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“My decision making is much more deliberate. . . I’m still energised by it”: lessons learned from the design and delivery of a module on judgement and decision making for senior social work managers

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the design, delivery and evaluation of a module on decision making for senior managers as part of a master’s programme for current and aspiring Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO). Scotland is unique in having a statutory duty that requires local authorities to appoint a CSWO to provide strategic and professional leadership in the delivery of social work services. The CSWO also has certain statutory decision-making responsibilities and as a key decision maker is responsible for decisions that affect individual rights and liberties to an extent that other services do not. This paper describes the key decisions CSWO’s are required to undertake before describing the pedagogical approach to developing and delivering the module. Rather than seeking to teach decision making the focus of the module is on raising awareness of factors that impact decision making, shifting from intuitive to active decision making and reflecting on the decision-making process. Results are presented from a thematic analysis of a post-completion survey of participants about their learning. The results highlight the isolation and vulnerability of the role, the weight of responsibility, the complexity and challenges of decision making and how the module supports managers to engage in analytical decision making.

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Introduction

Judgment and decision making (JDM) are core to social work practice, and whilst there is a burgeoning literature on practitioner decision making in social work (see, for example, Helm, 2022; Sicora et al., 2021; Taylor & Whittaker, 2018, 2020) and an edited collection (Taylor et al., 2023), the perspective of senior leaders in social work is under-represented. The quote that forms part of the title of this paper comes from one of the CSWOs who participated in a module on judgment and decision making (JDM) as part of a specialist award. In exploring the design and delivery of a module on JDM, in the context of

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a specialist award for CSWOs in Scotland, namely the Postgraduate Diploma Chief Social Work Officer, this paper opens up some questions about whether JDM is, as Dhami et al. (2012) assert, a dynamic skill rather than a static capacity, and consequently whether it can be learned. Although having the limitations of a small-scale exploratory study, four interviews and eight artifacts (essays and presentations), it is argued that the richness of the data from the thematic analysis of key themes arising from a post-completion survey of participants about their learning from the module and arising from summative assignments submitted represents a valuable contribution to teaching and learning in an area, where there is a paucity of evidence. This paper begins by outlining the particular role of CSWOs in Scotland and the key decisions required of them, followed by moving on to exploring the development of the award itself and then the development of the JDM module, exploring issues of pedagogy and learning and teaching strategies. It will then turn to present the findings of the thematic analysis.

Background

The importance of leadership and management by senior managers to the successful delivery of social work and social care services in Scotland is well established (Social Work Inspection Agency SWIA, 2010). Within a UK context, Scotland is unique in having a statutory duty, Section 5(1) of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, that requires local authorities to appoint a Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO), which has at its core the responsibility for providing strategic and professional leadership in the delivery of social work services. The role includes responsibility for professional standards and development, policy and practice development, quality assurance, the provision of advice and guidance in relation to social work matters and supporting local authorities and partners in understanding the complexities and cross-cutting nature of social work service delivery. The role is subject to statutory guidance (Scottish Government, 2016b) with additional supporting materials being produced by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) (2016).

As such, the CSWO role is a significant and influential position within the social work sector, with those holding the title being the most senior social work professionals in Scotland. Those holding the role often combine it with other functions, either strategic or operational, within local authorities and integrated health and social care structures, with some CSWOs having direct management responsibility for social work services and others occupying different positions within organizational structures. All CSWOs are responsible for the production and publication of an annual report to the local authority and partner agencies on the functions of the CSWO role and delivery of the local authority's social work service functions; however, these are organized or delivered (Scottish Government, 2016b).

