Exploring Child Protection in the Community

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how social workers based in family service centres (FSCs) perceive and conduct child protection work. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with social workers, this study shows how the knowledge and practices of FSC-based social workers are partial rather than absolute, and are construed largely in relation to the government’s Child Protection Service (CPS) at any point in time. This alludes to the integrated direction the child protection system in Singapore is heading towards, one where there are shared roles and responsibilities between various community stakeholders. This paper recommends that practitioners should practice reflexivity by enhancing their awareness of how the structure of the child protection system shapes the subjective perceptions and practices of different professionals within the system. Recognizing this will create a greater collaborative context in child protection work between the various child protection agencies.

Introduction

The Community in Child Protection Work

Existing literature on child protection has increasingly emphasized the importance of involving the community (Barter, 2001; Maniji, Maiter
& Palmer, 2005; Mondy & Mondy, 2004; Schene, 1998; Thompson, 1995; Waldfogel, 1998). One key reason lies with the fact that the community is a repository of diverse forms of social support – resources of value to the individual – which can be tapped on to deal with the multi-faceted issues associated with child protection cases (Maniji, Maiter & Palmer, 2005; Thompson, 1995). Barter (2001) proposes a community building conceptual framework for child protection, where he calls for collaboration amongst the various stakeholders in the community by “linking and identifying with each other in the political dimension”. Collaboration is needed in order to create second-order change, which Barter (2001) defines as “innovation through a shift from the traditional top-down bureaucratic paradigm to a client/community paradigm”.

In light of calls for reform of the child welfare system in Australia, Mondy & Mondy (2004) advocate a new vision for child protection, with a “whole of community” approach involving “courageous and inspired communities which protect children from abuse and neglect”. This requires the community to be directly engaged with the issues of child protection, since child protection has to be viewed as the joint responsibility of individuals, families, communities, and governments (Mondy, & Mondy, 2004).

The Local Context

In Singapore, child abuse and protection work is embedded in a multi-systemic setting stemming from an ecological perspective. The CPS of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) is the lead agency in child protection, offering both care and protection to children suspected of abuse, and helping their families address multi-faceted
problems through collaborative partnerships with other government and non-government agencies (Goh, 2011).

To tackle child welfare issues, MSF has initiated an Inter-Agency Network, as well as an Inter-Ministry Working Group on the Management of Child Abuse (Goh, 2011, p. 19). These initiatives are significant in the field of child protection as they delineate the roles and responsibilities of community stakeholders towards the protection of children. In order to ensure that the other agencies involved in child protection work are firmly aware of their respective roles and duties, a manual pertaining to the management of child abuse and the intervention framework for all partners – childcare centres, schools, the police, and voluntary welfare organisations – has been formulated (Goh, 2011). These initiatives highlight the multifaceted nature of child protection work, where collaboration between CPS and various community-based agencies is emphasized.

In recent years, there appears to be a shift towards more proactive and preventive efforts at the community level to protect the welfare of children. There has been an increased recognition for the need to do more for abused children, especially due to the rising number of reported child abuse cases (Tai, 2011). In 2013, MSF collaborated with two social service agencies to set up Child Protection Specialist Centres (CPSC) for the protection of abused children, as a means of assisting CPS in managing moderate-risk cases and assisting community-based agencies in managing low- and moderate-risk cases (Tai, 2011; Tan, 2014).

In Singapore, social workers are typically based in FSCs, which are examples of community-based agencies that are allocated a defined geographical locality to work within, and are tasked with integrating
themselves into the community. They are also expected to be mobilisers of services that relate to the social well-being of families in the communities they operate in (Briscoe, 2005). The main objectives of FSCs are to help community residents develop interconnections, network with one another, and offer one another support and friendship (Briscoe, 2005). Therefore, social workers in FSCs are strategically positioned to be the leading change agents who facilitate collaboration with other community stakeholders to form an integrated network of community support for child protection.

**Research Aims and Definitions**

In line with MSF’s vision to promote greater community involvement and responsibility towards child protection, this research aims to contribute to this vision by eliciting the views of FSC-based social workers on the role of the community in Singapore’s child protection system.

