

Symposium

Digitalization, Risk Assessment, Decision-Making Tools, and Social Work

14.02.2020, 10:30 AM – 4:00 PM

Alice-Salomon-Hochschule Berlin, University of Applied Sciences

Alice-Salomon-Platz 5, 12627 Berlin, Room 124

Around the world risk assessment and decision-making tools are used to improve and promote consistency in decision-making. The “digitalization” of work promises more efficient work flows and increased support for decision-making. In child protection units worldwide, (digital) instruments of risk assessment are already an important part of organizational decision-making processes. However, risk assessment techniques gamble with the apparent “objectivity” of numbers and calculations, implying that the matters at hand could be mathematically calculated (Ackermann 2017; Ackermann 2019), making the human decision-making process (almost) obsolete. In this way, digital decision-making tools can become more than “tools” (Gillingham 2014, Büchner 2018,). They become active actors with which social workers have to interact and negotiate (Gillingham 2014, Ackermann 2017, Bastian 2017). They can become an important part of the decision-making infrastructure as they dictate the order and timing of work tasks (Gillingham 2014, Büchner 2018). Big Data has brought digital decision-making and risk assessment to a new level. The aim is to calculate the probability of future deviant behavior, using data analysis as a means to achieve “predictive policing” (Schrödter/Bastian 2018). Last but not least, a significant aim of the implementation of risk assessment and decision-making tools is to promote consistency in child protection services but they rarely fit with a non-standardized world (Gillingham, 2017; Timmerman). Research focusing on day-to-day practice with risk assessment tools show that the claims for objectivity and consistency are questionable (Gillingham/Graham 2017, Ackermann 2017, Bastian 2018; Gillingham, 2009). With the advent of big data and the new possibilities for predictive modelling, there is a danger that historical and existing forms of stigmatization will be continued under the guise of the apparent objectivity of mathematical process and even that new forms of marginalization may emerge (Gillingham/Graham 2017, Schrödter/Bastian/Taylor 2018).

Following a number of cases that were dramatized and scandalized in the media, the German Child protection system has been through many changes in the last decade. The child protection system was subjected to an unprecedented level of scrutiny by the media, politicians, the legal profession and science. There have been many attempts to improve the effectiveness of child protection work, for example, new legislation has been created and more research has been commissioned and conducted. Organizational changes have been made, including the employment of more staff and initiatives to standardize practice using digital case work systems and risk assessment techniques.

Despite these attempts to improve the German child protection systems, it seems that little progress has been made. Far more children are brought into out-of-home placements, but still, little is known about the decision-making processes that lead to these interventions. The quality of the institutions

where children are placed has also been questioned. Electronic information systems have been implemented ubiquitously in social services and child protection units but there is a growing research-based critique of their adverse effects on social work practice. New practice approaches have led to social workers engaging in “self-protection” and “defensive practice” (Biesel 2009, Ackermann 2010), as responsibility for decision making is increasingly deferred to new risk assessment tools. Notions of accountability have had to be adjusted to incorporate algorithmic accountability (Gillingham 2019). Privacy and data protection in the context of digital documentation have not been sufficiently considered (Ley/Seelmeyer (2018). Young people as active agents might be even more distanced from decision-making in this environment of objectification (Ackermann/Robin 2016). Last but not least, child protection units have become very unattractive work places, leading to serious problems with the recruitment and retention of staff. But there is also a new generation of social workers who, to a greater extent than their elders, seem to rely on risk assessment and decision-making tools (Gillingham 2011). Others are critical about electronic information systems and decision-making tools, claiming that tools do not assist with the most difficult decisions (Gillingham, 2009), and increasing workloads created by the administrative demands of electronic information systems steal both time and attention from having meaningful interactions with clients and creating helpful relationships (Gillingham, 2016).

Against this background, we would like to address the following questions:

- How do (digital) decision-making and risk assessment tools influence decision-making processes and infrastructures in child protection services?
- What does theory research teach us about the subject of interest?
- How could actorhood and agency be understood in the context of risk assessment, decision-making tools, and digitalization?
- What does the use of algorithmically based decision-making tools mean for social work decision-makers?
- How do social workers of Berlin and other child protection services use decision-making and risk assessment tools? How do they handle problems in interaction with decision-making tools?
- How can we understand the differences between digital (or algorithmically based) and analog decision-making support systems? What might be the consequences for children and families if services move more towards using algorithmically supported decision-making tools (also known as “automated decision making”).

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