

## Title

'Siblings as better together': Social worker decision-making in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour

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## Abstract

Sibling abuse is arguably the most prevalent form of family violence (Meyers, 2014), with sibling sexual abuse more common than parental sexual abuse (Krienert and Walsh, 2011). However, research on social worker decision making has been limited to situations concerning parental abuse, with almost no attention paid to situations where a child in the family presents a risk.

This grounded theory study analyses from interviews with 21 social workers in Scotland their retrospective accounts of decisions relating to sibling living and contact arrangements regarding 21 families in which sibling sexual behaviour has occurred. It finds that decisions are made intuitively, influenced by a practice mind-set, 'siblings as better together'. This mind-set comprises three underlying perspectives: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective. These perspectives encourage a focus on immediate safety rather than emotional harm, and could be said to extend Dingwall *et al.*'s (1983) 'rule of optimism'. There is a danger of the victim child becoming lost. The study opens up a new area of research, its findings of relevance for professional groups beyond social workers including specialist nurses and other allied health professionals.

## Keywords

Child protection, Decision making, Grounded theory, Siblings, Sexual abuse, Social work

## Introduction

Social workers are generally faced with large amounts of uncertain, constantly changing information (Taylor, 2010). Intuitive skills are essential for decision-making (van de Luitgarden, 2009), but there are concerns that these decisions may be not only idiosyncratic but flawed (Gambrill, 2005; Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008). Most research within child welfare has focused on case

characteristics associated with decisions rather than the thinking processes of social workers (Hackett and Taylor, 2014), who are key decision makers in child protection, their recommendations often accepted routinely by other professionals (e.g. Wade *et al.*, 2011). Studying how social workers think has therefore become an important and pressing task (Platt and Turney, 2014).

Research exploring social worker decision-making has primarily related to concerns about parental abuse, with almost nothing written about cases where a child in the family is the source of risk. However, sibling abuse is arguably the most prevalent form of family violence (Meyers, 2014), with sibling sexual abuse being up to three times more common than sexual abuse by a parent (Krienert and Walsh, 2011; Stroebel *et al.*, 2013). In such circumstances maintaining existing living arrangements may compromise the welfare of the victim child, while removing the perpetrator may not be in that child's best interests. Sibling sexual abuse raises an unusual problem for social workers in potentially having to choose between the welfare needs of two children. How social workers think and make decisions in these cases is therefore an important area for inquiry and represents a significant gap in the literature.

Children's sexuality has been the subject of concern and regulation since at least the sixteenth century (Naphy, 2002), and while society has vacillated between regarding adolescents as children or as adults (Scott and Steinberg, 2008), it is primarily sexual innocence which has demarcated the boundary between social constructions of childhood and adulthood (e.g. Angelides, 2004). Any sign of children's sexual subjectivity arouses concern (Egan and Hawkes, 2009), and in the context of these sensibilities a definitive understanding of what constitutes normal child sexual behaviour is lacking, research being largely confined to adult observations or retrospective reports (Hackett, 2004).

The incest taboo renders understanding sexual behaviour between siblings yet more problematic (Tidefors *et al.*, 2010). Whether sibling sexual behaviour constitutes abuse or is better regarded as normal and harmless remains a vexed issue, with no universal agreement over how to differentiate

harmless from harmful sibling sexual behaviour (Caffaro, 2014). Calder (1999: 2) defines child-on-child sexual abuse as children engaging in:

any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a sexual exploitation.

Typical indicators include large age-gaps and use of force or other coercion (e.g. Araj, 2004), but evidence has challenged the absence of these indicators as being sufficient to allay concerns about sexual behaviour between sibling children (Cyr *et al.*, 2002; Krienert and Walsh, 2011). In these instances an examination of the sibling relationship dynamics may be necessary to determine whether the behaviour is abusive (Allardyce and Yates, 2013).

Until the 1970s sibling sexual abuse was regarded as generally harmless (Adler and Schutz, 1995), and while evidence from clinical populations has since indicated the potential for consequences at least as damaging as abuse by a parent (Rudd and Herzberger, 1999; Cyr *et al.*, 2002), results from non-clinical populations have been more equivocal (e.g. Stroebel *et al.*, 2013). How social workers make sense of sibling sexual behaviour and its impact are of particular interest in light of their role in decision-making.