In addition, the role of the CSWO, in providing leadership for the social work profession, has taken on increased importance in Scotland partly as a consequence of the development of the integration agenda with health and the development of Health and Social Care Partnerships (Public Bodies Joint Working Scotland Act, 2014). Given the ongoing change agenda in Scotland, focused on the development of the National Care Service, that will bring accountability for adult social care services under the remit of Scottish Ministers in the Scottish Government instead of local authorities, and the

development of a National Social Work Agency that will take responsibility for qualifications, training and workforce planning, the significance of the role is likely to increase. Indeed, Schaub et al. (2022) would argue that health care has a broader concept of leadership and that social work can learn lessons, particularly in relation to compassionate leadership (West et al., 2017). The SSSC, the professional regulator in Scotland, commissioned work to identify leadership capabilities (SSSC, 2017). This has been followed up more recently by Iriss (Martin, 2023). Whilst decision-making is mentioned in both these studies, they do not explore the decision-making role of social work leaders in depth. Where managing decision-making processes are explored in the literature (see, for example, Harvey & Weekes, 2023), the focus tends to be on managers in the first and second tiers, as opposed to senior managers or leaders. As far as can be ascertained, there is no recent research or evidence that looks at the role of senior social work managers, or specifically CSWOs, as decision-makers, and as such that will be the focus of this paper.

As noted, Scotland is unique in having a statutory duty that requires local authorities to appoint a CSWO to provide strategic and professional leadership in the delivery of social work services. Local authorities, of which there are 32 in Scotland, are required to ensure that the CSWO:

- “can demonstrate extensive experience at a senior level in both operational and strategic management of social work and social care services;
- has the competence and confidence required to provide effective professional advice at all levels within the organization and within the full range of partner organizations; and
- receives effective induction to support them in full delivery of their role” (Scottish Government, 2016b, p. 4)

In addition to the strategic and professional leadership responsibilities, there are specific functions conferred by statute and guidance directly on the CSWO by name. CSWOs are responsible for certain operational decisions mainly associated with managing risk and deprivation of liberty that are set out in legislation. Specific responsibilities which rest with CSWOs include deciding whether to implement a secure accommodation authorization in relation to a child and removing a child from secure accommodation, the transfer of children subject to Supervision Orders, decisions relating to children and young people for whom the local authority has assumed parental rights, the appointment of foster and adoptive carers, acting as welfare guardian to an adult with incapacity where no other suitable individual has consented to be appointed, the appointment of Mental Health Officers, decisions associated with the management of drug treatment and testing orders, and carrying out functions as the appropriate authority in relation to a breach of a supervised-release order. In these areas, the legislation requires that decisions are made either by the CSWO or by a professionally qualified social worker, at an appropriate level of seniority, to whom the responsibility has been formally delegated. Even where responsibility has been delegated, the CSWO retains overall responsibility for the decision and for ensuring quality and oversight of the decisions.

In terms of providing professional leadership, there are some similarities with the role of the Principal Social Worker (PSW) roles for Children and Adults in England, with the

role of PSW for Adults being reflected in statutory guidance (reference). However, that role is about supporting decision making, whereas the CSWO is, in some instances, directly responsible for making certain decisions. As such, the CSWO is a key decision maker in social work and is responsible for decisions that will affect personal lives, individual rights and liberties, to an extent that other local authority services do not. And whilst they inevitably take into account the judgment of other staff, both within their own agencies and partner agencies, the responsibility for the decision ultimately lies with the CSWO themselves.

The award

Recognising the complexity of the role and the importance of leadership in social work and social care services, the SSSC commissioned work to support this group of senior leaders, culminating in the development of a standard for CSWOs (SSSC, 2015) and the development of an accredited award (Postgraduate Diploma), positioned at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 11.

The Postgraduate Diploma in Chief Social Work Officer Studies is a bespoke programme, offered at Master's level, aimed specifically at social work leaders currently in the role of CSWO or those aspiring to the role. The award was developed in close consultation with CSWOs and other key stakeholders. It is approved and is regulated by the SSSC. The award, centered around the CSWO Standard (SSSC, 2015) and informed by considerations of 'Mastersness' (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, 2013), is a flexible part-time work-based programme that allows candidates the opportunity to tailor the programme to their own learning needs by encouraging a synthesis of current knowledge and skills, with new learning.

The award is accredited singularly by a Higher Education Institution but delivered jointly with another Institution. This partnership arrangement strengthens the delivery of the programme and reflects the strong partnership, namely the SSSC, The Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser to the Scottish Government, HEI's and Social Work Scotland, the professional body for the social work and social care professions in Scotland, which surrounds the programme. Whilst not a formal requirement for registration as a CSWO, the award, having been developed in consultation with CSWOs, is highly regarded as such and has made a valuable contribution to succession planning, with four of the last cohort of nine moving into the role of CSWO during, or soon after completing, the award.

