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Lamponen, Tuuli; Aarnio, Noora

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Social workers' assessment of a child's need for services as 'craftwork' practice

Tuuli Lamponen^a and Noora Aarnio^b

^aFaculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; ^bFaculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

This study examines assessment practices when social workers determine whether a child needs child welfare or child protection services. It describes the elements employed when constructing assessment practice. The data consist of 28 group interviews among assessment teams from child and family services. The analytical framework, based on the theory of decision-making ecology and thematic mapping, allowed for a theory-driven reflective analysis. Our results highlight the distinctive nature of the assessment process, which contains the following elements: 1) individual and holistic assessments, 2) changing structures, 3) conflicting or shared understandings, and 4) unclear legal guidance. The assessment process is case-related and situational, such that tailoring also contains elements that combine decision-maker, organisational, and external factors, leaving significant space for professional discretion. Such an assessment practice represents a contextually crafted practice.

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Child protection; child welfare; assessment; decision-making ecology

Introduction

In assessment research, professionals' work practices, assessment skills, and methods have been evaluated (e.g. Fluke et al., 2020; Hayes & Spratt, 2014; Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014; Whittaker, 2018). Assessment as a process examines a child's and family's circumstances, living conditions, and the capacity to take care of a child (Fluke et al., 2020; Gambrill, 2012; Shlonsky & Benbenishty, 2014). In addition, assessment involves a constant process of selecting the pathways regarding where to target support and control in a specific situation (Helm, 2016). Thus, assessment is considered a critical stage which demands knowledge, analytical and professional know-how, and practical skills to appropriately understand a child's situation. Finally, an assessment serves as the foundation for decision-making and further work with a child and a family (Horwath, 2001; Jaakola, 2020).

The practical framework for a social worker's assessment process relies on understanding a child's need for services and protection within the broader context of child welfare given that Finnish child welfare adheres to the welfare and family service model. This model includes the principles of universal welfare services and benefits for children

CONTACT Tuuli Lamponen  tuuli.lamponen@helsinki.fi

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and families as practiced in other Nordic countries (Pösö & Huhtanen, 2017). In Finland, two pieces of legislation – the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) and the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) – provide mandates for a social worker to carry out an assessment and make a subsequent decision regarding a child becoming a service user of child welfare services or falling under child protection services. Understood through the Finnish child protection system, comprehensive services are provided to families with children at a low threshold, including a mixture of voluntary and involuntary services, most of which consist of voluntary in-home services (Pösö & Huhtanen, 2017).

When assessing a child's situation and their need for child welfare services, the practitioner must draw conclusions regarding risks and protective factors given the information at hand (Biesel & Cottier, 2020). As such, practitioners use their professional knowledge (Hultman et al., 2018; Munro, 2008) and professional discretion during this process (Helm, 2016; Molander et al., 2012). A social worker's task is to make sense of the information and to choose how to proceed with a case under evaluation. In this article, we focus on social workers' descriptions of their assessment work – that is, assessment practices when they determine whether a child needs child welfare or child protection services – and reflect upon this understanding applying the theoretical framework of decision-making ecology (Bauman et al., 2011). In our analysis, we focus on addressing the following question: What elements are constructed through a social worker's assessment practice when determining a child's need for welfare services or protection services? The data consist of 28 focus group interviews among child and family service assessment teams.

Assessment practices in Finnish child protection

In Finland, the assessment process is carried out under the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) through a process called 'the assessment of the need for services'. In certain circumstances, a process outlined in the Child Welfare Act (417/2007), called 'assessment of the need for child protection', may take place simultaneously. An assessment of the need for services is initiated by a child protection notification, at which point contact is established with a child or a parent or through a joint application of the family and professionals via other services. Services are also provided according to both acts, with the primary difference being that services falling under the Social Welfare Act are only available on a voluntary basis, while services falling under the Child Welfare Act may be provided with or without a service user's consent (Saastamoinen, 2016).

