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Child Protection Managers' Views on Frameworks for Assessment of Children in Need

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ABSTRACT



Internationally there has been a movement to reform investigative work in child welfare and protection systems. These reforms have aimed to introduce national frameworks that systematize the way assessments are carried out. Several reports have identified shortcomings in the way that child protection investigations are carried out in Norway. Consequently, there is a need for improvement. However, an attempt to change practice within an organization has little hope of succeeding unless the organization implementing the new practice accepts that a change in practice is needed. The aim of this study was to examine child protection agency managers' views on the advantages and disadvantages related to implementation of an assessment framework in Norway. Electronic survey questionnaires were distributed to the managers of all Norwegian child protection services. The response rate was 68% ($N = 217$). The majority agreed that the use of an assessment framework is helpful in child welfare and protection services investigations in general, and helpful in terms of facilitating child and family participation. This study indicates that some prerequisites would need to be present for successful implementation of an assessment framework: training, supervision and ongoing support, and sufficient resources.

KEYWORDS

Assessment frameworks;
child protection services;
readiness to change

Introduction

Child welfare and protection services (CWPS) in Norway have been criticized on the grounds that child protection investigations are carried out too unsystematically and are not adequately documented (Helsetilsynet, 2017). Several reports have identified shortcomings in the way that these investigations are carried out in Norway (Helsetilsynet, 2012, 2017; Myrvold et al., 2011; Riksrevisjonen, 2012; Vis, Storvold, Skilbred, Christiansen, & Andersen, 2015). The most important of the identified shortcomings are (i) that cases risk being prematurely closed, (ii) failure to investigate cases in a systematic manner, and (iii) that children are often not consulted as part of the investigation. The

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reports also documented significant differences among agencies in terms of personnel qualifications, workload, skills training, and methods used in assessment of cases.

The government has taken this as evidence that there is a need to further develop routines for child protection investigation in Norway and to increase competence in the field of practice. As a consequence, in 2012 the Directorate for Children and Family Affairs was given a mandate to develop recommendations for municipal CWPS agencies regarding routines for case assessment (Prop 106 L, 2012–2013). This study provides knowledge about how the use of assessment frameworks, which structure the workflow in child welfare and protection assessments, are viewed by managers of child welfare and protection agencies. This knowledge might help guide future implementation of programmes and systems within the child welfare sector and may be useful for ensuring practice change by identifying possible disadvantages or advantages to build on.

In Norway there is no national standard for how the assessment of cases reported to child welfare services should be performed. It is not mandatory to use any specific assessment framework in the investigation processes. Therefore, it has been up to the individual municipalities to establish their own routines. Consequently, several different types of assessment frameworks are currently being used. The most commonly used framework was developed and implemented by one person in a private capacity (Kvello, 2015) and was used in 58% of the municipalities (Vis et al., 2015). An evaluation of the contents of this framework was conducted in 2017 (Lauritzen, Vis, Havnen, & Fossum, 2017). The evaluation concluded that the framework was not fully suited for a needs-based assessment of children and their families in a child welfare and protection context. The reason for this was, first, that important topics such as parents' provision of basic care, as well as the child's functioning at school, were omitted from the framework. Second, the framework recommended the use of tests and observational procedures that either had no documentation about reliability or were considered not valid for use in a child protection investigation.

The ways in which the framework had been used were later evaluated as part of a rigorous study that used case file analysis ($N = 1365$) and focus group interviews with social workers (Christiansen et al., 2019). The study concluded that the framework was not used in a systematic manner. It was partially used in 20% of the cases, but not a single case was found in which every part of the framework was used. The reason social workers gave for this was that they did not find many parts of the content relevant for most types of cases. The government has taken this as evidence that there is a need to further develop routines for child protection investigation in Norway and to increase competence in the field of practice. As a consequence, the Directorate for Children and Family Affairs has initiated the development of a new national assessment framework along with recommendations regarding routines for case assessment in child welfare and protection investigations. Implementation of new routines at the municipal level will surely need to be conducted in cooperation and understanding with agency managers. Managers may play an important role in a CPWS agency, as they probably have an impact on the existing practice and work-related culture, and hence indirectly may have an impact on the decision-making of the social workers. However, little is known about how these managers view the need for assessment frameworks in child protection investigations.