The programme design is underpinned by the principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1984), specifically self-directed learning, and work-based learning (Raelin, 1997). The programme seeks to support learning by engaging students in active learning and promoting integrative and reflective practices that extend beyond the confines of the conventional classroom settings. By engaging in reflective practices and real-world experiences, students can achieve deeper understanding, develop practical skills, and integrate their learning across different contexts (Fink, 2013).

The initial module includes the development of a learning contract in conjunction with university tutors that then forms the framework for the rest of the programme (Boak, 1998). Candidates are required to self-assess against the CSWO Standard and identify individualized learning objectives and learning strategies. Over the course of the

award, candidates compile a portfolio of evidence that demonstrates competence against the standards. The final module comprises a written submission and a structured professional discussion, where participants reflect on their learning over the course of the module and their future learning needs as senior managers in relation to the CSWO standard.

The programme was established in 2014 and has seen five cohorts successfully completing the award. Because of the small size of the potential cohort, student intakes are available every 2 years, with a suspension during the first year of the pandemic. Over the time, it has been in place; the development of the programme has been guided by the SSSC, the HEI's and the wider partnership as discussed. Ongoing evaluation of the programme and the process of programme review in 2019 which included representation from key stakeholders, including the Scottish Government and Social Work Scotland, identified the need for an increased focus on the teaching of JDM which led to the development of the specific module discussed here. The module has a focus on the theoretical aspects of decision making, on the CSWO as decision maker and on individual aspects of decision making. This paper will now turn to the process of the development of the module.

Judgement and decision making module design and development

The design process for the JDM module was closely informed by application of the principles of constructive alignment (Biggs et al., 2022; Moon, 2002), 'constructive' relating to the activity of the learner and 'alignment' relating to the activity of the teacher in order to provide reflective space for the module team during the process of development of the module, support was sought from colleagues in Academic Development (Figure 1).

As the module was aimed at leaders who were experienced decision makers, making many decisions in a working day, often with limited opportunity for reflection, the view was taken that it was important that activities and assessment tools had a level of challenge within them as well as providing the opportunity for critical reflection (Fook, 2016).

The learning objectives for the module were identified as follows.

“On successful completion of the module, the student should be able to:

- Critically evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of judgment and decision making
- Demonstrate an understanding of the ecology of judgment
- Evidence a critical understanding of threshold judgments
- Identify and critically explore the CSWO role in decision making for social work.
- Critically explore their own role in decision making
- Present an exploration of a key decision they have been instrumental in making to peers” (Module Handbook, 2021).

The learning outcomes were identified as moving from the macro, an exploration of principles, through layers to the micro, a detailed examination of a key decision the participant was directly involved. The application of a social ecology approach (Billett, 2011; Evans et al., 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2008) very much underscores the design of

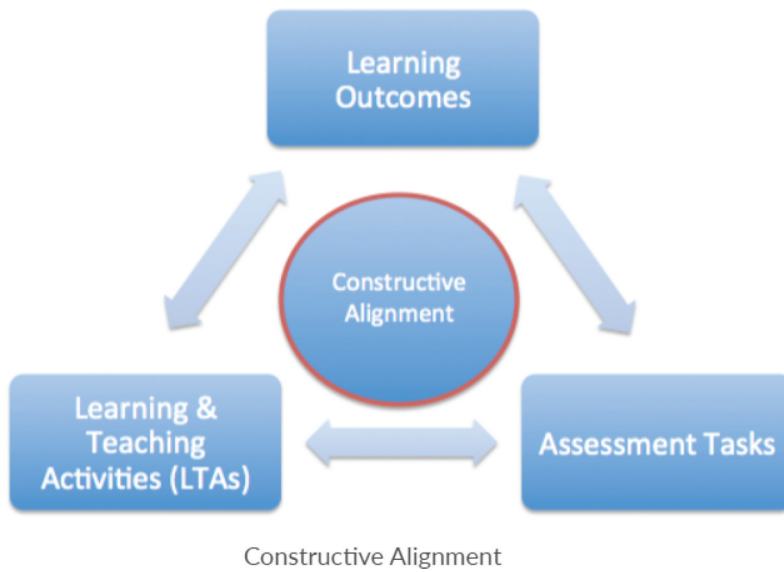


Figure 1. 2 principles of constructive alignment.