The child protection orientation in Finland represents a family service – oriented framework, where the threshold is rather low for an assessment to serve as the starting point of becoming a service user (Berrick et al., 2016; Enroos & Tarja, 2021; Pösö & Huhtanen, 2017). In 2014, the Social Welfare Act was reformed, with the aim of further lowering the threshold for social services. The assessment process became timelier and more regulated. This legal change led to organisational shifts such that social services for families fell under both the Social Welfare Act and the Child Welfare Act.

The overriding principle of an assessment in child protection and social welfare services is the principle of the child's best interest (Child Welfare Act 417/2007). Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 3), all professionals' actions and decisions must be performed keeping that principle in

mind. Article 5 of the Finnish Social Welfare Act defines the ‘child’s best interest’, while Article 36 outlines the assessment practice. The child’s best interest contains elements from the past, present, and future. Therefore, the child’s situation in an assessment reflects these dimensions of time (Masson, 2010; Pösö, 2010, 2014; Witte et al., 2020). In addition to the legislative foundation, decision-making is influenced by various guidelines, which are municipality- or work community – specific or determined by national guidelines, such as the Handbook for Child Protection (Lastensuojelun Käsikirja, 2021). Professional practices are also informed by the professional ethics guidelines from the social work trade union Talentia.

Social workers work individually, in pairs, and in teams. Social workers complete assessments, however, working as a part of assessment teams, which can be permanent or formed as multi-professional teams if a child’s situation requires it. As a last resort, social workers must complete the professional assessment and investigate a child’s circumstances as a responsible public authority (Jaakola, 2020). However, the supervisor supports the assessment process if needed by consulting with the social worker and providing their views on the assessment process.

In addition, previous studies underlined the broad individual discretion that exists within child welfare and child protection practices when assessing a child’s situation (Jaakola, 2020; Lamponen, 2022), leaving space for designing an individual assessment in practice. This space grants broad decision-making power to an individual social worker (Pösö & Huhtanen, 2017). The other characteristic of assessment practice is that the structured procedures for identifying risk are not used extensively. This influences the professional discretion and the space in which social workers can decide whether a child should fall within child welfare services or child protection services.

Theoretical framework

In assessment practice, professionals aim to comprehensively clarify the understanding of a child’s circumstances given their current situation (Blomberg et al., 2013; Helm, 2011; Holland, 2004). An assessment, thus, concerns a child’s needs for support as well as understanding a child’s wellbeing, signs of risks, their living conditions, close relationships, their parents’ capacity to care for a child, and other elements which impact a child’s general wellbeing. The range of case-related factors and information about a situation vary and may also be insufficient or contradictory. Therefore, a social worker must critically analyse the information and create a valid ‘picture’ of a child’s needs (Helm, 2011, Horwath, 2007; Östberg, 2014).

Helm (2016) argues that assessment forms part of the decision-making process, whereby the conclusion is based on the information available and on an observation of the current situation. Professionals weigh the information regarding situational factors alongside background information. The object of collecting information is the child and the family, while the assessment itself aims to form an understanding of that information rationalising the next steps intended to protect a child (Helm, 2011, Horwath, 2007; Östberg, 2014). When assessment is successful, this process allows social workers to determine the appropriate course of action (Helm, 2011, 2016; Holland, 2004).

Assessment includes a selection process, identifying the pathways to target support or to control a child’s situation, including intervening in a family’s private sphere (Helm,

2016). The importance of the assessment emerges specifically when a social worker makes a decision and plans future measures and services for a child and family by identifying a child's needs appropriately and in a timely manner (Jaakola, 2020).

The assessment establishes the foundation for decision-making and further work with a child and a family (Horwath, 2001; Lamponen, 2022). In addition, the child's best interests are considered, serving as the fundamental principle guiding the professional's assessment, where the child has a right to an assessment of their situation framed within this guiding principle (Burns & McCaughren, 2021; Falch-Eriksen & Backe-Hansen, 2018). Thus, a child's participation represents a significant element when assessing their situation (Munro, 2011; Pösö, 2014; Witte et al., 2020).