This study provides knowledge about how the use of assessment frameworks, which structure the workflow in child protection assessments, are viewed by managers of child welfare and protection agencies. This knowledge might help guide future implementation

of programmes and systems within the child welfare and protection sector and may be useful for promoting practice change.

Frameworks for assessment of reports to CWPS

Internationally there has been a movement to reform investigative work in child welfare and protection systems. These reforms have aimed to introduce national frameworks that systematize the way assessments are carried out. In the late 1990s a model of assessment called the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families (FACNF) was developed and implemented in England and Wales. This framework serves as a guide for social workers and specifies the kind of information that should be considered in an assessment process. The framework categorizes information related to three main areas. These areas represent different aspects of (i) the child's needs; (ii) parents' capacities and (iii) family and environmental factors (United Kingdom Department of Health, 2000). In Sweden and Denmark, the FACNF system has been translated and adapted to use in the Nordic countries. In Sweden, the system called *Barns Behov i Centrum* (BBIC) (Socialstyrelsen, 2015) was implemented in about 90% of the municipalities from the late 2000s' and onward. In Denmark, the system is called *Integrated Children's System* (ICS) (Socialstyrelsen, 2014) and has been implemented in 73% of the municipalities since 2011 (Deloitte, 2014).

A common objective of these assessment frameworks is to make the investigative process more structured and less susceptible to subjective factors that may lead to bias and misjudgement, in addition to making the process more transparent and predictable. A systematic investigative process means that relevant information is gathered and evaluated. Furthermore, it means that there are clear distinctions between information gathering, evaluation and analysis of material, and the making of a decision. For investigations to be transparent, it must be clear to others what information is emphasized, what evaluations are made and what decisions are reached. Furthermore, there should be a clear and logically coherent argument whereby a decision is substantiated by the analysis (de Kwaadsteniet, Bartelink, Witteman, ten Berge, & van Yperen, 2013).

Léveillé and Chamberlain conducted a meta-evaluation of international experiences regarding the adoption of the FACNF in 2010, in which they studied the implementation experiences and results of the framework (Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010). The results indicated that professionals who used the framework made better assessments of complex situations, had a more holistic and child-centred point of view, and consequently planned better interventions (Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010). The authors also found that the framework increased inter-professional and inter-organizational collaboration, as well as increasing child and family participation in the provision of services. In a Norwegian review study, conducted in 2016, the findings were similar (Vis, Lauritzen, & Fossum, 2016). The review concluded there is evidence to support that when assessment frameworks (BBIC and ICS) are used in the Nordic countries, this leads to more information being gathered, and an increased focus on children's needs. Additionally, children's participation in the investigation phase of a child protection case is increased (Vis et al., 2016). A side effect is that the investigation phase of a child protection case became more extensive and time consuming when assessment frameworks were used.

In a Norwegian PhD dissertation (Samsonsen, 2016), child welfare services in Great Britain, where investigations are managed with the FACNF model, are compared to the

services of Norway, where caseworkers' procedures are based more on individual professional judgement. Samsonsen and Willumsen (2018) interviewed parents who had been the subject of child welfare investigations in both Norway and England. They found that the experiences of parents in the two countries were quite similar. They were concerned with the feelings connected to being investigated by child welfare services, to a greater degree than they were about the use of systems or tools. The authors argue that one consequence of having a structured investigative process like FACNF is that the power relationship between parent and social worker is made conspicuous. In contrast, in Norway, where the investigation is based more on relationship building and judgement, the power dimension is more obscure. The authors argue for a more manifest procedure during the investigative phase in Norway in order to elucidate this power dimension. Structure and room for professional judgement should nonetheless be balanced, they argue, because rigid structure limits the room for professional judgement, while a lack of structure places too much emphasis on the individual's ability to personally evaluate how the investigation should be carried out. The challenge lies in finding a balance between these two extremes (Samsonsen, 2016). From the social workers' perspective also there seems to be a need for balance between structure and room for judgement. In Great Britain, the social workers are satisfied with the system of the assessment framework model, but many wish there was greater room for professional judgement. In Norway, there is plenty of room for professional judgement, and social workers wish they had more structure. Nevertheless, there is scepticism among Norwegian social workers that an overly extensive bureaucracy surrounding the investigative process could emerge (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014).