the whole programme, not just this particular module. This metaphor is particularly useful in that it provides an entry point to understanding the complexity of factors that impact on the lifelong learner without losing sight of the whole picture. Furthermore, this is complemented by consideration of Taylor's (2021) psycho-social rationality model, which recognizes the situated nature of decision making.

The module was structured around four units, namely factors that influence decision making, approaches to decision making, the role of the CSWO in making decisions and the response to and management of risk. In particular, as CSWOs were frequently faced with decisions that were very finely balanced, participants were encouraged to adopt a critical perspective on threshold judgments (Platt & Turney, 2014).

Stemming from the identification of specific learning objectives came the development of two assessment instruments, namely a critical reflection on the role of the CSWO in decision making generally and a presentation on a key decision that they were directly involved in making. In particular, the presentation allowed for dialogue and exploration in depth of the process of arriving at the decision, whilst the written assignment allowed an exploration of the decision-maker in context and allowed for a more sustained exploration of the influences on, and process of, decision making. Over the two assessments, participants were expected to evidence a critical understanding of the context of, and factors that influenced, decision making and their own learning from the decision-making process. The assessment tools encouraged participants to reflect on an actual decision-making experience and to engage in a degree of abstract conceptualisations (Kolb, 1984) as well as reinforcing the importance of reflection and feedback loops.

The module was delivered in a hybrid format, with a mix of online and in-classroom teaching, circa 50:50. For busy students, there was a trade-off between time spent traveling and the opportunity for direct face-to-face contact. It was notable that an important aspect of the course generally was the opportunity for dialogue in a safe

space and paying close attention to the ecology of judgment as discussed above (Billett, 2011). In addition, the emphasis of the programme as a whole has been on encouraging participants to take the time to reflect. It was, however, evident that the pace at which senior leaders were asked to work meant, at least at the outset, a certain impatience at the slower pace of the programme. The more reflective pace did become something that participants became comfortable with and valued, as will be explored below. Outside the classroom, students were offered a series of activities associated with the units referred to above, in order to guide their reflection for example, about how to conceptualize and respond to risk.

Having outlined the background to the context of the award and the development of the JDM module, the paper will now turn to the process of evaluation of the impact of the module, beginning with a consideration of the approach taken to the evaluation, before turning to the findings.

Methodology and methods

In order to undertake an evaluation of the JDM module, ethics approval was gained from the host university to undertake a small-scale research study comprising a two-stage methodology. The first was access to participant submissions as discussed previously, both presentations and written submissions. Whilst potentially offering access to detailed information, documentary analysis has the disadvantage of not allowing interrogation of data sources, this is counterbalanced by the absence of an observer effect that may come into play during interviews, for example (Bowen, 2009). The second stage was semi-structured interviews with candidates who had undertaken the module. Although the interviewers were academic staff teaching on the award, some seven months had passed since the award was completed, and that combined with the fact that these were senior managers meant that the likelihood of participants feeling in any way pressured to participate was minimal; indeed some declined to participate. The timing of the interviews gave the additional advantage that participants had had a period of time and opportunity to reflect on any impact of the module on their decision-making practice. Written consent was obtained from participants for access to their submissions and for their engagement in the interview process. Participants were also given assurances regarding confidentiality, specifically, that neither they nor their organization would be identifiable from any published material.