Here, we examined the assessment of a child's need for services employing the theoretical framework of decision-making ecology (Bauman et al., 2011, p. 21). Viewed through decision-making ecology, an assessment (and the resulting decisions) takes place within an organisational culture and systemic context which includes professionals, the child, and the family. Several components affect the assessment process: 1) the child and the family influence the assessment process through their contributions and actions by bringing their views and knowledge to conversations; 2) professionals affect the assessment through their professional know-how, work methods, and values; 3) the organisational environment influences the assessment by regulating the timeframe and resources available for assessment work and by providing the structures and organisational values for practice; and 4) the wider social environment affects child protection practices through the service system, the societal culture, and norms. Additionally, another component impacting the process is the information learned through an assessment process and any assumptions related to the future which impact decisions taken regarding that child's life (Bauman et al., 2011; Fluke et al., 2020; Gambrill, 2012; Shlonsky & Benbenishty, 2014).

Moreover, the theoretical model of decision-making ecology demonstrates how numerous factors are bound to one another. Specifically, Bauman et al. (2011) introduced four factors: the case factor, the decision-maker factor, the organisational factor, and the external factor. The case factor refers to the unique needs, concerns, and problems in a child's and family's life and living conditions, and their personal and social circumstances. The decision-maker factor consists of professional and ethical responsibilities and professional discretion. In relation to the theory of decision-making ecology, an assessment is impacted by an individual's personal qualities including their professional skills and knowledge, critical thinking skills, values, and methods. This factor includes the capacity to apply evidence to inform their decision-making. The organisational factor consists of manuals, training, coaching, and monitoring in order to create sustainability. The role of the organisational factor is to identify and offer effective services. Decisions take place within an agency culture, in which a systemic context combines with case-specific decisions taken by professionals acting within an agency. Finally, external factors refer to evidence-informed policy and legislation (Bauman et al., 2011).

Data and methods

This study is a part of the broader research project 'Child Welfare as a Child's Best Interest?', ¹funded by Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and

implemented by Tampere University and the Socca Centre of Expertise on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The *ex ante* ethical approval was provided by the Ethical Committee of the University of Tampere. The research team also adhered to the guidelines laid out by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity throughout the entire study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and efforts have been made to carefully ensure the consent of and protect the anonymity of participants at all stages of the project. The data have been anonymised such that the participants and the organisation cannot be identified.

Our data were collected during 28 focus group interviews (Adler et al., 2019), including a total of 120 members of assessment teams. In addition, participants worked under the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) and the Child Welfare Act (417/2007). The focus group interviews were conducted in social service offices or via remote access using Microsoft Teams in 2021 and January 2022 in 21 municipalities.

Municipalities were geographically situated across Finland. Large central municipalities and some smaller municipalities were selected for inclusion in order to achieve a more robust understanding of social workers. Our sample can be considered representative of the country as a whole. Participation was entirely voluntary, which affected our sample.

All municipalities granted official research permission for our study. In each focus group interview, two to eight individuals took part, and the interviews lasted 1 to 1.5 hours each. Both authors conducted interviews. Given our interest in the interviewees' views, approaches, and values, a vignette (an imaginary case) served as a suitable method to prompt discussions (Wilks, 2004). Participants were thus asked to reflect on and discuss together an imaginary family situation we developed with professionals and experts based on their experiences. We used the following vignette:

Elias (9) and Anna (14) live with their parents. Elias has difficulties in school. His grades have not been great, and he does not have friends at school. He told a teacher in tears that he is afraid of telling his parents about his difficulties with his homework. The school has not been able to get in touch with his parents. Some mornings the father brought Elias to school late and seemed disoriented. Elias has been psychologically assessed in the family counselling centre and based on the results he was assessed as having special needs which are not met at home. Anna is doing well in school, and she has a lot of friends. However, Anna has visited the school nurse several times this fall because of vague pains and complaining of tiredness. Lately, she has spent a few nights away from home. Anna did not tell her parents where she was. Both parents have mental health issues. During the meetings at the family counselling centre, the parents talked about their difficulties in supporting Elias and Anna. Anna has not attended the meetings at all. The psychologist from the centre and the parents contacted family social services.

