* (e.g. personality, interpersonal relationships) levels.

A small number of studies have signalled the influence of emotional responses. Horwath (2007) revealed that fears of recrimination and aggression from service users, and feelings of guilt/shame about betraying families could limit practitioners' willingness to refer to social services. Thompson's (2010) research revealed how 'iffy feelings' about a family, or anxieties about what might happen to a child, often drove further investigation and referrals. She introduces the notion of '*emotion information*' to describe the information contained within uncertain feelings and concerns experienced by practitioners in relation to their service users and cases. This term is also used in this paper, where it is expanded to include information that is *sensed* (affective knowledge) rather than derived empirically (cognitive knowledge).

In short, information sharing is more complex than policy suggests. Cooper (2005) described the difference between the 'surface' concerns of policy makers about structures, procedures and protocols, and the 'depth' concerns of practitioners about how it *feels* to do child protection work and the dynamics of work with clients. He highlights the apparent inability of policy makers to engage with the emotional realities of child protection work. This has resulted in the misrepresentation of the information sharing task as 'uncontaminated by the contingencies and emotions of practice' (White, 2002, p.410) and of practitioners as 'automatons' rather than human beings (Horwath 2007). A better connection between the perspectives of surface and depth is required, derived from deeper ethnographic research of daily practice. Without this, policy makers will continue to proffer information sharing 'solutions' in the absence of any real understanding of the problem. (Broadhurst et al. 2010; Munro 2005).

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The research reported here was conceived with this in mind. Conducted as a psycho-socially informed case study, it set out to better understand the complexities of information sharing across team and agency borders in front line child protection practice, and to consider both the surface and the depth.

Research Aims

The study had three main aims:

- To understand how information sharing is understood and experienced by front line child and family social work practitioners
- To illuminate barriers and facilitators experienced in relation to information sharing.
- To consider how practitioners may be better supported in their information sharing practice.

Cases consisted of three front line children's services teams within one local authority children's services department. These were a referral screening team (RST), an initial assessment team (IAT) and a longer term team (LTT). The local authority was a unitary authority serving an urban population with high rates of economic deprivation. Access to three teams provided an opportunity to consider information sharing at different points throughout the progression of cases. This allowed a contribution to the existing literature on information sharing, which has previously focused, almost exclusively, on referrals to social care by other professionals.

Methods

Methods of observation, semi-structured interview and documentary analysis were employed.

Observations

A period of two weeks of office-based observation was carried out in each team (approximately 3 hours each day), comprising:

- *Observations of day-to-day, office based activities* – focused on the information sharing activities undertaken, the organization of work, the atmosphere within the team and the existing challenges/supportive mechanisms.
- *Observations of multi-agency meetings on and off site* – to observe inter-agency information sharing in action and the differing contexts/dynamics under which activities take place.
- These observations were focused at three levels; the events happening, the emotional atmosphere and the inner experiences of the researcher (Hinshelwood and Skogstad 2000).

Observations were designed to gather 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of events occurring in these locations to enable a detailed examination of information sharing practice. Extensive notes were made to describe events happening, who was involved, what the related feelings

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appeared to be and any personal reactions triggered by these observations in the researcher. This resulted in rich textual data containing detailed descriptions and extended vignettes of dialogue and incidents observed, as well as related personal reactions.

Consent was sought in advance from the team leader and team members. The observational role adopted was that of 'participant observer' (Junker, 1960) – the researcher was visible to the research subjects whilst in the office and observing meetings. At times, there was opportunity to talk informally with research participants at more length, in general, however, the researcher tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible, not least because of the busy-ness of practitioners and the nature of the work they were carrying out.

Perhaps somewhat unusually, it was often possible for notes to be taken during observations – the researcher was allocated a free desk space each day, depending on who was in the office, and therefore which desks were available. It was therefore generally possible to make notes of issues relating to the events observed and related emotional impressions, in an unobtrusive manner (typed up and expanded upon at the first opportunity). Despite the researcher's presence, it appeared that activity was carrying on as normal, both in the office and meeting contexts, – limiting the potential bias of data observed and collected. It is important to note however that at the start of observations in one team in particular, practitioners did need reassurance that the researcher's role was not to audit or evaluate practice.

Table 1: Observations conducted

Interviews

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted across the teams, with social workers, senior practitioners, social services' assistants, information officers and team leaders. Written consent was obtained at the start of each interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

Table 2: Interviews conducted

Figure 1: Interview guide

Documentary analysis

Documentary data was collected to enhance understanding of the legal/policy frameworks within which safeguarding work is carried out.