According to the United Nations General Assembly, child protection is the prevention of and response to all forms of violence and abuse towards, and exploitation of, children. It is a right to which all children have access to, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Gregson, 2014, p. 74). In Singapore, child abuse constitutes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional/psychological abuse (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2002). Belsky (1980), in his seminal paper on the ecological model of child abuse, uses a generic term ‘child maltreatment’ to refer to the different types of abuse as well as neglect. As such, this research adopts the term ‘child abuse’ in a generic sense to encompass the various types of child abuse and neglect, while the term ‘child protection’ refers to the cases of child abuse that professionals
deal with. A child protection system is defined as “certain structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to abuse, violence, neglect and exploitation of children” (Gregson, 2014, p. 73).

Methods

This research is a qualitative exploratory study that aims to uncover deeper insights into how social workers based in FSCs perceive and work with child protection cases. This paper aims to answer two main questions. First, what are social workers’ perceptions of child protection in the community? Second, how do social workers intervene in these cases?

Research Design

Qualitative research is an attempt to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people attribute to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An in-depth semi-structured qualitative interview has been used with participants in order to elicit and capture varied and detailed responses. As the aim of this study is to explore social workers’ opinions and experiences with child protection cases in the community, a qualitative design incorporating semi-structured interviews is appropriate.

Recruitment of Participants

The sampling method used in this research is purposive sampling, which aims to select respondents who are able to provide the needed information for the research. Purposive sampling allows us to interview willing participants who are relevant to our research topic (Ezzy, 2002).
Personal contacts of social workers based in FSCs have been tapped for this research. In addition, emails have been sent to several FSCs to invite them to participate in the research. In this paper, the term ‘social worker’ is used to refer to the participants of this research. These participants are social service practitioners working in an FSC, who have had at least three years of working experience with children and families. A total of eight participants from seven different FSCs across Singapore have been recruited.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews have been audio-recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim in English. An inductive or data-driven approach to thematic analysis is adopted in this research where the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83; Boyatzis, 1998, p. 45). Themes are patterns found in the information that at the minimum describe and organize the possible observations and at the maximum interpret aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). Transcribed data from the eight interviews are read multiple times and coded. Related codes are then merged into sub-themes and themes. A total of four themes emerge from this process.

**Limitations and Strengths of Study**

Similar to most qualitative studies, the sampling strategies of this research do not ensure representation as the sample size is small, and findings are not generalizable. Nevertheless, the findings relate to the sample studied and provide insights into the experiences of FSC-based social workers in child protection work, and therefore meet the exploratory aim of the research.
Findings

The aim of this research is to explore social workers’ perceptions and interventions when handling child protection cases. This section reports the themes and sub-themes which have emerged from the interview data.

Increased Involvement of Community in Child Protection System

Perceived division of child protection cases between CPS and FSCs. Social workers in FSCs see themselves as handling child protection cases of low and middle risk; high-risk cases are perceived to fall under the jurisdiction of CPS.

“If it’s low risk, then it can be managed by FSC. But for medium risk, it needs collaboration with other agencies while case managing a child abuse case. If it’s a high risk, then I think that it should be referred to the ministry.” (Participant A)

“If it is really high risk, then we will let CPS take over from there. But if it is low or medium risk then we will want to contact the school to find out what their observation of the child is and what is happening to the child recently and if there are any changes in behaviour and school attendance etc.” (Participant G)

One common reason for such a perceived divide is that high-risk cases (cases where abuse has occurred) tend to be detected by schools or hospitals, and reported directly to CPS.