During the group interview, the vignette was first introduced to participants. Based on this imaginary case, participants were asked several questions, such as how the assessment should be conducted, how the best interest of the children would be evaluated, and how the children's wellbeing is understood. The same questions were asked, and the same themes were discussed with all interviewees. The theory of decision-making ecology provided the theoretical foundation when designing the interview questions. The

questions were formed in such a way that all factors (case, decision-maker, organisational, and external factors) were covered during the group interviews.

Participants' statements were analysed as contextual descriptions about the themes, and participants created a shared understanding based on the thematic questions by analysing social work communication (Juhila et al., 2014). In addition, we also considered the possibility of any hesitancy in expressing opposing views and the possibility that some views received more weight than others. We noted that the process of forming a shared understanding is essential during focus group interviews. Moreover, in a group setting, it is easier to express critical views on societal phenomena (Barbour, 2005; Duggleby, 2005; Kitinger, 1995). Thus, the group process contained discussions, comparisons, and negotiations about various opinions and viewpoints.

Theory-driven and reflective analysis served as the analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). The theory of decision-making ecology (Bauman et al., 2011) provides us with a concrete tool via which to organise the data. The analysis occurred in two phases. First, all of the meaningful content from the interviewees' speech was classified as falling under the case, decision-maker, organisational, and external factor categories based on the theoretical approach. During this process, we used thematic maps to organise and classify the data under each factor. During the second phase of the analysis, we identified connections between the factors (case, decision-maker, organisational, and external factors). Here, some of the data were combined while others were removed; as a result, the data were categorised as falling under broader themes. We reflected on the themes and the analytical steps throughout to ensure relevancy in relation to our research questions. The factors were relabelled into four elements of assessment practice. This two-part analysis is presented in two results sections: in [section 4](#), we present the assessment factors, and in the subsequent section we introduce the elements of assessment practice.

Along with the theoretical perspective, the other parties involved in the assessment process (child, family, close relative, and professional network) and their viewpoints have been taken into consideration, particularly when social workers mentioned them as a part of the assessment process. Otherwise, these views were excluded from our analysis here.

Assessment factors

Based on the theory of decision-making ecology (Bauman et al., 2011), we identified the case, decision-maker, organisational, and external thematic factors from social workers' discussions. Some factors overlap with respect to the researchers' understanding of how professionals used various terms and descriptions concerning the assessment of a child's need for services.

Case factors

Social workers spoke about case-related factors. Case-related factors can be categorised along three themes: 1) child-related factors such as 'the age of a child' or a child's special needs; 2) parent-related factors such as "mental health problems", "substance abuse", "impact of parents' divorce"; 3) family-related factors like 'everyday life', 'living conditions', 'domestic violence', 'a child's position in the family', and a child's and parent's

emotions such as ‘fear, anxiety, or suspicion’, or concerns about the assessment process itself. This concern might include ‘fear of a social worker seeing the actual conditions in the family’ or a ‘fear of the consequences of an assessment’. Social workers recognised a ‘child’s loyalty towards their parents’ and spoke about a child feeling anxious about telling a social worker about the real situation. They also recognised a parent’s indifference to a child’s needs. Beyond the case factors presented above, another case factor touched upon a child’s and/or parent’s resistance or consent to the assessment process. Participants connected this kind of action to the family members’ differences and conflicts related to their opinions or a family’s secrets such as substance abuse or mental health – related issues.

Decision-maker factors

In our analysis, we identified decision-maker factors in social workers’ descriptions. Specifically, participants used various terms to describe their work from the decision-maker’s perspective, such as ‘discussion’, ‘negotiation’, ‘reasoning’, ‘argumentation’, ‘listening’, ‘good cooperation’, ‘weighing’, ‘tackling’, ‘consulting’, and ‘getting on the same page’. Within the decision-maker factors, practical components included activities such as creating a relationship within the assessment process, choosing an assessment orientation, and selecting which methods fit a specific case. Such activities demanded a degree of flexibility, and thinking, planning, and choosing a beneficial way in which to work on a case. This kind of case-by-case approach relies on tailoring, specifically the relational and practical design of with whom, where, and when to meet. Social workers were of a similar mind regarding the necessity of ensuring an adequate number of meetings: individual meetings with a child and with family members, and joint meetings with all family members present. Within decision-maker factors, social workers pointed out the requirement of creating a space within which to ‘hear all viewpoints’ and simultaneously being aware of their role as an authority. One factor in this category revolved around the requirement of collecting different types of information from multiple sources and working towards a shared understanding of a child’s situation.