This paper adds to the knowledge base by presenting a model of social worker decision-making in cases involving sibling sexual behaviour. It is developed from doctoral research, which aimed to explore the thinking processes of social workers in their decision-making regarding separation, contact and reunification of siblings following sibling sexual behaviour becoming known. Such decision-making is likely to draw upon complex discourses of childhood, childhood sexuality and gender; however the scope of this paper allows only limited allusions to this material. A more detailed treatment of particular findings will be the subject of subsequent papers. The model may have resonance for other professional groups, such as specialist nurses and other allied health professionals.

## Method

Given its exploratory nature, the study followed a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Participants were local authority social workers at main or senior grade who had had case management responsibility for cases involving sexual behaviour between siblings, defined as any sexual behaviour taking place between full or half siblings under the age of sixteen.

Participants were recruited through several means, including e-mail adverts distributed within participating local authorities and direct approach by specialist agencies with whom the author maintained professional contact.

Twenty-six in-depth interviews totalling forty-five hours were conducted and recorded, which involved talking retrospectively through a case from start to finish, and tracing the decision-making throughout the process (Benbenishty, 1992). Some participants discussed more than one case, and others their involvement at different stages of the same case.

Retrospective interviews as a way to explore social workers' thinking processes in their decision-making have been used by previous researchers (e.g. McLaughlin *et al.*, 2010). One of the limitations is that interpretations may not be the same after the fact as at the time (Schutz, 1963), and memories may be false (Gambrell, 2008). Participants were therefore asked to prepare for interviews by reading through case files and preparing a chronology of events to assist their recall of key debates and dilemmas. Nine participants consulted case files throughout the interviews. Prior rehearsal might facilitate a defended simplifying of the decision-making (Crandall *et al.*, 2006). I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, an examination of which suggested that a peer relationship (Platt, 1981) resulting from my social work background mostly facilitated the interviews to be approached in a spirit of learning rather than being defensive.

Transcribed interviews were analysed throughout and beyond data generation, and were coded using NVivo 10 software, initially line-by-line and segment-by-segment, with later focused codes synthesising and explaining larger segments of data. Constant comparisons (Charmaz, 2006) were

made across and between interviews of codes, incidents, decisions, and case and participant characteristics in order to develop the dimensions of emerging categories. Memos were written to develop theoretical insights, and a series of mapping and clustering exercises (Charmaz, 2006) were undertaken to organise the codes into core categories and to develop a theoretical model. Analysis was suspended once theoretical sufficiency was achieved and no new insights emerged.

Approval for the study was given by the Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Sciences. Written and verbal information was provided to participants, with written consent granted prior to interview. Pseudonyms were used throughout and it was agreed that reporting of the study would not include any identifiable information about participating local authorities, participants, or the families discussed. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Due to the challenges of recruitment, theoretical sampling proved impossible and a final convenience sample of 21 social workers from six local authorities in Scotland was obtained. Their demographic characteristics are broadly in keeping with social workers across the Scottish workforce (The Scottish Government, 2010). The participants had been qualified from one to 27 years, with a mode of nine years. All but one had had involvement with the cases they discussed within five years prior to interview, the majority within two years, and nine maintained some ongoing connection. They discussed a total of 21 families, including 54 children involved in sibling sexual behaviour, 21 of whom being regarded by the participants as perpetrators of the behaviour. There were three examples of sibling sexual behaviour being regarded as mutually initiated. The ages of the children ranged from one to 15 years, with a variety of age differences and types of sexual behaviour involved.

## Findings and Discussion

### Introduction

One of the themes which occurred throughout the interviews was the uncertainty which bedevilled these cases, such as what happened between the siblings, how to interpret the behaviour, and the risks of future behaviour occurring. This uncertainty had particular implications for decision-making, with concerns about “victimising the accused” (Annette), and discomfort about choosing one child’s needs over another’s:

What was good for one young person was maybe not good for the other, and then...how do you work that out, while balancing risk, and need, and the fact that you actually don’t know what’s gone on in the first place. I mean it was just a mess. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

These concerns were not expressed when an adult was the alleged perpetrator, participants then being unhesitating over the need to remove them from the home. Despite this uncertainty and discomfort, social workers have to make decisions anyway. The decision-making model is to be understood within the context of uncertainty.