“We seldom receive cases of actual abuse. Because if let’s say a child is really being or is already abused because of some injury,
so I guess the school will be the first person who come to know
them. If let’s say they attend the school regularly, so the school may
report. Or if let’s say the parent brings the child to the hospital for
the medical attention due to some form of like the injury, so maybe
the hospital they come to know about it. [...] So this explains why
we don’t receive so many of the actual child abuse cases directly.”
(Participant C)

When asked by the interviewer if the cases that the FCSs receive
are generally not high-risk ones, the participants respond as follows:

“I would think so. These are cases where the abuse has most likely
not yet occurred, or if it has occurred, the immediate threat to
the child’s safety has been mitigated by CPS and our role is more
towards preventing it from re-occurring.” (Participant C)

“Actually usually if it’s a true case of child abuse, it will go to
Child Protection [Service] already. The cases that we deal with
here, that have child protection concerns, are usually those that
come in for other issues. So maybe they come in for shelter, they
come in looking for house, then we realize that they have been
living on the beach with their three year old kid. This is a concern
for us. Then we will raise it up to Child Protection [Service]. If it is
usually from hospitals and schools, they will refer directly to child
protection. Our clients usually come in for other purposes, and
then along the way we realise that something is not right, then we
probe further.” (Participant E)

Shift towards community. Further credence to the claim of such
a perceived divide lies in the recent trend towards a greater involvement of the community in child protection cases. Interviewees note that in recent years, it has become much harder to make a case referral to CPS. Despite their risk assessments of cases warranting the attention of CPS, they find that the latter has become more circumscribed in the intake of referral cases, often preferring to leave it to the FSC social workers to handle the cases first.

"FSCs have been raising concerns and they would want MSF to step in but then MSF now is more community-oriented actually. They don’t step in so heavy-handedly now. Actually, there is a huge change. Really! Sometimes you are like how come when we are like concerned but they are not stepping in. [...] Of course if it is really serious they will come in straight away. But in a situation where there is moderate to low risk, I think they want to see how the community can support the family. I do see them moving in that direction as well. You know, where they are looking at the community-based agencies actually working alongside with the families, rather than them being so heavy-handed. And the State only has so much resource and can handle so many cases."

( Participant F)

This shift invariably causes feelings of exasperation for some social workers, who are often required to adopt extraordinary strategies for these cases.

"This is a case we asked MSF to take. They don’t take, ok, we already warned them of some of the things and we see more things coming. So my style is, in case anything bad happens to the child,
we have to go more often to check up on the child. MSF say they won’t take it up for investigation but we keep them informed about this case. [...] I cannot give it up, as far as I am concerned, it means that MSF have a different benchmark; they don’t see it as high risk enough for them to open up a case and supervise themselves. So if that is the case, then I have to continue, I cannot just close the case. I will still have to keep an eye. What if I close the case and MSF say that we are not taking on this case? My agency referred but they did not take it up for investigation. So it is still my agency’s responsibility. So if something happens to the boy, and we closed the case, whose negligence is it? My agency, I will think so.” (Participant D)

In particular, one resultant strategy mentioned by the social workers is to frame and present a compelling case to CPS.

“I think the challenge would be, if you make a report, they won’t take it straight away. Then you really have to present your case and I think the challenge would be how you view the case and how MSF view the case. But then, from what I know, from what I understand, MSF assessment will really depend on the information that you, the referring agency is presenting to them. So if based on their assessment on the data or the information that you presented to them, if it doesn’t merit that they should come in, then they won’t take the case. But if you are the worker and you feel like they should come in, then how are you going to persuade them through your presentation of the case? I think that’s the challenge.” (Participant A)
“Sometimes it’s the way we present our information to them. If we feel that certain basic needs are not met, we can then question them on why they feel that these are not serious enough for them to take on the case? Or sometimes I will blatantly ask the officers, so what is it exactly you are looking for before you are willing to open the case. Then I will look out specifically for these signs and evidences and of course if there is I will present back to them. If there isn’t then I will just have to hang on till it surfaces. Because if it’s a genuine case of child abuse, in time to come, the evidence will surface.” (Participant E)

**Varying levels of competency in community.** In light of the recent trend to entrust the community with more responsibilities in child protection cases, social workers have also cautioned about its potential drawbacks – not all social workers in FSCs possess the competency to handle child protection cases.