Perspectives on practice change

A critical issue in services research is the gap between what is known about effective services and what is provided to consumers (Proctor et al., 2009). It is, therefore, important to increase research in an effort to better understand service delivery processes and contextual factors that impact those processes (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). This may lead to improvements and increased efficiency of child protection assessments.

The most efficient way of establishing new work methods and routines in an organization is by implementing frameworks that are well described (Fixsen et al., 2005). Implementation of any framework or procedure to change practice is a complex endeavour. In addition to changing the service providers' behaviour, there is also the matter of restructuring organizational contexts (Fixsen et al., 2005). Strategies to enable organizational changes and workforce development should encompass the active building of service providers' capacity to implement innovations (Metz et al., 2013). The essence of implementation is behaviour change (Fixsen et al., 2005; Greenhalg, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyrikidou, 2004; Maybery & Reupert, 2006; Metz et al., 2013). This implies that the actions of CWPS agency managers and the social workers who are to convert new routines into practice are either the key to success or a key reason for failure. This underlines the importance of systematically working to develop the CWPS workforce.

Having established the idea that the workforce is key to successful implementation of a new practice, it is important to study potential workforce barriers in detail. A key to achieving change lies with the professionals in the workforce (Barry & Jenkins, 2007;

Maybery & Reupert, 2009; Reupert & Maybery, 2008). It is crucial that the workforce recognizes or accepts the premise that a change is needed. If not, an implementation of new routines has little hope of success (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Fixsen et al., 2005; Weiner, 2009). It is therefore important to study workforce attitudes more extensively. To detect workforce barriers related to the implementation of a new CWPS framework for child welfare and protection investigations, existing attitudes must be examined.

Existing knowledge about workforce attitudes regarding the use of assessment frameworks in Norway is limited, and so is the knowledge about other organizational barriers to practice change. We therefore have little knowledge about organizational readiness to change within the child protection services. Experiences and outcomes of the implementation process for assessment frameworks have yet to be studied in a systematic way in Norway, and we still know too little about contextual factors that could promote or hinder the sustainability of the introduction of new or revised routines. As mentioned, Norway has no national standard or common assessment framework for how a child welfare investigation is to be conducted. It has largely been up to each individual municipality in Norway to organize the work as they have found most appropriate. In Norway, there has been a debate about how appropriate it is to use systematic approaches to CWPS investigations in the form of an assessment framework versus relying solely on the individual discretion and judgement of the professional. The advocates for an assessment framework have stated that the lack of a national standard can be problematic. The pro-framework arguments hold that a framework may connect decision-making more strongly to theory and research, and help to avoid unintended differences in thresholds for action caused by differences in individual standards and preferences. It has also been argued that frameworks may increase the predictability of child welfare case processing and ensure that investigations become more comprehensive and transparent. The arguments against frameworks hold that they impose bureaucratic procedures that lead to extensive information gathering which, in many cases, is not necessary. This may lead to prolonged adversities for children and families. This group has also argued that the CWPS workers' professional judgement should be a sufficient basis for decision-making. Professional judgement generally refers to the application of the accumulated knowledge and experience gained through relevant education, training and experiences. By making use of ethical standards, professional judgement is seen to result in making informed decisions about the courses of action that are appropriate in specific circumstances.

The public debate in newspapers, journals and other child protection forums in Norway has appeared to be somewhat polarized and heated. Given the documented advantages of having a framework mentioned in the introduction, we were interested in exploring the attitudes of the managers of these services. We were interested in documenting whether there was a general resistance within the CWPS to adopting such a framework, or whether the services appear ready to change.