There was some evidence of social workers with more experience of working with cases of children’s harmful sexual behaviour, particularly those from a Youth Justice background, making assessment-based decisions. The study does not provide evidence that assessment-based decisions are any better than those made intuitively, and it has been demonstrated that intuition may sometimes be more effective than analytical reasoning in complex and uncertain situations (van de Luitgaarden, 2009). However, the decision-making model should fit the task (Hackett and Taylor, 2014) and logical forms of reasoning are sometimes essential to counteract the biases of intuition (Evans and Over, 2010). Most participants reported making largely intuitive decisions influenced strongly by their relationships with children and parents.

In particular, decisions were underpinned by a cognitive orientation, a practice mind-set, 'siblings as better together', which comprised three underlying perspectives: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective (see figure 1). These perspectives shaped the social workers' perceptions and interpretations of evidence, and there were mechanisms that supported the maintenance of these perspectives in the face of potentially contradictory evidence. 'Siblings as better together' is not a set of beliefs and values, but a way of thinking about these cases, which allows decisions to be made even in the face of uncertainty and which tends to support decisions to keep siblings together.

[Figure 1 about here]

The paper will discuss these perspectives in turn and their implications for decision-making.

### Children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others

From the social workers' perspective, children may engage in sexual behaviours but are expected to be vulnerable and intend no sexual harm to others. They may intend physical harm, and there were several examples of children described as bullies and their behaviour as bullying or physically abusive; however there was strong resistance to labelling or even thinking about children as sexual abusers and their behaviour as sexually abusive. While the social workers' perspective of childhood is broader than one of sexual innocence (Angelides, 2004), sexual abuse remains associated with adult sexuality, and sexual abusers with an image of adult males who seek to exploit children for their own gratification. While sibling sexual behaviour might be expected to challenge the social workers' perspective of children, a number of mechanisms operated to maintain it, militating against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate siblings from their families and from each other.



In some instances the social workers found it so hard to believe that a child might engage in sexual behaviour which could be construed as abusive that they doubted whether the behaviour had taken place. For example, James described a situation where a boy was receiving specialist help for concerns about his sexual behaviour, but when his mother reported witnessing further behaviour, sufficient doubt was cast over her account that contact between the siblings was allowed to continue:

She says that she's sure that that happened. She's sure that that's what she seen and...then said to [residential unit] that she wasn't 100%...It was from that basis that...social work...made the decision, was to say...Are you sure that this happened? Yeah, pretty sure. But not, not fully sure. And...then agreed for the contacts to continue. (James, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 1 year-old sister)

Where the occurrence of the behaviour was not doubted the participants resisted labelling the behaviour as abuse. For the most part the social workers made sense of the behaviour from the perpetrator's rather than the victim's perspective, using terms such as 'inappropriate' or 'experimental' to describe the behaviour, which risked understating its seriousness and impact on the victim. The characteristics of the behaviour did not determine how the behaviour was labelled; rather it was the perceived characteristics of the perpetrator child and the social worker's relationship with the child that were more influential. The participants were more reluctant to label the behaviour as abuse where the child was younger, expressed remorse for the behaviour, and where they had a close relationship with the child. Social workers allocated only to the victim were more likely to label the behaviour as abuse.

For example, Liz discussed a 14 year-old girl who engaged in sexual behaviours with several of her younger siblings. Liz vacillated between describing the behaviour as abuse and as experimentation

throughout the interview, trying hard to hold on to an interpretation of the behaviour as experimentation:

I always kind of felt that it was more experimentation than sexual abuse as such, I don't feel like she sought them out and groomed them or anything like that...[But] maybe it wasn't a one-off, we don't know. But, I think just that her boundaries were so skewed as well, and she was outwardly sexual all the time,...but then, I know it's sexual abuse but it did still seem more, I don't, I think in her wee, in her head, I'm not sure whether she'd got any satisfaction out of it as such. (Liz)

The social workers' interpretations of the child's intentions influenced their sense-making of the behaviour. Liz starts by regarding the behaviour as experimentation, differentiating it from sexual abuse from the perpetrator's perspective on the basis that it appeared to be spontaneous and to be a single rather than repeated incident, drawing attention to the girl's victim experiences and her resultant skewed sexual boundaries as explanations for the behaviour, all of which mitigated any sense of 'adult' sexuality. Liz acknowledges that the behaviour constituted sexual abuse but immediately retracts this on the basis that she did not think that the girl was seeking sexual gratification 'in her wee head'. For Liz this girl was not a sexual abuser, and while on the one hand Liz knows that this is sexual abuse, she is immediately doubtful because she is discussing a child.