“Previously when I worked in a children’s home, we get very frustrated when the Ministry workers tell us no, no, no, the case will go back to the community, will be referred to a FSC. Because we are telling them that they need to hold on to the cases. [...] If you tell me the case will go back to the community, I don’t know what is the quality of the workers there, it’s a ‘heng suay’ kind of thing [dependent on one’s luck]. And we have really dealt with workers that really [...] you just want to do their jobs for them you know. So, it’s a gap. It’s a very real gap.” (Participant E)

It is further revealed that the varying levels of competency in the community can be attributed to two factors. First, the varying levels can be
due to the lack of adequate expertise/training in child protection in some FSCs.

“I think from my past experience with FSCs or VWOs, when they are asked to work with child protection cases, they are not very willing. Maybe they feel that they do not have the authority or the skills to engage or are fearful of the perpetrator, or they do not want the responsibility. I mean it’s a child and something happens to the child, I do not want to be responsible. But it is also because of the service model of FSC and you can’t expect them to be visiting once a week, they have other things I believe they are committed to also. So the intensity is not there, the knowledge perhaps is not there. What is acceptable or what is not, when do you know to escalate or when do you not, how do you work with a perpetrator or how do you keep a child safe, they may not have that expertise. How do you be child-centric? So I believe that FSCs do struggle with that.” (Participant H)

“FSCs predominantly don’t do child protection work. A lot of FSCs don’t know how to handle child protection work. [...] Because we have worked with many FSCs; a lot of them are really, I don’t know what to say about them. They have no knowledge of child abuse, they have no knowledge of working with a family. They are mostly caught up with disbursing SPMF (School Pocket Money Fund) and financial assistances. So it’s a different ball game. My agency is unique because we are child focused. And a lot of my colleagues here have experiences working with children directly [...]. So that’s why we are more equipped with knowledge and information
and resources that are available to handle this kind of cases. But not all FSCs have the same competency.” (Participant E)

Second, the cases which FSCs work with are often handled on a voluntary basis.

“For child protection cases, you say come here, and they don’t want to turn up at the start [...] So you have to do a lot of home visits,[...] you have to sell them the idea why we should be child-focused, which is a lot of hard work and certain workers feel that it is a bit imposing at the start, [...] and if you don’t see or believe in the cause, you will feel that you are imposing your ideas to the family. That is why I think FSCs are not ready right now if you say that we are to open the floodgates to them. Unless the FSC has already known the family. Usually if the family is not known to the FSC and you refer to the FSC, the FSC finds it hard to engage. Usually they visit once, or they send call-memo for you to come down and if you don’t come down then they close the case and tell CPS that they are not engageable, which is not the model that we want or the help that these families should have. So you see that these families are very high in needs, they are very different, they have their own difficulties so we need to reach out to them instead of they coming, something which I think is still lacking due to the voluntary nature of cases in FSCs.” (Participant B)

Doing Preventive Work

Another theme which surfaces is the social workers’ perception of their role as one that prevents child abuse and neglect, when they work with
child protection cases.

“I would like to think that social workers intervene at a preventive level to prevent abuse from happening so that we can teach parents effective ways of bringing up children without resorting to violence or neglecting the children.” (Participant D)

For the social workers, prevention is fundamentally about being aware of possible threats the child may face and mitigating them in advance.

“I’m not really handling child abuse. Not that I’m not, maybe because it’s just that the cases given to us or those cases coming to us not really child abuse cases. But even if I’m not handling a child abuse case, I’m more into preventive side. So, for example, the School Pocket Money Fund. If you look at it as just an SPMF case then it would just be easy, just disburse and that’s it. But if you look at it in a holistic way, then you would ensure the safety of the children, and then their welfare, their needs. Are their needs met by the parents? Or is there any neglect happening, are there any welfare issues happening in the family?” (Participant A)

In other words, child abuse prevention begins with the awareness of the social worker. This implies having to constantly keep in mind the child’s needs and safety while working with the family.