Aims of the study

The current study was conducted to explore the perspectives of Norwegian child protection managers about the use of assessment frameworks. We wanted to investigate their views on assessment frameworks in general, and obtain information about whether they regard the frameworks as helpful in terms of gathering information in child protection

cases. We also wanted to assess what disadvantages they associate with the use of such frameworks. An additional aim was to study whether the child protection managers regard the frameworks as facilitating child and family participation. Finally, we wanted to explore the relationship between views on frameworks, perceived disadvantages, and child and family participation with organizational conditions within the services.

Methods

Participants and procedure

To gather data, an electronic survey questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was distributed via an email that contained a link to an online survey. The survey was only open to those who were invited to participate. The questionnaires were distributed to the managers ($N = 317$) of all Norwegian municipal child welfare and protection agencies in 2014. A total of 217 informants responded to the survey; this constitutes a response rate of 68%. Cook, Dickinson, and Eccles (2009) found that average response rates to postal or electronic surveys of healthcare workers was 57.7%. This is an indication that although we are missing data from about one third of the agencies, the response rate in this study was in line with what can be expected. The study was approved by the data protection supervisors at the national competency centre for data protection in research (NSD).

Description of the sample

The majority of the respondents (72%) were managers of a single municipal CWPS agency, 17% were managers of an intermunicipal CWPS agency, 3% were managers of a CWPS city district agency, and 8% of the questionnaires were completed by others. The participants represented agencies from all the administrative CWPS regions in Norway. The majority ($N = 126$, 58.1%) of the agencies used a standardized assessment framework (Kvello-malen), whereas the others used their own frameworks developed locally. A total of 93 (42.9%) of the agencies had fewer than five social workers working on CWPS investigations, 77 agencies (35.5%) had 5–10 social workers, and the rest ($N = 47$, 21.6%) had more than 10 social workers conducting CWPS investigations. In total, 49 (23%) of the agencies received fewer than 30 CWPS referrals a year, and 61 (28.6%) agencies received more than 200 referrals. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Information about characteristics related to the managers who completed the survey, such as age, gender or work experience, was not collected.

Measures

The questionnaire included 35 questions on managers' views about strengths and weaknesses associated with the use of assessment frameworks in CWPS investigations. Each item was scored on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree to some extent, 3 = agree to some extent, and 4 = totally agree. Exploratory factor analysis was used for the purpose of transforming item scores to continuous variables by creating composite scores that combine the score on several items. The analysis showed that the 35 items group into three main factors. These factors reflect the managers' views on (i) the

perceived usefulness of assessment frameworks for information collection, (ii) the perceived usefulness of assessment frameworks for child/family participation, and (iii) disadvantages they associated with the use of assessment frameworks.

Usefulness of assessment frameworks for information collection. This latent variable was measured using 16 items. Examples of these items are: by using assessment frameworks we get access to information we otherwise would not have; using assessment frameworks contributes to keeping the investigation less intrusive for the clients; and using assessment frameworks contributes to better documentation of the investigation process. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.94. This factor was labelled *information collection*.

Use of assessment frameworks to facilitate child and family participation. This latent variable was measured using 10 items. Examples of related questions are: using assessment frameworks contributes to the child being heard in the investigation process; using assessment frameworks contributes to the child having an impact on the choice of interventions; and using assessment frameworks contributes to the relationship with the parents. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89. This factor was labelled *participation*.

Disadvantages related to the use of assessment frameworks. This latent variable was measured using nine items. Examples of relevant questions are: assessment frameworks take too much time to complete; assessment frameworks compromise the case worker's professional judgement; and assessment frameworks demand more competence than most child protection workers possess. The Cronbach's alpha for these items was 0.79. This factor was labelled *disadvantages*.

Organizational conditions within the services. Information was collected about different organizational conditions within the services. Among these were: information about what kind of assessment framework is currently used (a standardized framework or a locally developed framework), whether using a framework is mandatory, whether case workers have received training in the use of the framework, and whether there are routines in the agency for assessment of reports and cases. We also assessed characteristics related to the agency, i.e. agency size, number of reports in the previous year, and whether they had a generalist organization (that is, the same caseworker follows the case from investigation to service provision) or a specialist organization (investigations are done by teams specialized in investigations, and after the investigation is concluded the case is transferred to a different team).