Organisational and external factors

Social workers described organisational and external factors as employing the legislative foundation recognised within their assessment work. Organisational and external factors were combined in professionals’ descriptions. The primary focus centred around determining whether the service user needs services according to the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) or the Child Welfare Act (417/2007), while others emphasised organisational challenges when determining whether the service user should be enrolled in social welfare services or child protection services. Social workers described the criteria in various ways, but the primary criteria leading to a determination of needing child protection services was a service user’s resistance. Social workers did not rely on descriptions of the organisational quality, although most social workers spoke about the principle of hearing a child and enabling sufficient meetings with all family members.

Shifting case-related structures and permanent organisational structures were also mentioned. Such supportive structures existed when working with a colleague, in a team,

and with a consulting supervisor involving multidisciplinary and other consultative work. One notable external factor influencing assessments consisted of other professionals' views (outside the assessment team) and their 'orders' for specific services for a child and family.

Elements of assessment practice

Social workers are obliged to tailor and combine various assessment factors to each individual case during the assessment process. Categorising social workers' descriptions under the factors described above created a bridge to the next phase of our analysis. This stage of analysis relied on a further examination, specifically identifying how different factors were combined with one another and how they construct the specific elements of assessment practice. The elements are as follows: 1) individual and holistic assessment, 2) changing structures, 3) conflicting or shared understandings, and 4) unclear legal guidance.

The element of an individual and holistic assessment was well-recognised in social workers' descriptions. Social workers assess a child's situation individually, through a case-by-case orientation, in order to identify how case factors influence a child's wellbeing. In doing so, social workers consider all the different views from the child and the parents. This kind of tailoring meant considering all characteristics and viewpoints, while also recognising their role as holding a degree of authority over and responsibility for the process. When specific case-related risks in a child's situation were documented, such as rejection from a child or parents, the starting point for a child becoming a service user of child protection services was established.

... [I]f the parents and the child have different opinions [regarding the need for child protection], then it leads easily towards a child protection decision, if the professional also has the view that there is a need for child protection services. I don't think that the professional would hesitate to establish clienthood in child protection in that case ... because the services in child welfare, according to the Social Welfare Act, are voluntary and based on [a] voluntary willingness. (Group interview 12)

As a result of any resistance or conflicting views, additional meetings and further tailoring are required with the participants in the process.

Thus, the assessment is embedded in the nature of the situation at hand, such as an emerging danger, any time pressure, or tension. That is, the situational context was formed through various case-related factors. Social workers assessed situational information by weighing how case factors affect the current situation, such as in an emergency assessment situation. In other words, the situational element aggregated case factors at the moment of an assessment.

And what is especially challenging is when there is a conflict between the adults, that is, the professional and the parents, and when the parents want to pull out of the [process]. That is one challenging factor. (Group interview 26)

Here, a social worker describes the tension in a specific situation whereby the parents no longer want to cooperate during an ongoing assessment process.

The element of changing structures refers to changing organisational and team-based practices, such as when social workers determine how they will proceed in an assessment

process. In this element, organisational, decision-maker, and case factors merge. As one example, changes to legislation have led to organisational changes. Changing structures included structures which support the assessment process, such as working in pairs, teamwork, support from managers, cooperation with multi-professional teams, and allowing for consultations. Despite work aimed at achieving a shared understanding, managerial support and consultative support were required to reach a shared understanding of a child's situation, particularly in complex cases.

Or consulting, ... if for some reason you want to have [support] ... you have thought through a case with your colleague and haven't found a solution, and also already talked with a manager without moving forward [with the assessment], at this point you need fresh views and thoughts. (Group interview 23)

This structure allowed for opportunities to make sense of various viewpoints during an assessment.