The interviews were undertaken by the two academics involved in the delivery of the module, one from each of the two HE institutions involved in the delivery of the award. The use of the two researchers allowed for dialogue and discussion about the findings. The interviews were semi-structured, focussed around a topic guide that explored the role of the participants, their experience with the module and the impact on their professional practice. As managers involved in leadership within social work, participants were also invited to comment on both their own continuing professional development needs and the needs of their peers. Given the geographical spread of the participants, interviews were conducted on MSTeams, a modality that has some disadvantages in terms of loss of some social cues, for example, but these disadvantages are outweighed by the time and convenience factors (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Interviews

were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, undertaken by both the interviewers (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were arrived at inductively.

All five participants in the first cohort of the module were invited to participate in the research study. Targeting the entire cohort of students as potential participants avoided the risk of sampling bias. Four out of the five module participants agreed to allow access to their submissions and presentations and agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews. Despite the limitations of a study of this size in terms of generalization, the richness of the data gathered allowed for a thematic analysis and for key findings to be identified. Indeed, the uniqueness of the findings offers particular insights into what decision making in the context of professional leadership looks and feels like from the inside (Flyvbjerg, 2005). These findings will now be explored.

Findings

This paper will now turn to an exploration of the findings from the interviews and reading of the documents, exploring four themes of isolation, complexity of the decisions requiring to be made, challenges and opportunities faced in reaching decisions and the integration of theory, before turning to an exploration of the impact of the module. It is important to stress that given the small group of participants, close attention has been paid to confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used throughout, and we have been careful to avoid the possibility of including details that could lead to identification.

Isolation and vulnerability

The role of CSWO in relation to decision-making was frequently described as a lonely one. The nature of the role means that CSWOs, and other senior social work managers within partnership arrangement, do not usually report to or are managed by someone with a social work qualification. The participants also noted a sense of isolation arising out of responsibility being delegated upwards or from other agencies. Alan described the case of a decision on secure accommodation where he was put under considerable pressure by a senior police officer. He had previously described the culture of the organization as 'Chuck it upstairs to the bosses and the bosses will come down and tell you exactly what to do'. He went on to describe how he was regularly reminded by staff of the power that he had in relation to decision-making, and this had the effect of increasing his awareness of the weight of the responsibilities that he held. He was very conscious that he was involved in sometimes making potentially life-changing decisions about people that he would very possibly never meet, which he found unsettling. By way of contrast, Esther explored in her presentation being directly confronted by someone convicted of a serious offence about whom she had decided in relation to a child protection concern, and how his anger had brought home for her the significance of her decision and the impact it had had on the individual.

For Tony, the sense of isolation and vulnerability was added to by a sense that, at a time when social work is more fragmented and specialized with social work staff increasingly part of integrated teams with health colleagues, CSWOs were expected to have a generic knowledge base. In his assignment Tony explored how it is becoming increasingly difficult for single CSWOs in each local authority to build the necessary skills, experience and

knowledge required to exercise the role across a wide range of diverse services. Group discussions during the teaching of the module gave participants the opportunity to give voice to that vulnerability. Creating a space for that giving voice is an important aspect of teaching the module. Connecting to that sense of isolation and vulnerability was the complexity of decisions that CSWOs were required to make. By its very nature, it is the complex and difficult decisions that come to the attention of the CSWO, with established systems and processes managing more straightforward decisions.

Although decisions to place, or not place, young people in secure accommodation required to be made infrequently, they represented the hardest decisions that needed to be made, as they presented genuine dilemmas, where the choice was between two potentially negative outcomes, the loss of liberty for a young person weighed against the risk that either they or members of the community could come to serious harm. The weight of responsibility of such decisions was heightened by an awareness that the young people did not have access to all the safeguards an adult would have in the criminal justice or adult care system.

As Tony put it in his assignment,

Such decisions are complex and have many factors that influence the decision. The CSWO must think about the individual child's rights, their right to freedom, their right to a family life. This must be balanced against risk to the person, risk to others and risk to the community.

Alan's analysis of such a decision, using Recognition Primed Decision-making (Klein, 1997) is included in [Figure 2](#). This model highlights the role of expertise intuition, and pattern recognition in decision-making, particularly in high-pressure or time-constrained situations.

In addition to the factors set out, there were a range of other considerations about whether the broader system including in-house residential provision could be mobilized to meet the children's needs, which required consideration at a range of different levels.