Table 3: Documentary evidence collected

Data Analysis

The steps and processes of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were followed in data analysis. These are (1) engagement with literature prior to analysis, (2) familiarizing yourself with the data, (3) generating initial codes, (4) searching for themes, (5) reviewing themes, (6) defining and naming themes and (7) producing the report. Data was stored and managed through the use of NVivo 10. Using this software package, transcripts were read in detail and

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coded, with codes being re-named, re-grouped, merged or disregarded, as issues emerged and re-emerged in subsequent transcripts. The coding frame was increasingly refined and used as a basis for analysis and writing. Coding was both deductive (themes identified in theoretical framework and research questions were looked for within the text) and inductive (codes that have not been pre-conceived were allowed to emerge from within the data). An additional element to the inductive/deductive phase, that has been described as 'abductive inference' (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013) was then carried out. Put simply, abductive inference is the process of further interpretation that takes place once the codes have been defined – the work (not always acknowledged) that takes place between creating a coding frame and writing the story of the research. It involves a greater level of abstraction, beyond describing the codes and makes links between different themes within the research and more broadly. For example, the study's research questions dictated that we would look for information tasks and activities carried out. In identifying these (as in table four), coding was deductive. Issues around *ways of knowing* (i.e. what you can sense versus what you can prove) were not anticipated in advance, so could be said to have emerged inductively. In the process of abductive inference, links were made between what respondents in this study said, and Thompson's (2010) work on emotion information. Further inference suggested that the filtering out of this emotion information at team and agency borders hampers the generation of shared understandings.

Researcher positionality

The researcher herself is not a social worker, and was undertaking the study as part of doctoral work. As such, she acted as a fresh pair of eyes concerning the activities taking place, and the meanings associated with these. Issues that struck the researcher as surprising and interesting, may have appeared less so to a researcher with a child protection background. An example of this, was a repetitive talking through of cases observed in one of the teams. When this was highlighted and reflected on by the researcher, another member of the team suggested that she may not have noticed this, as to her this was part of everyday social work life. The role of doctoral student also appeared to make the researcher less threatening to participants. In contexts where social workers are used to scrutiny and criticism, it was important to provide reassurance that this work was being conducted for academic purposes, rather than as any form of evaluation. On the other hand, there were a couple of occasions when the researcher was refused access to certain meetings – it may be that with status of an experienced, and trained social worker, access would have been granted.

Rigour and Reflexivity

A number of measures were taken to enhance the rigour of the approach, in particular to enhance processes for reflexivity, given the interpretive nature of the study. Peer debriefing was carried out within supervision meetings, which provided a highly valued forum through which research and interpretations could be discussed and problem solving carried out. Emergent findings and interpretations were shared with participants informally during fieldwork. Incidents that did not seem to fit with emerging findings were also examined as an

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important source of data. Written draft findings were shared with one of the team managers (who had been a key gatekeeper in this study), and comments invited.

Ethics

The study received internal review by the university research and governance review system. Governance approvals were sought from the site's research and development office, the principal safeguarding officer and the manager of each individual team.

Findings

The following section is divided into two main categories of 'the surface of information sharing' and 'the depth of information sharing', based on Cooper's (2005) distinction between the two levels of child protection work. As discussed above, for Cooper, the surface level of child protection is the domain of policy makers, relating to the organisation of work, the processes and procedures that must be followed. A linear framework for information sharing, with an associated set of tasks and activities, was clearly described by respondents in this study. This is depicted in table four. Linked to this institutional framework for information work, are particular assumptions about, and requirements of, information, i.e. that it is gathered empirically and consists of facts and evidence. The model presumes that, through a meticulous process of investigation, information can be uncovered, understood, classified and recorded, as a base for action. Examples of information being used in this way are provided.

Findings also reveal, however, that the performance of these rationally defined processes was infused, at all levels, by the emotional complexities of child protection work. This is what Cooper has described as the depth of child protection. For Cooper, this is the domain of the practitioner whose concerns are about how it feels to do child protection work and the dynamics of work with clients. In the depths of child protection, information work is infused with emotions and feelings, information is ambiguous rather than clear-cut and emotions and instincts provide supplementary ways of knowing. These issues are all discussed under the section 'the depth of information sharing'.

i) The surface of information sharing

When asked about the types of activities carried out as part of information sharing, practitioners described a set of information tasks that accorded with the categories of 'collecting', 'interpreting' and 'communicating' suggested by Munro (2005) as central to information sharing. There were a further set of tasks relating to 'recording' information, which highlighted the prevalence of the managerialist paradigm and anxieties related to performance and blame. These tasks, and related findings, are briefly described in table one below.

