Introduction

Child protection work inevitably involves uncertainty, ambiguity and fallibility. The knowledge base is limited, predictions about the child’s future welfare are imperfect, and there is no definitive way of balancing the conflicting rights of parents and children. The public rightly expect high standards from child protection workers in safeguarding children, but achieving them is proving problematic.

Many initiatives to improve professionals’ accuracy entail increasingly specific procedures, guidelines and risk assessment schedules. Front-line workers have mixed views about these, with many feeling that they undervalue the interpersonal skills of empathy and intuition needed to relate to parents and children. The issue is usually presented as a stark dichotomy between objective and subjective knowledge, science and art, or formal reasoning and intuition. This leads to a sterile and often bitter conflict. This book proposes that they are more usefully seen as on a continuum, with both being necessary, to varying degrees, at different stages in child protection work. I shall argue that trained, experienced professionals cannot be replaced with bureaucrats with sets of forms, but they can be trained to develop their intuitive reasoning skills, understand their limitations, and use more analytic skills to test and augment them.

All advanced industrial countries have developed some type of child protection system. These societies recognise a child’s right to a minimum level of care, protected from the worst excesses of parental abuse or neglect. At the same time, the privacy of the family and the rights of the individual adult are also highly valued, so that child protection workers have to walk a tightrope, balancing the conflicting rights of the family members. Moreover, the aim is not just to minimise the danger to children but to maximise their welfare. Removal from the birth family may increase their safety but harm their overall development. In all but the most extreme cases, the birth family is seen as the best place for a child to be nurtured. This affects the way allegations of abuse are dealt with. Professionals know that the parents they are investigating today are likely to be their partners in future efforts to improve family functioning. The way the initial contact is handled has long-term effects on the family’s relationships with professionals.
In assessing a child’s safety, accuracy is a crucial goal. Ideally, professionals want to be able to classify parents correctly as abusive or not, with the minimum of distress to those wrongly accused. They then want to manage the risk to children in a way that maximises their safety while also promoting their healthy development. Reality falls far short of this because of their limited knowledge. Added to this, they face strong pressures from the wider society. The image of a vulnerable child suffering pain and fear at the hands of their carers stirs up deep feelings of horror and outrage. Equally, the idea of powerful officials invading the privacy of the family and interrogating us on the intensely personal issue of our competence as parents provokes anger and resistance.

It is hard to imagine circumstances that pose a greater challenge to reasoning skills: limited knowledge, uncertainty, high emotions, time pressures, and conflicting values. It is not surprising, therefore, that so much effort and money has been poured into research to improve professionals’ knowledge and skills. However, there is a problem in how many child protection services are trying to improve practice; the dominant view has been that progress can be achieved by a more formalised and prescriptive approach. The increase in empirical research and the development of guidelines, checklists, procedures and risk assessment instruments exemplify this approach. The problem is that many of the people who are on the receiving end of these developments – the front-line workers – are very sceptical about them and use them half-heartedly. There is a widespread feeling that they fail to capture key elements of working effectively with families. These formal aids are often seen as a device for protecting management from outside criticism rather than for protecting children from abuse.

This conflict of opinion in child protection reflects the classic debate about how to understand human nature. Should the social sciences study people with the methods used in the natural sciences, trying to describe an objective reality and developing causal explanations of behaviour? Alternatively, do the human skills of intuition and empathy offer a distinctive, and richer, form of understanding, enabling us to know how it feels to be another person? In relation to human reasoning skills, these contrasting views of knowledge are illustrated in the analytic/intuitive divide. At one extreme, analytic reasoning is formal, explicit and logical. It is associated with mathematics and rigorous thought, where every step in the argument is spelled out. In contrast, intuition is non-verbal, swiftly reaching a conclusion on the basis of largely unconscious processes. In child protection work, analytic reasoning is exemplified by an actuarial risk assessment instrument where, on the basis of a set of questions, the practitioner works out a score that determines the level of risk to a child. Intuition, on the other hand, is illustrated by the practitioner who spends time talking to a family, drawing on professional experience to try and make sense of the family dynamics and develop a picture of how the family functions. The former is an intellectual task leading to a precise, impersonal conclusion. Its justification comes from the empirical work on which the instrument was based. The latter engages feelings and imagination as much as knowledge, and leads to a conclusion that has an authenticity based on the individual’s emotional response; it ‘feels right’.