Complexity of decisions

Often decisions that were explored, either in written assignments or during interviews, crossed the interface between service user groups. Anna described the process of supporting a young man with significant learning difficulties and behavioral issues in the community where he had been assessed as requiring hospital care, but no place was available. His behavioral challenges were such that staff, whom Anna had leadership and management responsibility for, were often being assaulted, but there was no available alternative provider. As the local authority holder of welfare guardianship, Anna was ultimately responsible for the case. Even some time after the young man was eventually admitted to hospital, Anna still experienced what she described as a traumatic reaction, finding herself caught as she was between her responsibilities to her staff group and to the young man. By way of comparison, in his presentation Tony discussed a decision he was required to make as agency decision maker in respect of adoption and fostering, where the legal advice that he received was in direct conflict with his practice experience and practice wisdom. Alan specifically highlighted the complexity of the decisions he was required to make was added to by the lack of full information.

Alan wrote about a decision about the placement of a young person in secure accommodation and was able to apply Klein's (1998) Recognitional Primed Decision-Making model to the decision that needed to be made, and in so doing was able to bring a level of clarity to the decision.

- Goal:
 - To ensure that the safety and welfare of the child is secured.
- Cues:
 - That the child by their actions poses a risk to themselves or others as outlined in the secure criteria.
 - Information available to the decision maker at the time in this instance.
 - The young person is verbalising threats to harm himself or others.
 - The young person has absconded on several occasion from settings to care and nurture for him.
 - The child has possession of an improvised weapon
 - The availability of placements that could meet the young person's needs based on the information available to the decision maker.
- Expectancies.
 - Returning the young person to a place of safety may not secure his safety as there is a risk that he may abscond again.
 - Risk that the child without the appropriate structure and safeguard may harm himself or others as he has stated.
- Actions:
 - Return child to place of safety.
 - Place child in a safe and secure setting.

Figure 2. Decision about secure accommodation.

In short, there is no doubt that this group of leaders, with roles that combine statutory decision making responsibilities with a range of line management

responsibilities and wide spans of control, regularly face making decisions of considerable complexity, where it is essential that they have access to the best information and knowledge.

Dependence on the judgments of others

Turning now to challenges that were faced in reaching decisions, it was evident that CSWOs were highly dependent upon the judgments of others, as well as having to make decisions based on partial information. As Esther put it in her assignment,

it is necessary to note that most decisions made by CSWOs depend on good quality information from social workers and other professionals, legislation and statutory guidance.

Building on that, Alan spoke about having to establish and nurture relationships of trust with the managers who reported to him, and this leads into a discussion about the integration of theory into leadership practice, which will be explored below. Additional challenges that CSWOs and senior managers face include having to reach decisions based on partial or incomplete information, or as the example from Anna above has highlighted, having to balance competing interests including those of service users and staff groups and a decision process that left her feeling isolated and traumatized. In addition to this, there was a delicate balance to be struck between building and maintaining trust with, and of, subordinates and providing an appropriate level of challenge to those subordinates. Tony described how he would very regularly find himself in a position of unpacking the information he had been presented with and not accepting recommendations that had been made. Finding the time and reflective thinking space to come up with creative solutions when faced with budgetary constraints that severely limit the room for maneuver was also identified as a significant challenge.

Having previously discussed the sense of isolation associated with the role, it was also highlighted that Chief Social Work Officers do not make decisions in isolation, rather decisions are based on recommendations and discussions with a wide range of others, however ultimate responsibility for the decision lies with the CSWO and it is this that leads to the feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Whilst making decisions with a lack of information is unavoidable (Munro, 2019), and not uncommon in social work and across a range of professions, its significance is heightened for CSWOs given the responsibility that lies with them when making potentially life changing decisions about the most vulnerable in society.