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INSERT TABLE FOUR

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Tasks of collecting, interpreting, communicating (Munro, 2005) and recording information were central to each team. In fact, it is difficult to think of any tasks that did not involve some form of information sharing – taking contact referrals, undertaking multi-agency assessments, attending multi-agency meetings, keeping records so that others can review cases or presenting evidence in court, all involved information work. This confirmed Thompson's (2012, 2010) observation that information sharing is no longer *part* of child protection work, rather it has become, *the* work. Whilst Parton (2008) has theorised the increasingly informational nature of social work, this study has provided empirical evidence of this.

To perform the tasks outlined above, social workers described the need for clear, rationally based facts on which to base case classification and decision. This was contrasted with hearsay and personal feelings:

"Essentially, it's got to be purposeful, relevant, you know...and particularly for case recording for social workers it has to be, you know, analysis and opinion, not, not, what's the word? You can include hearsay, in terms of this is what we were told, but it has got to be based on evidence and based on, you know, not like, 'I think this family are OK because I like them.'" R7:IAT

This was particularly important, with stakes so high for the children and families involved:

"We have a legal duty to protect children and actually if we are removing...we need robust information to make that important decision..." R21:LT

Information also needed to be unambiguous, meanings checked out and clarified. Arriving at unambiguous information required particular skills of practitioners involved, who needed to be tenacious and inquisitive to get to these facts:

"You have to be really clear about 'what does that mean, when you say...what does that actually mean? What did they actually say?'" R7:IAT

Once this understanding had been reached, further skills were needed to make sure that it was then communicated incisively. This was important both in work with service users and professionals, court work in particular, requiring a rigorous approach to the development and delivery of information about families.

"You are having to argue the case so what you have to do is set out a robust outline of the situation, your analysis and why you think that this is a better option than any other option for the way to proceed." R17:LT

In the longer term team in particular, practitioners were frequently observed in discussion with each other, stressing the need to be 'very, very clear' when conveying information to other professionals, service users, or in court.

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As highlighted in table four, the rigorous recording of all case-relevant information was also part of the evidence building process, linked to accountability and need for transparent process.

"I always say to my social workers, 'If it isn't written down it didn't happen... You can say you've done your stat visit to me but if it's not written down it didn't happen. You can say that that woman phoned you and gave you some information on a certain day, if it isn't on a case note it didn't happen, you can't go back afterwards. Like now we're in court...and one of the solicitors has asked for every single case note with that child's name on.'" R16:LT

Nevertheless the work of information sharing, and the nature of information itself, was not limited to these rational, external processes. As described below, in the murkier depths of practice, processes were much more ambiguous, emergent and emotionally informed.

ii) The depth of information sharing

Throughout the study, it was evident that every task was infused by the emotional realities of child protection, challenging reductionist assumptions about the nature of information, information work and the capacity of practitioners to act in a purely rational way.

Each of the tasks listed in table four concerned with collecting, interpreting, communicating and recording information were loaded with emotion and anxiety. For example, the sheer sense of frustration experienced by RST practitioners when contact referrals come in late with incomplete information meaning that a child is potentially being left in a risky situation for longer than necessary. The paralysing dread felt by a young social worker having to stand up in court to give evidence in support of removal of children, with the weight of their future on her shoulders. The dynamics of working with involuntary and misleading clients and the feelings of fear and intimidation that could prevent workers communicating and interpreting information clearly. The burden of record keeping, filing documentation, performance monitoring when working at an intense pace, causing stress and anxiety about being unable to complete work to a high enough standard:

"...you need to be very thorough in your work, but actually we don't have the time to reflect at all... It's so crisis led here, that you don't actually have any time to reflect, to sit back and go, OK, let's put all these pieces together – you don't have that space – it's jumping from one crisis to the next crisis, to the next crisis and it's non-stop."
R21:LT

At times, rigid adherence to the tasks and processes of information work took on a defensive purpose for practitioners. In these instances, repetitious checking of facts and interpretations, rehearsal of clear communication and lines of argument, rigid application of threshold criteria seemed to serve as a socially structured 'spotlight' defence to justify the

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focus of professional attention and action in the context of limitless demands, under-resourcing, complex cases and rigid performance management (Anonymised reference). There was also joy and satisfaction – when a family worked to improve life for a child, and satisfaction in completed assessments and evidence presented well in court. The insightful, analytical and skilled information work observed was conducted in an atmosphere of emotional intensity and often engendered its own set of powerful emotional responses. Mental noise (Covello, 2011) and emotional responses had to be brought under control to allow information work to be performed.