Liz discussed a sister, but despite gender being frequently central to the experience of sexual abuse (Angelides, 2008), explicit considerations of the gender of the sibling children are striking by their absence from the participants' accounts. The participants discussed only three sisters as perpetrators, reflecting the extant research whereby brothers are more commonly identified as the perpetrators of sibling sexual abuse (e.g. Griffiee *et al.*, 2014). This made it difficult to draw comparisons across the cases in terms of whether decision-making was different according to the

gender of the perpetrator. Whereas all three girls were offered support services related to their perceived vulnerability rather than related to their harmful sexual behaviour, all but two of the brother-perpetrators were offered a service to address their harmful sexual behaviour. These gendered responses have been noted previously (Robinson, 2005; Angelides, 2008), and it would be surprising if the gender of the siblings did not influence the social workers' decision-making. Further research is needed to tease out these issues.

Age, however, was a salient factor. Participants did not label the behaviours of any of the children under 12 as abuse and were especially reluctant to label younger children as abusers. This is not necessarily to suggest an exact age boundary, but may reflect Scottish child care law (e.g. s.52 of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act (2010). Older children provided less of a challenge to the social workers' perspective of children. Unremorseful older children risked losing the "protective cloak of childhood" altogether (Woodiwiss, 2014: 147):

I'd say he...has an easy-going manner, but very withdrawn, not aloof but just kind of cold...this is a psychopath in the making, because of his...detachment...You know, this was a boy who demonstrated to me that he could be capable of that and more.

Now, I know children have various defences...But he wasn't a child, he was a teenager. (Brian, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

As Angelides (2004) has suggested, this boy's display of 'adult' sexuality, of sexual behaviour towards a young child without remorse, tests the social worker's limits of childhood such that he is no longer classified as a child, therefore reaffirming the social workers' perspective of children.

That aside, while the participants expressed a personal inclination to prioritise the needs of the victim over the perpetrator, they regarded it as their professional responsibility to make a conscious

and self-reflexive effort to respond to the perpetrator as a child with needs, particularly when they had a relationship with the perpetrator. George chose not to meet the victim:

I think it would've clouded my opinion of the young man...but it was a professional opinion, not a personal opinion...If I had seen her...I would've seen a victim, and a daddy would've taken over, not a social worker...I think I'd have made a judgement on the boy, and I think I'd have been harsher on him, because...he's a child but she's a, she is the child. (George, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his seven year-old sister)

The perpetrator is 'a child', but the victim is 'the child'. Perpetrators may be less of a child than victims, but they remained children nonetheless, especially if they expressed remorse. The needs of the victim may be prioritised, but this did not mean that the perpetrator's needs would be neglected altogether.

Indeed, the social workers' conscious effort to regard the perpetrators as children was supported by an inclination to see them as victims themselves. Whereas social workers might accept the possibility of an adult sexually abusing a child because they are a sexual abuser, almost all of the participants expressed the view that a child harming another child through their sexual behaviour required some further explanation. This was not behaviour that they expected from children and must be an "exosomatic response" (Egan and Hawkes, 2009: 393), if not to abuse then to other difficult childhood experiences. Participants looked for reasons, often finding evidence of abuse (sexual or otherwise), or else poor household sexual boundaries, poor social skills and confidence, or a combination of these factors. These explanations reduced a sense of the perpetrator's culpability and intention to harm, and emphasised a sense of their being victims. This is in keeping with some theories of sibling sexual behaviour within the literature. For example, studies consistently report higher levels of sexual and domestic abuse in the backgrounds of boys who have sexually abused

siblings compared with boys who have abused children outside the family (e.g. Latzman *et al.*, 2011). With perpetrators regarded as victims, prioritisation of the needs of the perpetrator and victim remained finely balanced, a position which some of the practice literature on separation decision-making in these cases also endorses (e.g. Caffaro, 2014).

The social workers' perspective of children was challenged by the sibling sexual behaviour becoming known, but maintained by doubting that the behaviour had happened; resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse; seeing it as their professional responsibility to make a self-reflexive effort to continue to see the perpetrator as a vulnerable child, which was supported by looking for reasons to understand the behaviour. Maintaining this perspective militated against any straightforward and unproblematic decisions to separate the siblings and promoted the objective of reunification in those cases where the siblings were separated, therefore contributing to the practice mind-set 'siblings as better together'.

### Sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value

Sibling relationships may entail an array of behaviours and dynamics, but the social workers' perspective precludes the possibility of their being abusive. A sociology of siblinghood is underdeveloped in comparison to that of childhood (Edwards *et al.*, 2006), and there is no archetypal template of sibling relationships as abusive (see Sanders, 2004). This perspective added to the participants' difficulties in making sense of the sibling sexual behaviour and their resistance to labelling the behaviour as abuse. The participants did not report assessing the quality of the sibling relationship as many authors advocate (e.g. Caffaro, 2014); rather it was assumed to be of intrinsic value. Family systems theories, which include a consideration of the power dynamics of the sibling relationship (e.g. Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005), are largely absent from the participants' accounts. This meant that the sibling sexual behaviour was treated in isolation from the relationship, not as a part of the relationship or in any way representative of the relationship dynamic. As long as the sexual behaviour could be stopped, there was an almost unconditional belief in the benefits of

maintaining the relationship without any need to intervene to ameliorate its quality. The influence of the sibling relationships perspective on the social workers' decision-making appeared stronger where the siblings lived and had grown up together, and where the social worker was acquainted with the children as siblings. Three principal processes demonstrated this perspective.

There were no examples of decisions to separate siblings on the basis of a single incident, no matter what the sexual behaviour entailed or how it was labelled. Requiring a second incident may be related to the perspectives of the child and of parents. Uncertain about how to make sense of the behaviour on the basis of one occurrence, participants frequently cited repetition as a criterion to differentiate appropriate from inappropriate and experimental from abusive sibling sexual behaviour. Social workers may be reluctant to remove a child from the care of well-intentioned protective parents, wishing to give them a second chance. The perspective of sibling relationships further discourages the behaviour being construed as abuse, and social workers may be reluctant to disrupt a sibling relationship assumed to be valuable on the basis of a single incident.

Only a small minority of the participants voiced a consideration of the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behaviour upon the victim when making decisions about sibling living and contact arrangements, their focus instead being on immediate safety, namely preventing further occurrences of the behaviour. It was a striking feature of the majority of participants' accounts that the victim child lacked any prominence. For example, when discussing decisions about contact following sexual behaviour between 13 and six year-old brothers, Scott acknowledged that the potential emotional impact on the younger brother had not been considered:

There was no evidence at the time of contact being  
damaging...although what had happened was very serious and  
actually probably was quite traumatic for Paul...We didn't stop to  
question these things. That's what I'm thinking just now...I didn't stop

to think whether contact was appropriate or not. I just assumed that it would be important to maintain a bond. (Scott)

Other authors have similarly found a concern with immediate safety to the exclusion of considering a child's wider emotional needs (e.g. Matthews *et al.*, 1991; Horwath, 2011). This may relate to constructions of children as passive victims, as ignorant and disempowered (Gittins, 1998), whose voices do not require to be heard; they merely need to be protected. An alternative explanation is that the social workers' perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value implies that the quality of the sibling relationship is neither a cause, nor suffers as a consequence, of the sibling sexual behaviour. Any victim distress would be seen to result from the incident(s) in isolation, and as long as the behaviour stopped, the sibling relationship and its maintenance by direct face-to-face contact would be of value. The emotional impact of the sexual behaviour would not be relevant to the social workers' decision-making. Where siblings remained living together or in contact, rules were usually introduced to prevent any recurrence of sibling sexual behaviour, such as not allowing the siblings to be left alone together, sleeping in separate bedrooms, and putting locks or alarms on bedroom doors. Very few of the social workers introduced rules about how the siblings should relate to each other, and even fewer undertook any specific work to ameliorate the quality of the sibling relationship. Focusing on immediate safety to the preclusion of a consideration of emotional impact served to maintain the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value.