When we look at these extreme examples, we can see why front-line workers so often feel estranged from the formal developments in practice. The problem is not helped by the fact that the debate is often presented as a stark dichotomy. It frequently becomes heated and bitter, with the advocates of each side insulting the character of their opponents, who are either woolly brained (and so incapable of analytic thought)
or emotionally stunted (and so unable to relate empathetically to others). There is, as a leading American academic has put it, a widespread belief that ‘reason and caring are incompatible’ (Gambrill, 1990: 360).

However, this is not the only, or the most useful, way of looking at the problem. Hammond (1996) has argued persuasively that it is more realistic to view human reasoning skills as on a continuum, with the purely formal, analytic methods at one end and blind intuition at the other. In between, intuitive reasoning can be more or less steered by explicit ideas or structured guidelines, and analytic methods may rely, to varying degrees, on intuitive skills in collecting and organising the necessary information. Hammond’s argument is strengthened by research in neurophysiology that shows that the human brain has two methods of processing data – the mainly unconscious, intuitive process, and the deliberative, analytic process. These are located in different parts of the brain but are interconnected (Damasio, 2006).

The picture of human abilities as a continuum more closely resembles the experience of child protection workers who draw on all their reasoning skills in the total process of working with an abusive family, using both heart and head as required. It also provides a more accurate representation of the formal methods that are being introduced, few of which can be used without some intuitive skills. Instead of arguing that one type of reasoning is inherently superior to the other, conceptualising them as a continuum makes it possible to consider what degree of each is possible or desirable at a particular stage in the child protection process. This is, in essence, the project of this book, which offers the view that we need to take advantage of the full processing power of our brains but understand the strengths and weaknesses of each mode of reasoning to use them for the maximum good of children. The schism in the academic debate on reasoning skills has produced two distinct sets of literature. On one side, analytic theorists set out prescriptions for good reasoning, drawing on formal logic, probability theory and decision theory. The opposing school study how people actually reason and set out descriptions of successful and unsuccessful reasoning styles. The two approaches produce startlingly contrasting images of human thinking.

The analytic thinker would approach a family in a cool and distant manner, using some formal instrument derived from empirical research to measure a specific dimension of family functioning and then would apply some statistical equations to compute the measure. The intuitive thinker will approach the task by establishing a rapport with the family, using empathy and experience to imagine how the family is functioning, and make some, largely unconscious, appraisal of their competence. It is easy to think of scenarios where each type could be inappropriate. In a family interview, where the father is getting increasingly aggressive, the intuitive thinker who makes a swift assessment of the growing anger and its probable consequences would be much likelier to escape unharmed. The analytic thinker, stopping to get an anger rating schedule from his or her briefcase, is likely to exacerbate the situation. But in court, the positions are reversed. A child protection worker who asks that parents permanently lose custody of their children on the basis of a ‘gut feeling’ would be castigated by a judge, while a worker who can produce a detailed account of the reasoning behind the application is more likely to achieve the desired court order.

With decision making, the pictures from research are equally divergent. The prescribed image of a decision maker, looking at a range of options and weighing up their relative merits, is like Figure 1.1. However, people making decisions in everyday life are closer to Figure 1.2, navigating their way through a rough sea, making a sequence of
small decisions ‘to maintain a meandering course toward the ultimate goal’ (Hogarth, 1981). The latter image perhaps more accurately conveys the process of conducting an investigation (with a procedure manual as a map) while the former seems a good model for making the major decisions about children’s welfare, such as where they should live.

Figure 1.1  The prescriptive model of decision making

Figure 1.2  The descriptive model of decision making

This book examines how child protection workers can strengthen their analytic and their intuitive reasoning skills. While the main focus is on how we can use our analytic skills as a critical check on the known biases of intuition, it is important to stress that they cannot replace it entirely. Attention also needs to be given to appreciating how to develop our intuitive skills and to use them most appropriately.
This book is concerned with the process rather than the specific content of practice. It does not, therefore, provide a comprehensive account of current policies or empirical research. Reference will be made, where appropriate, to this literature, but the central concern is to discuss how to use that material to examine the reasoning processes involved in making judgments and decisions.