Pressure to make a decision

Participants frequently felt pressure to make a decision, sometimes with an urgency that was perhaps not always warranted and taking into account the option to not make a decision, and there is evidence that this featured in both negative and positive aspects. The literature recognizes that not making (or the failure to make) a decision is also a decision that has consequences (see, for example, Carson & Bain, 2008). In his written assignment, Alan quotes Carmella, the wife of the fictional Tony Soprano, who said, 'more is lost by indecision than by the wrong decision'. Alan goes on to refer to what he described as paralysis that may be set in a group context, where there may be a lack of

clarity as to who is ultimately for the implementation of any decision that is made. In contrast, Anna, in her interview, explored how the module teaching had given her the confidence to consciously refuse to be 'bounced' into a decision by people she managed and adopt a more reflective, analytical approach.

Putting learning into practice

This leads neatly into a discussion of the application of decision-making theory to practice. It would naturally be expected that theory would be referenced in academic assignments, but what was noticeable was the way in which references to theory featured in interviews several months after the completion of the module. Whilst there were numerous references, two came through particularly strongly, namely the differentiation between intuitive and analytical thinking (Kahneman, 2011) and the ecology of judgment (Helm & Roesch-Marsh, 2017). Anna, whose delay in making a decision was only referred to, outlined how her confidence in delaying the decision came from a recognition that a more measured analytical approach was preferable and indeed required in that particular instance. This differentiation was explicitly mentioned by all participants, and how their decision making had become more deliberate.

In terms of capturing the impact of the module, participants were asked about the applicability of the learning. Tony has reflected on how in the past sometimes he almost went into autopilot because he knew what he was doing and was confident in his role. However, he was clear that he used the learning from the module, 'every day. My decision making is much more deliberate . . . I am still energized by it'. He explored how he would challenge and frequently not accept judgments that had been arrived at by others and indeed had cascaded some of the learning from the module to his management team. He also discussed increasing his understanding of decision making had helped him become more aware of others' decision making and he was conscious of his role, as a senior manager, in modeling good decision making.

Esther and Anna both made explicit reference to how it had increased their confidence in their decision-making role, with Esther referring explicitly to how it had given her a research-informed language to challenge the approaches to decision-making of others, with specific reference to the example of confirmation bias, and Anna also talked about challenging the views of others. Interestingly, Anna used the word 'gumption' in relation to what needed to be developed in relation to decision making. When asked to expand on what she meant, she referred to a combination of being able to be explicit about how the decision was reached, being prepared to be challenged by staff and partner agencies on the decision, and also anticipating how the decision will land. For her, the module had given her the opportunity to reflect on all three aspects.

Alan, who had moved into the role of CSWO during his time on the course, identified how the module had given him the opportunity to reflect on how he managed the decision-making process. Despite being very clear about the ownership of the decisions that he was responsible for, he was, however, highly dependent upon the judgments of his managers and the trust that he placed in them. His way of working had evolved into one where he would explicitly check at the end of meetings that, while there would not always be unanimity, there was a sufficiently well-developed consensus to proceed. He also commented

I believe that all social work leaders and other leader should do the judgement and decision making course, particularly those in the public sector . . . from a professional social work perspective we do need to formalise, better than we currently do, leadership and management, and judgement and decision making training for managers at different levels

noting the module had value at all levels within social work management structures. He summed up the value of the module in that it helps 'equip people with the theories around how we all make judgments and decisions'.

In summary, in exploring the issue of impact by conducting interviews months after the module had been completed, there was an opportunity to capture the learning in a way that would not have been possibly had interviews been undertaken either at the end of the module or soon after. Although participants emphasized different aspects of the learning, there did seem to be a significant perception of an increase in confidence and awareness of the dynamics of the decision-making process. Although there requires caution in extrapolating from a small sample, there is evidence that this group of senior leaders have benefitted from the module in tangible ways. Leaving the last words with Tony,

I got so much out of the module - it really made me stop, examine and explore my current practice, examine, explore and reflect on my previous practice in terms of different decisions and how I made them.

Discussion

This discussion will in turn examine implications for research, managerial and leadership practices, and social work education.