When social workers decided that the siblings needed to be separated, principally for reasons of safety and only rarely with the additional concern about emotional impact, it was not regarded as a long-term solution:

They agreed that...they are family members and there's only so long that you can go without introducing them back together. (Angela,

discussing a case involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)

It was anticipated that siblings would want to reunite at some point anyway, and on that basis the social workers preferred to arrange this while they remained involved with the family. Echoing Farmer's (2009) findings that reunification occurs too frequently without resolution of the problems that led to the child being accommodated, for some participants there was no particular event or assessment which prompted the decision to reintroduce contact between the siblings; at some indeterminate point it simply felt that they had been separated for long enough:

I can't remember the point that we went, alright,...we'll just have to start it now. And that's the way it felt, I think...There just became a time where we thought, right time's getting on now...I don't think there was any particular incident or something happened or work done...the decision was made because of a lapse of time rather than...any particular change in risk. (Liz, discussing a case involving a 14 year-old girl's sexual behaviours towards several of her younger siblings)

Interpreting a case through the sibling relationships perspective meant that contact and reunification with a sibling would be encouraged regardless of the sibling sexual behaviour. Contrary to some authors' conclusions that social workers underestimate the meaning of sibling relationships (e.g. Hindle, 2007), this current study supports Atwool's (2013) findings that their importance is recognised, and perhaps sometimes over-rated.



## Parents as well-intentioned protective

With immediate safety being the primary consideration, a focus on the victim child was lost and turned instead to the parents, as observed in many serious case reviews (Brandon *et al.*, 2012). Only one of the participants spoke about assessing a parent's ability to protect their children. Instead, in the face of often uncertain and contradictory evidence, the participants reported forming an intuitive judgement of the parent's character based upon whether or not they seemed to be 'on board'. Platt and Turney (2014) argue that when under pressure and faced with considerable complexity, social workers tend to reduce decision-making processes to a limited set of manageable strategies. There is considerable evidence of parental cooperation and engagement being used as a short-cut to dealing with complexity and as an aid to decision-making (e.g. LeBlanc *et al.*, 2012).

Being regarded as 'on board' carried a sense of appearing to have a shared understanding of the problems identified by the social worker and being the kind of parent with whom the social worker felt they could work. If parents were considered 'on board' in their relationship with the social worker it was inferred that they were well-intentioned protective with respect to their children. Being well-intentioned means caring about and wanting the best for the children; being protective means having the intention to try to protect the children from harm. These two dimensions of a parent's character are distinct but overlapping, hence the term 'well-intentioned protective'. A parent being regarded as 'on board' often seemed more influential over the social workers' decisions than their demonstrating an ability to care for and protect their children. Social workers were inclined to support the wishes of well-intentioned protective parents, which in most cases meant siblings remaining together.

Whether parents were regarded as 'on board' depended largely upon the degree to which they engaged with services. In the short-term this meant needing to acknowledge that the behaviour happened, reporting it to the authorities, and being willing to work with a support agency. Parents being angry or upset in response to the sibling sexual behaviour becoming known, indicating

commitment to both children but willing to prioritise the needs of the victim, would enhance the sense of their being well-intentioned protective. For example, when asked what had influenced the previous social worker to decide that two siblings could remain living at home, Mary responded:

The parents. And I think it was the fact of the parents were fully on board...They were the ones that went ahead to social work. They didn't have to disclose that, who would know?...They fully wanted support. They recognised that he might be accommodated, but they wanted to try at least attempt to have him at home. (Mary, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and his four year-old sister)

In the longer-term the social workers expected parents to address issues of parenting which may have allowed the sexual behaviour to take place. A commitment to address these issues may be sufficient rather than necessarily having to demonstrate that the issues had been fully addressed. If social workers were under pressure, of time and resources or from the parents themselves, their expectations of parents could be lower and siblings more likely to remain or return to be together. Conversely, separated parents might allow social workers to “cover all the bases” (Brian), by ensuring the safety of the victim while each child continued to live with a well-intentioned protective parent.

If parents were seen as unwilling to engage more meaningfully, and broke safety rules in a way that was regarded as volitional, further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour were more likely to result in the removal of the perpetrator child. In a case involving sexual behaviour between 12 and seven year-old brothers, a decision was made to allow them to remain at home on the basis that the mother reported the behaviour and was willing to accept social work support. The mother subsequently failed to engage in way seen as meaningful, and a second incident in the context of the mother failing to supervise the children triggered the older brother's removal:

She still chose to make poor decisions and expose the children to harm...no responsibility, you know, doesn't want to hear or accept, either unwilling or, I'm not...convinced if it was unwilling or unable...to take responsibility, I think it was unwilling. (Fiona)

It was not the second incident itself, nor the mother's failure to protect, which influenced this decision; rather it was a judgement of the mother's character as lacking the willingness to try to protect her children that was key.