The element of a conflicting or shared understanding is at the very centre of assessment. This element combines case, decision-maker, organisational, and external factors. Conflict could occur between the social worker and the family or between the social worker and other professionals. Evaluating the views of the child and the family is essential since the various viewpoints represent a fundamental ingredient in any assessment. Social workers tend to combine different views from the child, family, and other professionals by tailoring the assessment process. This tailoring is also considered a form of know-how and fosters the development of an understanding during the assessment process. The aim of creating a shared understanding might include tension originating from the practice, where other professionals assess only one person's situation, while the social worker aims to create a 'whole picture' of the child and all family members' needs.

There can be professionals outside of our organisation, and they have different views about the family's need for services than the professionals in our organisation ...

But anyway ...

... [W]e discuss the views ...

And I think that if it's the school or child's psychiatrist or some other professional, they usually consider this one view [on the case] rather than the whole picture. We must consider every aspect. (Group interview 7)

Those who perform assessments had to take other professionals' views into account as well as the child's and the guardians' views. Despite all the different views presented during the assessment process, social workers and other professionals described a clear understanding of social workers' obligations to make the final decision. This decision meant choosing a pathway indicating a need for social welfare services, child protection services, or no need for further services.

The element of unclear legal guidance referred to specific situations during an assessment process. These situations might be confused by legislative imprecision regarding the appropriate assessment pathways. As a result of this imprecision, confusion within practice resulted. Social workers' assessment regarding whether the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) or the Child Welfare Act (417/200) was the appropriate legislation to dictate the assessment process must be made at an early stage. The complexity of juggling the

legal interpretation simultaneously with assessing a case alongside the situational elements is demanding. Thus, a social worker must make a decision regarding the appropriate pathway for an assessment. Conflict typically resulted through an intertwining of these two pieces of legislations as well as other closely related legislation. This conflicting interpretation and practice could cause disagreements between social workers and other professionals. Some organisations struggled with the legal guidance and assessment pathways, possibly leading to inconsistency and challenges when transferring a child and a family to child protection services at the end of an assessment. Some organisations recognised no conflict between the assessment practice and legal guidance. Yet, the decision regarding the appropriate assessment pathway and the practice to follow was selected by trusting social workers' professionalism.

I think that in our organisation we trust the social workers' assessment, if they have assessed that there is a need for clienthood in child protection services or social welfare services. So, anyway I think that very rarely the case comes back (to a social workers' desk) as a boomerang . . . that this case does not belong here. (Group interview 6)

Tailoring was related to case, decision-maker, organisational, and external factors, leaving a large space for professional discretion. This kind of assessment was identified as a contextually crafted practice, encompassing all of the assessment elements. Furthermore, it also combines all of the assessment factors. Crafted practice characterises the nature of social workers' assessment work when they consider a child's situation and the need for child welfare services. In crafted practice, social workers aim to formulate a complete picture of a child's and family's situation during an assessment, relying on case-related and situational elements, colleagues, and other professionals' assessments and legislation. Crafted practice meant tailoring the process from start to finish. In addition, tailoring leaves a large space for professional discretion: the social worker is obliged to combine the various assessment elements to an individual case during the assessment process. Often, cooperation with team members and multi-professional teams is also required. If the cooperation did not lead to a shared understanding and outcome regarding how to support a child and a family, the social worker could cause confusion and uncertainty in the assessment. In such situations, support from a manager and a consultation were likely required and relied upon.

Conclusions and discussion

A child's situation and the elements of an assessment are not explicitly known beforehand. This uncertainty challenges social workers' assessment practices. In this light, it is necessary to identify the possible ingredients of an assessment process. While our results presented here simplify the complexity of an assessment practice, they also illuminate certain factors that must be considered at a general level. Our study emphasises the decision-maker, organisational, and external factors when social workers assess a child's needs for services. In addition, this study highlights the distinction between case-related and situational factors.