Data analyses

Scale scores for each of the three factors—information, participation, and disadvantages—were calculated by summing the scores for each item and dividing by the number of items for each factor. This allows scores on each of the scales to range between 1 and 4. On the information and participation scales, a score above the midpoint (2.5) indicates the respondent agrees that the use of assessment frameworks is helpful for information collection and for child and family participation. On the disadvantages scale, a score above the midpoint (2.5) indicates the respondent agrees that there are disadvantages to using assessment frameworks.

Group differences were tested by comparing mean scores on the three scales using *t*-tests. Models that determine the most important predictors for participation scores and disadvantages scores were estimated with the use of hierarchical linear regression. In the regression analysis, organizational characteristics were entered at step one and

characteristics regarding their current use of assessment frameworks were entered as step two. Only the variables that were significantly associated with the scaled scores in bivariate analysis were entered into the regression model. Because the information scale was only associated with two other variables, a regression model was not estimated for this scale.

Results

The perceived usefulness of assessment frameworks for information collection

The majority of agency managers ($N = 116$, 58.3%) agreed that the use of an assessment framework is helpful in CWPS investigations. Assessment frameworks were considered more useful for information collection if use of the framework was mandatory within the agency and if training in the use of the framework was provided (Table 1). Information collection scores were not related to the type of assessment framework used by the agency, agency size, case workload, or whether the CWPS agency organization was characterized by a generalist or a specialist model.

Use of assessment frameworks to facilitate child and family participation

The majority of CWPS agency managers ($N = 132$, 66.0%) considered assessment frameworks to be helpful. In a bivariate analysis (Table 1), the assessment frameworks were

Table 1. Associations between scaled scores, municipality characteristics and framework characteristics ($N = 217$).

Variable	Information collection M (SD)	t	Participation M (SD)	t	Disadvantages M (SD)	t
Type of framework		0.15		1.78		-3.23**
Local	3.21 (0.50)		3.05 (0.58)		1.98 (0.47)	
Standardized	3.20 (0.47)		2.90 (0.52)		2.23 (0.47)	
Framework use mandatory		1.95*		3.80***		-3.42**
Yes	3.27 (0.47)		3.10 (0.52)		2.00 (0.44)	
No	3.10 (0.52)		2.73 (0.56)		2.28 (0.46)	
Agency size		-1.37		-2.18*		2.15*
<10	3.21 (0.49)		2.97 (0.56)		2.12 (0.47)	
≥10	3.33 (0.47)		3.17 (0.47)		1.95 (0.44)	
Number of cases		-1.72		-0.91		2.87***
<100	3.18 (0.47)		2.97 (0.51)		2.17 (0.47)	
≥100	3.31 (0.50)		3.04 (0.60)		1.98 (0.44)	
Organization		-1.89		-0.64		2.59**
Generalist	3.15 (0.45)		2.99 (0.49)		2.16 (0.46)	
Specialist	3.31 (0.52)		3.04 (0.62)		1.98 (0.45)	
Routines for assessment of reports		0.86		2.40*		-1.57
Yes	3.26 (0.51)		3.07 (0.59)		2.05 (0.47)	
No	3.19 (0.44)		2.87 (0.42)		2.16 (0.47)	
Routines for assessment of cases		0.50		2.32*		-1.58
Yes	3.25 (0.49)		3.04 (0.54)		2.07 (0.47)	
No	3.18 (0.45)		2.72 (0.60)		2.27 (0.46)	
Training in assessment framework		2.85**		4.18***		-3.16**
Yes	3.28 (0.47)		3.10 (0.52)		2.02 (0.45)	
No	2.97 (0.54)		2.61 (0.60)		2.34 (0.43)	

Table 2. Analysis of predictors for Participation ($N = 217$).