“So you’ve got to be able to have that emotional connection to it, but be able to go ‘OK right, that was awful and yes, I probably would like to put him on a bus to nowhere’, but actually this is what we need to do with this and we’ve got to get on and start talking to people because there’s a child there and that’s what this game is all about.” R27: RST

Then there is the nature of the information itself. Within the rubrics for thresholds and classification is the assumption that information is clear-cut and can easily be defined as one thing or another. Of course, in the case of people’s lives this is often not so:

“I think the clear cut child protection stuff is clear cut, the phone call from the school about the child with an injury or the child making a clear disclosure about whatever it might be is generally quite clear cut, so we know OK that’s fine, that’s what we need to do with that, that’s where that goes...and there is this ginormous pot of grey that sits in the middle of all of that and you are sort of going OK right, what does that all mean?” R27:RST

And human beings are not designed to fit neatly into pre-determined categories of risk.

“the difficulty you’ve got...is you are dealing with people, you are not bottling milk or making widgets.” R31:RST

Added to that, were the difficult dynamics of handling one’s own reactions to information about the nature of abuse encountered. As one senior practitioner eloquently described it:

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"It is messy. It's conflicted, it brings all kinds of things that you wouldn't think about into the process...It's not just about all the relationships stuff in terms of what's going on 'out there' - it's what's going on in your head as well, and what are your barriers? What are your things that you feel sensitive about? What are all those things that make you react in the way that you do? And if you believe what's going on is going on, what does that make you think about this person as a mother and the child? ... Then talking to the social worker about, well, you are going to have to find a way of managing your own feelings about these particular issues because you are going to have to stand up in court, potentially, and you are going to have to say these out loud and talk about them and be questioned on them. And then you've got...other professionals maybe teacher, health visitor equally is going to have their own particular reactions to those kinds of accounts and your job is to manage them, not to be tied up in what you're doing and how you're feeling, you've got to manage them and understand that and then you've got to manage the mum..." R17:LT

Given the emotionally charged context of work, the role of feeling and emotion as a way of knowing was highlighted. Practitioners referred to their use of instinct and emotion to assist them in their search and interpretation of information— a form of knowing that Thompson (2010) has described as emotion information. Such emotion information was frequently referred to and accepted as a valuable source of intelligence. Emotions needed to be switched on and harnessed to gain the truest picture of situations for families.

"You don't ever switch off, if someone says you do, then firstly I'd be worried if they were OK, because if we get too mechanical we'll miss some key things. We need to remain emotionally in touch with what we're doing, we need to allow those emotions to be there..." R1:IAT

During observations in each team, descriptions of factual events were intertwined with practitioners' own emotional responses to them – the two narratives appearing to be equally valued, sitting alongside each other as ways of knowing. Reflective supervision, and support from peers, was also highly valued (although not universally available), as a way to share and reflect on the emotional content of their roles, keeping this 'emotional antennae' working at its best.

Practitioners gave some striking examples of knowledge that began as instinctive and emotional, which then had to be supplemented by evidence and fact, to become acceptable for use at the 'surface'. A senior practitioner in the longer term team described an on-going court case, where the Local Authority were requesting the adoption of six children. The children's father had sexually abused one of his girls and as a result, five of the couple's children were in foster care, although the baby remained with the mother. According to

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normal process, if the mother broke off her relationship the father, and acted protectively of her children, it would be possible for them to be returned to her care. However, social workers and foster carers had reason to believe that the couple were carrying on a relationship, making it unsafe for the children to return home. However, because the mother strongly denied this, it was very difficult for the social workers to get evidence to present in court.