Specifically, we have shown how decision-making ecology-based (Bauman et al., 2011) factors connect to certain elements of the assessment. Social workers are obliged to tailor assessment factors to each individual case during an assessment process. This process

leads to a crafted practice during assessments. Thus, in concluding we suggest that a crafted practice can be divided into case-related and situational craftwork. Case-related craftwork is case oriented and includes case-specific planning and tailoring during the assessment process. When there are multiple case factors, case-related tailoring becomes demanding and advances the practice to situational craftwork. Situational craftwork contains organisational, external, and decision-maker factors in addition to case-related factors. Depending upon the organisational and external factors, legislation and organisational guidance increases confusion within the practice. Consequently, this confusion increases the social worker's need for further crafted practice no longer tied to case-related factors alone.

The assessment elements presented in this article have also been identified in previous studies. Social workers consider case-related factors and situational factors when weighing options regarding how to proceed and as they become convinced about the need for child protection measures (Helm, 2011, Horwath, 2007; Östberg, 2014). According to Horwath (2001), assessing the need for child protection includes an understanding of a child's wellbeing, their need for protection, their life circumstances, and their close relationships. A child's need for protection is clearly indicated when service users resist services. Social workers' craftwork is tailored to various pieces of information and viewpoints, with the aim of creating a shared understanding between parties. As such, our results mirror a study about the initial assessment process in Finland summarising the views of 177 parents. That study found that assessment is successful when parents and social workers reach similar conclusions (Hietamäki, 2015). In another previous study, there are similarities in the views between experts based on their experiences, whereby taking the individual factors into consideration is deemed necessary for a 'good' assessment (Aarnio & Pösö, 2023).

When opinions regarding which pathway to follow conflict with each other, social workers may need managerial support. Yet, such support should recognise their individual obligation to make the final decision according to a child's best interests. Organisational and external factors such as multi-professionalism provide supportive elements but can become obstructive if the expectations or demands on a social worker are unrealistic. An understanding of the requirements for a high level of professional expertise, as well as an understanding of the assessment process, is necessary.

Reforms to legislation may have had unintended consequences. In this study, the legislative changes influenced the assessment practice and the resulting craftwork, specifically in relation to case-related and situational assessment processes. Our research highlights the element of professional discretion and the authority of a social worker's crafted practice. Despite the various elements social workers pointed out, they did not describe elements of risk-based reasoning when assessing the need for child protection services. Errors and mistakes are possible, particularly if the actual risks are not examined in a child's situation (Biesel & Cottier, 2020; Biesel et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018) or when there is no clear guidance for risk assessments in the legislation. Thus, the legislative foundation of assessment practice and pathways to child welfare services or to child protection must be clear and explicit. Neither the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014) nor the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) provides sufficiently clear definitions for assessment practice, resulting in uncertainty in front-line practice. As yet, the blurriness of the legislative foundation does not support clear

recommendations for practice. Therefore, the legislative foundation should be clarified before developing the structure of an assessment. This issue should be examined in more detail in future research, including from the child's and family's perspectives. To conclude, individuality in assessment cases requires analysis and justified arguments in the assessment process when choosing an appropriate pathway. This requires continuing the option to tailor assessment practices. The need for tailoring in assessment should be identified from the case perspective rather than from the structure. While crafted practice is essential to distinguishing between case-related and situational factors, assessment tools should support case-related assessments. Therefore, our study supports understanding the need for individualised and time-conscious assessment practices in child welfare and child protection services.

In closing, we note several limitations to this study. Specifically, here we relied on a qualitative dataset from one specific country and at a particular time. We also note the contextual questions including systems-oriented, organisational, legislative, and practice characteristics. Notably, the data collection method, a vignette used in a focus group interview setting, can only elicit interviewees' views, approaches, and values, as well as an imaginary contextual description. These limitations have remained at the forefront during our analysis.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Tuuli Lamponen (D, Soc.Sc, licensed social worker) works as a university lecturer in social work at Tampere University. Her research interest is in child and family social work and child protection practices, assessment and decision-making, as well as multi-professional work.

Noora Aarnio (M, Soc.Sc, licenced social worker) is a Phd-candidate in the University of Helsinki. She also works as a consultant for professionals in the most demanding child protection cases. Her research interest is in child and family social work and child protection and multi-professional work.

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