Variables	Participation		
	R^2 change	b	t
<i>Step 1: Municipality characteristics</i>			
Agency size (0 = low, 1 = high)	0.01	-0.06	0.75
<i>Step 2: Framework</i>			
Procedures for reports	0.12***	-0.12	-1.34
Procedures for assessment		-0.17	-1.10
Use is mandatory (0 = yes, 1 = no)		-0.20	-1.66
Training (0 = yes, 1 = no)		-0.30	-2.10*
R^2	0.12***		

Note: Coefficients are unstandardized.

considered more useful for participation if the CWPS agency had established routines for how assessment of reports and cases should be conducted. In a multivariable analysis, the most important predictor for participation was whether or not the agency had routines for how the frameworks should be used, and not the size of the agency.

Disadvantages related to the use of assessment frameworks

The majority ($N = 148$, 80.3%) of the participants did not think the use of assessment frameworks was especially problematic. In a bivariate analysis (Table 1), higher scores on disadvantages were associated with many of the agency characteristics. In the multivariable analysis, disadvantage scores were best predicted by whether the use of the assessment framework is mandatory or not.

The R^2 values for the models in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that the variables we studied predicted only 12% and 18% of the variation in data. This means that there may be other variables, not included in this study, that could help explain agency managers' views about the use of assessment frameworks.

Discussion

Due to widespread media attention, it can be assumed that social workers and CWPS agency managers are well aware of the criticism of the current practice in child protection investigations that was documented by inspections from the Norwegian Board of Health

Table 3. Analysis of predictors for disadvantages ($N = 217$).

Variables	Disadvantages		
	R^2 change	b	t
<i>Step 1: Municipality characteristics</i>			
Agency size (0 = low, 1 = high)	0.07*	0.01	0.01
Caseload (0 = low, 1 = high)		-0.21	-2.11*
Organization (0 = generalist, 1 = specialist)		-0.09	-0.65
<i>Step 2: Framework</i>			
Local framework (0 = yes, 1 = no)	0.11**	0.13	1.61
Use is mandatory (0 = yes, 1 = no)		0.09	0.63
Training (0 = yes, 1 = no)		0.35	2.20*
R^2	0.18**		

Note: Coefficients are unstandardized.

Supervision (Helsetilsynet, 2017). This may indicate that the field of practice is likely to accept the premise that a change in practice is needed. This is a prerequisite for successful implementation of new routines (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Fixsen et al., 2005; Weiner, 2009). We therefore set out to examine whether the services perceived assessment frameworks that guide information collection in CWPS investigations as useful tools for decision-making. The majority of the CWPS managers responded positively towards using a standardized assessment framework in their organization. The majority of the managers also considered assessment frameworks to help facilitate child and family participation. Overall, the view that standardized assessment frameworks are disadvantageous for workflow or inhibit the ability to use professional discretion in decision-making was not widely supported. This may indicate that many of the larger Norwegian CWPS agencies with high caseloads would welcome a national implementation strategy to create a common framework for the assessment of child protection cases. It should, however, also be taken into consideration that resistance towards implementing a mandatory system should be expected from agencies that view this as unhelpful. Our data indicate that this perception is more prevalent among the smaller agencies. The positive perception among agency managers regarding assessment frameworks' usefulness in terms of information collection indicates that attitudes at the manager level would not necessarily be a significant barrier to the implementation of a new assessment framework.

In theory, an additional prerequisite for successful introduction of an assessment framework is that the framework in question must be implemented appropriately. This was supported by our findings that agencies that have received training in the use of an assessment framework were more positive towards its usefulness and recognized fewer disadvantages with having a framework in place. Thus, to successfully implement a standardized national assessment framework, the workforce would have to be trained sufficiently in the new procedures for information gathering. Another important prerequisite would be to provide ongoing supervision related to how the assessment framework should be used. Additionally, there should be support systems available in terms of adapting the framework to the services nationally (Barry & Jenkins, 2007; Maybery & Reupert, 2009; Reupert & Maybery, 2008). Keeping in mind the existing research, which found that the investigation phase of a child protection case became more extensive and time consuming using assessment frameworks (Lauritzen et al., 2017), another important prerequisite for successful implementation is the provision of sufficient resources, such as personnel resources.