"Now we knew and instinct, whatever it is, but we knew that this couple were carrying on a relationship. They were saying, she was saying, 'I want to start a new life, I don't want anything to do with him, I haven't seen him other than court and contact, I haven't really seen him in the last 2 years'...We were actually losing this case, we're halfway through a final hearing and we were losing it." R16:LT

In this case, social workers gained the proof of an on-going relationship that they needed through access to the parents' phones, which would improve the chances of the court moving in favour of the children being permanently removed. However, the case illustrates very clearly the difficulty of gaining evidence to back up instinctual knowledge, in cases of disguised compliance. Without this extra layer of evidence however, emotion information gained in the depth of practice, is useless at the surface.

Discussion: The dual nature of information and information work

From these findings, a picture of information and information work emerges that is both cognitive and affective, rational and emotional. Practitioners begin their work on cases at the deeper practice level, where families' lives are complex, ambiguous and emotionally charged. From these depths, practitioners must move towards refining, interrogating and framing information in ways that fits into systems for sharing and communicating information between teams and organisations, and which, ultimately may have to stand up in court. Both the cognitive and emotional aspects of information and information work were recognised by social workers to be valuable and important. They also recognised the need to keep a balance between both aspects - being informed by emotional responses, but not allowing them to take over and over-ride rational processes. In this, practitioners sought to adopt an emotionally intelligent approach to information work. George (2000 p.1034), describes emotional intelligence as

"The extent to which people's cognitive capabilities are informed by emotions and the extent to which emotions are cognitively managed."

Gantt and Agazarian (2004), discussing emotional intelligence at an organizational level, highlight the need to keep the two types of knowledge in balance. They suggest that where team and organizational boundaries are impermeable to emotional and feeling information, an important source of information is lost, to the detriment of decision making and problem solving. More helpfully, if accepted by the organization, feelings enter in a form that can be 'used', rather than becoming detrimental to working processes, for example through feelings of frustration, lack of satisfaction and the adoption of defensive practice.

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At the other extreme, if emotionality is high, boundaries may be relatively impermeable to cognitive information and data. In these situations, decisions may be made without checking out the evidence, resulting in decisions that are hard to implement and need to be redone later. This resonates strongly with practitioners' comments in this research that whilst emotions should be used they should also be managed – that is to say – that emotional intelligence should be applied to the domain of information sharing.

Gantt and Agazarian (2004) suggest that organizational emotional intelligence is influenced by developing norms for appropriate boundary permeability *within* each system level and *between* each system level. This would make both cognitive and emotional information available at all levels of the system.

Herein lies a difficulty for information sharing work. Practitioners working with complex families recognised the centrality of feelings and emotion information. However, information systems required that this was cleaned up and presented in its rational, evidenced form, at the boundaries of teams and agencies. Within the context of referrals to social services, Thompson (2010) suggested that preparing information for referral required a work of translation to make information into something that is organisationally acceptable/relevant. This study revealed the same phenomena occurring at all stages of the child protection process.

Whilst practitioners described the need to emotionally engage in order to understand how a situation felt for a child, the presentation of evidenced facts was prioritized within assessment documentation, inter-agency and inter-team referrals and court paperwork. Thus, bad feelings were seen by social workers as insufficient grounds for contact referrals by other agencies, court documentation required factual evidence and the transfer of cases between teams focused on key events and chronologies. Computer systems exacerbated the filtering out of emotion information - the 300 word summary that was available for RST practitioners on the case database to summarise the chronology, analysis and recommendations about each case, allowed no capacity for the communication of 'micro details' and 'affective judgements' that 'hold great significance for those working with children.' (Thompson, 2010:244).

This filtering created tensions and frustrations between practitioners and inhibited the development of shared understandings about cases. It also cast light on how interpretations of thresholds for intervention can differ between teams, despite the existence of a threshold document laying out the criteria for action against particular sets of circumstances. When emotion information used to guide the decisions made by one team is discounted at the boundary of another, decisions are then based on different sets of information. This situation renders the notion of a standardized set of categories and classifications, against which cases can be judged, rather meaningless. In a similar way, when external referrers phone children's services on the basis of bad feelings about a child's circumstances, this is discounted by social workers as an inappropriate referral, rather than acknowledged as a potential source of concern that may need supplementing with further evidence. The lack of

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validation of referrers' feelings is also likely to interrupt the formation of trust and impair further communication (Covello, 2011).