“Prevention work is also on quite a continuum, you can be doing parenting talks and all, it is also prevention work but I’m not too sure whether people view it as that or is it just a life skill for parents only. So people may do all this, they may already be doing their so-called prevention work but they may not view it as preventing
child abuse. So if it can be put into that view, there may already be a pool of prevention work that is being done. So I don’t know whether if just the acknowledgement of such programs will bring to consciousness that this is really the child abuse prevention strategy.” (Participant H)

Possessing a child-centric perspective does impact the way FSC-based social workers administer their welfare schemes and handle cases. The existing family-focused activities and schemes, such as parenting talks and financial aid, do also have a child-centric orientation to them if the social workers constantly maintain a holistic approach to child welfare in their daily work.

“I think the first part is when you do assessment. When the family comes for school pocket money, it’s critical how you assess the situation. Oh, they are in a financial crisis so they need assistance. You need to apply for pocket money. [...] If your focus is just to administer the school pocket money fund, then your assessment will really focus on the financial side. But if you look at it as a holistic approach then when you do the assessment, even during intake, [...] the direction of the assessment is not just about income and employment issues. But how does this income and employment issue affect the family, affect the children, affect the parents’ capacity to ensure that the needs of the children are being met. And to ensure that the kids are being supervised. Or are they out of the house because they need to work overtime until evening, and then the kids are just left behind? And who are the ones responsible? Ya, so when you do the assessment, you look into these also.” (Participant A)
**Importance of Relationship-Building with Parents**

For social workers, the ability to build good relationships with parents is a must. It is the starting and determining criterion as to whether they are able to handle a child protection case within the community or they have to refer the case to CPS.

“Normally if we work with the family, if they are willing to cooperate and change, then don’t need to refer [to CPS]. I think in Singapore, all the VWOs are like that. Even the parents might be harsh, even in cases where parents use a bunch of canes to hit the children, my staff will work but if parents are not willing to cooperate, in the end I will tell my staff to report to MSF.” (Participant D)

“The most important thing is the client relationship. We have to build up a relationship and once the client finds that we have their welfare at heart, that is where psycho-education will come in to be effective. Sometimes this takes time.” (Participant G)

There are two key reasons why relationship-building with parents is important. First, the manner in which the FSCs operate always means that parents, rather than children, are the primary clients.

“Parents are the main point of contact because they are the main caregivers. They spend most of the time with the children. And they are the ones who provide the care and also to protect the children. So we think that if let’s say this family is really facing a lot of stress, be it financial, parenting, we will really want to speak to them to understand better. So I will think that parents are still...
the important people that we need to speak to.” (Participant C)

“Who is the client? The adult. Parents are the primary client. So sometimes from what I remember, workers say that they can’t address it [the child protection concern] because it will affect their therapeutic relationship with their client.” (Participant H)

This implies a tension between being family-focused and being child-centric in the service model of the FSC.

“Of course there is [a tension], because if you meet a certain threshold you will have to decide if the child should be at home. Is the home the best place to meet the needs of the child? The home is usually the best place. Usually even if there is physical discipline, the child will still want to remain at home. But I think the tension comes where you tried so hard to do change work or even control work to tell parents not to use certain discipline but they still refuse and use it, so I guess that is where the tension points come in.” (Participant B)

Second, one participant mentions that engagement with parents is an important criterion in determining their participation in cases concerning child protection, as they lack the legislative authority of their counterparts in the ministry (who are able to resolve child protection concerns without the cooperation of parents, if necessary):

“Maybe at the community level it is different from MSF because you don’t have the authority. If you are government, people will entertain you more. From what I observe about the workers at their work, they do get a fair bit of rejection or unhappiness or a
lot of people who are antagonistic and say they don’t need help. But the only tool they have is the engagement that they have to be very persistent to try to engage them. So I think that is the main challenge because at MSF at least you have your legal powers, especially when the child is in significant harm and you can say that if you don’t cooperate with me I can exercise section something of the CYP A [Children and Young Person’s Act] and you must give me information, but we don’t do it here [...]. So your access to all these are limited.” (Participant H)

Utilizing Community Resources

Another important point highlighted by the participants is the need for social workers to collaborate with community partners in their work with child protection cases.