The majority of the CWPS that participated in our study found assessment frameworks useful to facilitate child and family participation in child protection investigations. This may indicate that implementing an assessment framework would contribute to increased user participation in Norwegian child welfare and protection work. The widespread criticism that children participate too rarely in CWPS services decision-making in general (Helsetilsynet, 2012; Vis, 2014), and the increased focus on the need for child participation in CWPS investigations, supports the argument that better routines for child participation are needed. We believe that the negative outcomes of previous government audits that pointed to shortcomings in CWPS investigations (Helsetilsynet, 2012, 2017; Myrvold et al., 2011; Riksrevisjonen, 2012; Vis et al., 2015) may explain why managers are generally positive towards implementing a national standard for assessment. Previous studies have suggested that assessment shortcomings such as cases being prematurely closed, cases being investigated unsystematically, and children rarely being consulted can be avoided

by applying a framework for assessment (Vis, Lauritzen, & Fossum, 2019). Implementing a national assessment framework may reduce differences among agencies in future, in terms of personnel qualifications, workload, skills training, and methods used in the assessment of cases.

As documented in previous evaluations of implementation of the FAFNC internationally (Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010) and in the Nordic countries (Vis et al., 2016), the introduction of a structured framework for assessment of child protections referrals has the effect of increasing child participation. This is supported by the views of Norwegian CWPS managers in this study. We were able to elaborate on these previous findings by identifying some organizational factors that affect the relationship between FAFNC and user participation. The most important factor that may determine whether the use of assessment frameworks improves user participation seems to be the level of training that is provided. This finding supports the argument that the introduction of routines and structures without proper considerations regarding implementation cannot be recommended.

Few participants reported that assessment frameworks are disadvantageous. It was mainly the smaller services with few employees who considered a standardized approach to investigations to be a disadvantage. This may imply that larger services have a greater need to streamline investigation processes, as they have a larger case load and possibly higher turnover rates in the workforce. It is therefore important to consider the organizational context before implementing new frameworks. Small municipalities may have different needs than larger ones.

For those who did report disadvantages to implementing an assessment framework, their concerns were not related to the framework per se but to the possibility of making local adaptations to such frameworks. The results indicate that the incorporation of an assessment framework in child protection services should allow for some local adaptation. The results of this study indicate that including options for some local adaptation may decrease resistance towards the implementation of new procedures or systems. Additionally, adaptation to different cases should be possible; if not, the framework may more easily be perceived as disadvantageous and constraining for workflow.

Some limitations to this study are worth mentioning. First, respondents were agency managers. It is possible that caseworkers have different views about the use of systems for structuring the workflow than the managers have. Therefore, it is possible that some barriers towards implementation of a common assessment framework exist among social workers, such as those discussed by Samsonsen and Willumsen (2014), that were not measured in this study.

Because data were collected anonymously, we were not able to conduct an attrition analysis. Thus, we do not know whether data were biased with respect to agency size and geographical location. Furthermore, the explanatory power of the regression models was relatively low. This indicates that there are some important predictors for agency managers' views that were not included in this study. It is likely that managers' experience, education and professional preferences are also important.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the Norwegian child welfare and protection services are aware of the lack of a national standard to assess cases, and that a change of practice might be

welcome within the services. The majority of agency managers think the use of an assessment framework is helpful in CWPS investigations. The majority of the CWPS that participated in our study found assessment frameworks useful to facilitate child and family participation in child protection investigations. The results indicate that the introduction of a common assessment framework in Norway should take into consideration that agencies in large cities may have a greater need for structuring workflow through routines and standards than do smaller rural agencies that investigate relatively few cases. Different needs among CWPS agencies should therefore be considered as part of future planning and implementation to avoid discontent. This study demonstrates that the general view on having common guidelines and frameworks structuring child protection decisions and routines is rather positive. CPWS agencies agree that there are advantages related to assessment frameworks, and that they may help structure existing practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

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