Information work would likely be helped by an increased awareness (and acknowledgement) of the dual nature of information (and information work) amongst social work practitioners and their partner agencies. Anxious feelings must be complemented by checking the facts, but instincts and emotional learning are required to enhance interpretation of these facts (Ingram, 2013). This may allow for a greater acknowledgement of the feelings of referring professionals – and open the way for these to be used rather than to be categorised as unhelpful. It may also give referring professionals increased confidence to hold these feelings while gathering the facts that must go hand in hand with emotion information. A more nuanced view of the nature of information should facilitate the passing of shared understandings across agency and team borders.

Observations about the dual nature of information and of information sharing work could be incorporated into training around the different roles and processes for sharing information between agencies, but also teams. Within the fieldwork site, existing training for interprofessional colleagues about how and when to contact children's services, focused entirely on the legal and process framework around child protection, including advice on how to categorize need. Whilst necessary, the technical rational instruments of flow charts and process diagrams cannot reflect the skilled, and anxiety provoking nature of decision making to keep children safe, and provide little opportunity to acknowledge and address the anxieties and misunderstandings held by referring agencies.

There is, however, evidence that opportunities for gaining increased role understanding can be helpful in improving collaboration and information sharing, at both an inter-agency and inter-team level. Examples cited by respondents included shadowing opportunities and workshops designed to explore each other's roles. As has been argued, concentration on the 'surface' instruments (Cooper, 2005) of child protection has been unable to effect necessary change, therefore any intervention designed to enhance understandings between agencies (and teams) should offer opportunity for an exploration of the deeper experiences of day-to-day practice. Psychoanalytically informed interventions, which are designed to engage with both the systemic and psychological/emotional responses are likely to be particularly helpful in this regard. Examples could include use of the case study discussion model (Ruch, 2007), or the approach of Systems Centred Therapy (e.g. Agazarian, 1992).

Contributions to knowledge

This paper makes a number of practical contributions to knowledge. It increases understanding about the nature of the information sharing task (throughout the trajectory of a case) and the nature of the information dealt with. It shows that the filtering out of emotion information at the boundaries between teams and agencies can impair the generation of shared understandings. Information work would likely be helped by an increased awareness (and acknowledgement) of the dual nature of information (and information work) amongst social work practitioners and their partner agencies. This learning should be incorporated

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into referral and information sharing training for partner agencies and teams. Such training should allow room for the acknowledgement of the emotions and complexities of this work. Social work practitioners taking referrals from external agencies and members of the public should also be aware of the importance of validating the referrers' feelings, even when further information is required, as a way to build trust, enhance further communication (Covello, 2011) and to ensure that potentially valuable information is not lost.

Limitations and future research

Whilst the sole focus on social work practitioners brought the benefit of observing inter-team interactions and information sharing at all stages of the child protection process, the lack of access to the views of professionals from other agencies is a limitation to this research. To address this, further research within a multi-agency team environment or within different single services is suggested. Action research to instigate and evaluate the use of co-constructed reflective supervision and/or psychodynamically informed interagency and inter-team learning would also represent an excellent opportunity to further develop the knowledge base.

There is also a limitation in regards to the study's methodology, which relied heavily on the researcher's interpretations. Principles laid out in Hinshelwood and Skogstad's (2000) model of psychoanalytic observation of organizations were applied, but the usually integral mechanism of the research seminar was not available. This reduced the opportunity for discussion, reflection and further training in this method, which is likely to have had a limiting effect on the depth of analysis performed. The enhanced scrutiny provided by attendance at such a seminar would have complemented the steps outlined to promote a rigorous approach to the research.

It is also important to stress that the research represents a 'snap shot' in time, within the local authority setting. The rapid pace of change within this organization, and the welfare sector more broadly, makes the issue a particularly pertinent one. When considering the long term applicability of the research's findings, these issues must be borne in mind.

Conclusion

Practitioners in this study skilfully negotiated the surface and the depth to gather and process information that was robust and reliable enough to form decisions about the safety of children. This paper has argued that the managerialist preferencing of the surface, structural aspects of practice to the exclusion of all others has resulted in a system that is out of balance, creating difficulties of communication and partial understandings. The research set out to re-dress this through a deeper investigation of the experiences of day-to-day information sharing practice. It is also true, however, that focusing at a deeper level should not be at the expense of a systematic approach to gathering high quality information that is capable of standing up in court when children's lives are in the balance. Improvements to information sharing are most likely to result from a balanced approach,

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sensitive to the surface *and* the depth, the cognitive *and* the emotional, and through the provision of supportive interprofessional, and inter-team forums through which such issues can be acknowledged and discussed.

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