My own professional background is as a social worker in England and this affects the range of practice experience I can draw on. However, the topic of reasoning skills crosses national boundaries and so this book has international relevance. The subject also crosses professional boundaries: all the professions involved in child protection work have an active debate about relevant knowledge and skills, although the balance of support for the different positions varies. The book is, therefore, addressed to child protection workers, rather than social workers specifically.

Outline

The next chapter examines the nature of expertise in professional practice. There has long been a debate within the professions about what knowledge and skills could or should be used, and to what extent expertise should be seen as an art or a science. This traditional debate is revisited in the light of research findings from cognitive psychology and neurophysiology that offer insights into our reasoning abilities. These findings suggest a new framework for setting out the questions about the respective roles of analytic and intuitive reasoning. Following the theme of learning to use each when appropriate, their relative strengths and weaknesses are then examined.

Child abuse is a phenomenon shaped by its social context. It is quite unlike a specific disease entity, such as measles, where it can be hoped an understanding of its cause and treatment that has universal application can be developed. A society’s views on child protection are a reflection of its views on children and families generally. Parents’ ability to cope is strongly influenced by the degree of social support given to families. Chapter 3 looks at the range of cultural attitudes to families and the different balance that countries draw between individual autonomy and social solidarity. These views have repercussions on attitudes to abusive parents and whether the emphasis is on rescuing children or supporting those parents to improve their standard of care.

The social dependence of the concept of child abuse has pervasive implications. Chapter 4 examines the problems of defining abuse and the consequences these problems have for research (and amassing a body of empirical knowledge), for policy (and formulating it in a way that can be consistently understood and implemented), and for practice (and the difficulties of getting agreement between the various people involved in a case).

The next two chapters look at the issue of assessing the risk of child abuse. Chapter 5 concentrates on the theoretical issues, explaining the role of probability theory in formal approaches and risk research, summarising current findings on risk factors, and examining the relative strengths and weaknesses of actuarial and clinical approaches to risk assessment. Chapter 6 deals with the practical processes, setting out a framework and then going through it in detail, exploring the difficulties that arise at each stage and discussing what types of reasoning skills are needed to resolve them.
Chapter 7 addresses the question of how to manage the identified risk. It sets out the two main approaches in decision making research: the descriptive approach that has studied how people actually make decisions, and the prescriptive approach that draws on probability theory and decision theory to construct a model of rational decision making. The former body of literature offers useful insights for decision making under pressure of time. However, the major decisions in child protection work need to be made in a way that can be explicitly explained and justified to others and, for these, decision theory provides a good framework for organising and guiding one’s reasoning.

None of the aids to assessing or managing risk holds out the promise of infallibility or removes the role of the professional thinker. There is, however, a large body of research on the reasoning errors people tend to make and this is a fruitful source of ideas about how mistakes can be detected and minimised. Chapter 8 starts by looking at the social context in which the reasoning is done and how this can help or hinder good reasoning skills, before examining how individuals can develop a more critical and open-minded approach to practice.

The final chapter summarises the key points in the book and discusses the implications for implementation: how can training promote both formal and intuitive reasoning skill; how can practice aids be developed that are integrated with intuitive skills; and, perhaps most importantly, how can agencies develop a culture that encourages critical thinking.

Throughout the book, I use case studies as examples. Some of these come from published accounts of practice (for example in public inquiry reports into child deaths) but most come from the students who have taken the child protection course I teach at the London School of Economics. I would like to reiterate the point made in the Acknowledgements that, for the sake of confidentiality, not only have these cases been rendered unrecognisable, but also any distinctive features have been altered, so if readers find a resemblance to a case they know, this is a chance coincidence.

Summary

- Child protection workers have to make complex judgements and difficult decisions in conditions of limited knowledge, time pressures, high emotions, and conflicting values.
- Analytic and intuitive reasoning skills are best seen as a continuum, not a dichotomy.
- The centrality of empathy and intuition needs to be acknowledged, but practice can be improved by developing professionals’ analytic skills.