“You see, I don’t think you can talk about child protection work in community in isolation because it starts with us doing door-knocking, discovering capacities of families, what can each family offer and discovering resources. And all these resources are put into your database – you know oh this family likes to look after children, this family likes to cook, this family this and that. So it is in discovering the resources in the community as well as constantly thinking how the community can provide solutions that allow us to harness its potential to solve problems within the community.” (Participant F)

When questioned on the relevance of community partners such as the community development councils (CDCs) in their child protection
work, one of the participants responds as follows:

“Very relevant. It is all about the systemic practice especially with child protection work, with the child in the centre and the various systems around him/her. So I mean, financial assistance from CDC and student care and all the subsidies, these are tools for intervention to connect with the family and beef up the structures or the support for the families, so workers have to work closely and have a good knowledge of all these resources provided by our community partners.” (Participant H)

One reason for collaboration is that the community partners are important sources of information. One participant describes the working relationships between different partners in the community such as schools, resident committees, neighbours, and CDCs as follows:

“I think it’s good in the community where there are various touch points for the child and the family where information can be relayed and such things like abuse or neglect can come to light faster. So a lot of touch points will be good where more are trained to identify symptoms of abuse or neglect so these are good things to have [...]. It can be schools, hospitals or even neighbours. For example, the neighbour hears that the child is being left at home alone, so he can raise concern to whomever so that’s where the thing can start.” (Participant G)

In addition, the community has its own strengths and resources to provide practical solutions to child protection concerns. When presented with a scenario in which parents are not cooperative, one of the participants
responds as follows:

“Then we work the other way around, we find another door, the door is grandparents, uncles and aunts. Because sometimes we do have situations where the parent herself is not willing to cooperate, the mother is just not open to us. Who are you? You have no right to tell me what I should do. Then we work with someone else [...] Sometimes if the mother is resistant, it is working through the other members of the family who live in the household or even a neighbour. That means you keep on finding the resources within the community itself. It could be a neighbour who is concerned, who is caring towards the child.” (Participant F)

Discussion

Four themes emerge from this research: the increased involvement of the community; doing preventive work; building relationships with parents; and utilizing community resources. The first theme shows that the general perception that social workers have of their responsibilities towards child protection cases – involvement in mainly low- and middle-risk cases – is formed in relation to the CPS. For social workers, the difference between what constitutes a high-risk case and one which is not, is the actual occurrence of harm or abuse to the child. Barring the fact that most high-risk cases are referred directly to the CPS, the perceived divide of responsibilities towards child protection cases can be attributed to the broader changes in the child protection system. There is a trend towards increasing the community’s responsibility towards child protection cases. As a result, the participants from the FSCs mention that in recent years, it
is much harder to refer to CPS those cases which they deem risky enough to require the attention of CPS. Instead, they now find themselves having to manage these cases.

Implicit in social workers’ perceived divide of responsibilities for child protection cases, and CPS’s ostensibly reduced involvement in child protection cases, is the issue of unclear boundaries between what constitutes middle- and high-risk cases. That is, risk assessments are often highly subjective, with different individuals situated in different organizational positions making different risk assessments. For instance, one of the participants comments that:

“The only thing is that there is no agreed benchmark by all of us here, all of the social workers, of what constitute risk, especially medium risk. We don’t have that scientific/mathematical formula to decide. So it is very subjective.” (Participant D)

As a result of relatively subjective risk assessments, the referral of cases to CPS becomes a debatable issue. This explains why social workers stress that the manner in which a case is presented to CPS is important. The strategic manner in which social workers present cases to CPS can be understood as attempts on their part to negotiate and adapt to the recent shift towards increasing the community’s role in the child protection system. However, social workers also call for prudence in expediting such a move, as not all FSCs are willing and able to handle an increased intake in child protection cases.