By contrast, allowances could be made for parents breaking the rules when further incidents occurred if they continued to be regarded as well-intentioned protective. Emma discussed a second incident of sibling sexual behaviour in a case involving nine year-old boys and their six and five year-old brothers:

That's how we knew that this really had...been premeditated. Yeah, it did worry us. But...I think the fact that he was able to talk about it, and we were able to address it and look at his safety planning...it didn't prompt us into saying, right let's get him right out of there...'cause I think there was a lot of guilt attached to it for him...So...I don't think that, any more so than anything else, was a trigger...it was the reporting part, mum not reporting and then not accordingly shifting bedrooms, in terms of, let's look at this risk that's presented [that made us question whether the children could remain at home]. (Emma)

Despite its being premeditated, the boy's age and remorse for his behaviour meant that it was labelled not as abuse but 'sexualised behaviour', drawing attention to the boy's own experiences of sexual abuse. The repetition of the behaviour did not in itself prompt Emma to consider that the

child might need to be removed from the family; rather it was the lack of timely reporting by the parents which triggered this question being raised. The parents' failure to implement the safety plan raised further doubts about their willingness to try to protect their children. The parents had not demonstrated an ability to protect the children in that this was now a second incident, but it was the parents' willingness to protect, questioned by the lack of reporting, which was salient in the consideration as to whether the children could remain at home. In the event the parents did then re-engage with services and the boys continued to live at home despite several further incidents of sibling sexual behaviour, parental engagement again being key to those decisions:

By that point I was actually past the thinking that we need to accommodate these kids. I was quite past that, because [the parents] were engaging really well by that point. (Emma)

The wishes of well-intentioned protective parents would be supported, which in most cases meant the siblings remaining in contact or living together. In eight out of nine families where the social worker believed sibling sexual behaviour to have taken place, where the parent (7 cases) or foster carer (2 cases) reported the behaviour, seemed willing to accept support, wanted the children to remain living together or having unsupervised contact, and the decision was made to support the parent's or foster carer's wishes, there was a further incident of concerning sexual behaviour between the siblings or another child in the family. A repeat of the sexual behaviour does not mean that the decision was wrong, but the question is raised whether parental reporting and acceptance of support serve as reliable indicators of a parent's ability to protect their children.

The underlying perspective of parents as well-intentioned protective resembles Dingwall *et al.*'s (1983) finding of an assumption that parents are 'honest, competent and caring'. In their discussion of the 'rule of optimism', they argue that this assumption militates against social workers and health professionals interpreting information as indicating possible parental abuse. Even superficial parental cooperation is enough to support the assumption and to make it difficult to perceive

subsequent evidence to the contrary. The findings from this current study support the operation of a rule of optimism, although social workers' expectations of parents were more complex than superficial cooperation.

Dingwall *et al.*'s (1983) rule of optimism and support for its operation have derived from cases involving concerns about abuse by parents, but in the current study it is a child within the family who is regarded as the potential source of risk. The child and sibling relationships perspectives further support decision-making which keeps siblings together. In cases involving sibling sexual behaviour, the practice mind-set 'siblings as better together' could be said to extend Dingwall *et al.*'s (1983) rule of optimism by including not only the parent perspective but also the child and sibling relationships perspectives.

## Conclusions

This study adds to the existing knowledge-base by opening up a new area of research, providing evidence of how social workers think and make decisions in cases where a child is the source of risk in the family. Rather than making assessment-based decisions, it finds that most social workers make decisions intuitively in the context of relationships, and are influenced by a practice mind-set 'siblings as better together', comprising three underlying perspectives: children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value; and parents as well-intentioned protective. These perspectives operate dynamically and in association with each other. Sibling relationships are non-abusive and of intrinsic value only if the siblings are all children. All three perspectives are contingent upon the social worker's relationship with the family. The influence of parental engagement is predicated on the sexual behaviour taking place between sibling children and the child and sibling relationships perspectives being operative. Information is perceived and interpreted in accordance with these perspectives. Various mechanisms support their maintenance in the face of potentially contradictory evidence, encouraging a loss of focus on the victim child and a tendency to make decisions which maintain the sibling relationship. The study

provides useful reflective material for social workers and other health and social care professionals involved in this area of practice.

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