Implications for research

Turning initially to explore the implications of the study for further research, it is anticipated that widening the scale of the research will be undertaken. Gathering data from a larger sample of participants, after a time interval of 2 years would provide a degree of triangulation of sources of data, and this would also connect with the external evaluation of the programme which is under way at the time of writing. Beyond this particular module, however, it would appear that the research based on decision-making at a senior leadership level in social work is limited, with some notable exceptions (see, for example, Roesch-Marsh, 2011) on decision making around secure accommodation). There is a long tradition of ethnographic research in social work going back to Pithouse (1998) and more recently, for example, Helm (2016), Ferguson (2016), Morrow and Kettle (2023). However, this is most often focussed at a frontline level. Notwithstanding possible complications, it is argued that further research on decision-making by CSWOs and others in senior management and leadership positions, would be of broader benefit for the social work profession in Scotland and elsewhere.

Implications for leadership education and development

As has been identified (Miller & Barrie, 2022) the social work profession in Scotland faces a number of significant challenges including, but not limited to, issues of recruitment and retention and organizational and structural changes with the bill for a move toward a National Care Service having just been published and there are also well-developed proposals for a National Social Work Agency that will take responsibility for qualifications, training and workforce planning, as well as pay and grading for social work staff. Furthermore, developments are well developed for what is currently being referred to as an Advanced Practice Framework, which is intended to provide a clear structure for learning and development opportunities at all levels across the social work workforce in Scotland, including leadership at a range of levels. It is suggested that decision making as a skill will find an important place in the framework.

Implications for managerial practice

What came across very strongly from the study was the number of factors that impacted upon the decision-making processes of the CSWO. These included, but were not limited to, the complexity of the decision-making environment, and the multiple lines of accountability, both within and out with the organization. There was an implication that managers at a senior level were somehow past the stage where they needed reflective supervision (Ravalier et al., 2023) Although coaching and/or mentoring arrangements are in place for some people in leadership positions, these are limited and certainly not universally available. The implication was, and that as they moved through the ranks, the need for reflection somehow diminished. However, one of the aspects of the module that participants most valued was the space for reflective conversations, and in addition, they took advantage of the written assignments to work some of these issues through. As Ravalier et al. (2023) argue, the evidence for reflective supervision for front-line staff is strong, although perhaps something to be 'reclaimed' (White, 2015). It would appear that the case for reflective supervision to be available to CSWOs and those aspiring to the role would as strong, if indeed not stronger, in particular, as the complexity and significance of the decisions that require to be reached grow as greater seniority is achieved. So, it is argued that instead of the need for reflective space diminishing for CSWOs and other senior leaders, on the contrary it increases. Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between judgments and decision making (Taylor & Whittaker, 2018). As has been explored above, often CSWOs and other senior leaders were required to reach decisions based on the judgments of others. As Alan has explored, this often requires a high level of trust in those presenting the judgment. In essence, it could be argued that CSWOs are required to make a judgment on the quality of the judgment with which they were being presented, and only then to progress to reaching a decision.

Implications for social work education

Whilst there are a number of implications from this study for how decision making is taught in both pre and post qualifying social work courses, three will be highlighted here.

The first is to address the theoretical basis of decision-making, with the central message being that although humans are flawed decision-makers, decision making is a skill that can be learned and crucially that not making a decision is in fact making a decision (Carson & Bain, 2008). The second is that the context within which the decision is made is a crucial influence (Helm & Roesch-Marsh, 2017). The third is to emphasize the importance of critical reflection across social work education (Fook, 2016) as a skill to be enhanced and developed both in academic and practice contexts. In combination, these factors underscore the importance of teaching approaches that allow students to explore the ambiguity and complexity of decision making (Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Conclusion

As well as zooming in on the design and delivery of a module for JDM to a key group of social work leaders, this paper has given the opportunity to ‘zoom out’ (Moss Kanter, 2011) to the bigger picture on how those in leadership positions within the social work profession approach the complexities of the decision-making process. The focus has very much been on the Scottish context and CSWOs and the particular statutory responsibilities that they hold. However, it is suggested that there may be wider implications for exploring what decision making in the context of professional leadership looks and feels like from the inside. From this exploratory discussion, it would appear that the module has had a positive and sustained impact of a sustained nature and supports the assertion of Dhami et al. (2012) that decision making is a dynamic skill rather than a static capacity and is something that can be learned.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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