The subsequent themes on doing preventive work, building relationships with parents, and tapping on community resources reveal
the manner in which child protection work is practiced in the community. The theme on prevention illustrates how preventive work is not so much about what is being done; rather, it is about the social worker’s awareness of the child’s circumstances. That is, any form of intervention adopted by the social worker can be preventive as long as he/she is conscious of the risks being posed to the child. By perceiving their role as that of abuse prevention, social workers can subsequently adopt strategies to prevent it. As such, social workers in FSCs appear to be doing more upstream, preventive, developmental work while child protection officers deal with the remedial aspects of the work.

Relationship-building with parents forms another key aspect of social workers’ work. This appears to be engendered by the overarching service model of FSCs, which recognizes parents rather than children as the primary clients of a case. It is the means through which social workers can advise and influence parents on alternative ways of disciplining or caring for their children. Inevitably, this often implies having to choose between being family-focused or child-centric. Social workers mention that they often have to find a delicate balance between maintaining good rapport with parents and ensuring that children’s welfare and safety are not compromised by the former.

Relationship-building is imbued with further significance in the context of child protection as a result of social workers’ relative lack of legislative powers and authority, compared to child protection officers. Thus, for social workers, their role as a control agent is reduced; instead, change is effected through engaging and working with parents. Lastly, social workers’ location in the community avail to them a pool of resources
which serve important functions such as the formation of networks among partners to relay critical information in a shorter period of time, and the provision of practical solutions to issues of child abuse and neglect.

All in all, the themes surfaced suggest that the knowledge of practitioners regarding their roles and responsibilities, as well as their practice strategies when dealing with child protection cases, are likely to be constructed in relation to that of the CPS. This implies that perceived knowledge and best practices adopted by practitioners when dealing with child protection cases are often derived in relation to the manner in which the larger child protection system is structured. In turn, this challenges the veracity of an absolute ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in knowledge and best practices. That is, what appears to be currently ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ may not have always been so previously.

What constitute the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ practices to adopt at any particular point in time are often partial rather than absolute, and they do change over time. For example, social workers mention that they now find it harder to refer to CPS what they deem to be a middle-risk child protection case. Two observations can be drawn from this statement. First, it was easier to refer such cases to CPS in the past. Second, practitioners from different organizations have different criteria to assess risk. As such, this goes to show that knowledge and practices regarding child protection do change over time, and are subjectively ‘true’ depending on their context. Knowledge and practices are thus partial and fluid rather than absolute and fixed across time.

Yet, while the ‘ideal/right’ knowledge and practices are relative to their context, there is also a need for a sense of realism. Ideals do not just
exist in the mind but are often influenced by their ontological and material realities. In particular, the varying competencies of social workers, and the understanding that relationships are the key criteria in determining whether cases can be handled by FSCs, present limitations to the extent to which the community is able to be responsible for child protection cases. This in turn shows that in their lived experiences of child protection cases, social workers often have to find a delicate balance between “what is” and “what ought to be”. That is, while they may understand the impetus for an increased role of the community in child protection cases (as encouraged directly or indirectly by the larger child protection system), the very nature of working in FSCs places practical constraints on the extent to which such a vision can actually be achieved.

*Figure 1. Different spectrums of child protection work and the movement towards Q5 (Ow & Goh, 2011)*
“Child well-being is not just the responsibility of the family but also that of the state and the community” (Ow & Goh, 2011). In the above figure, the authors situate child protection work in quadrant 5, which indicates the shared roles and responsibilities of the state and the community in the different spectrums of child protection work, ranging from remedial to prevention. Given that FSCs are an important touch-point in the community for families-in-need (NCSS, 2010), the findings of this research can be interpreted as a signal that the child protection system is heading towards this vision as espoused by Ow & Goh (2011). That is, the community (and more specifically FSCs, albeit in varying degrees) increasingly recognizes its responsibilities for child protection work. Two child protection specialist centres have been set up in collaboration with social services agencies operating in the community, and training for handling child protection cases is also provided to FSC-based workers.

**Implications for Practice**

A direct implication for practice is the need for FSCs to structure training, supervision, and support for social workers handling cases with child protection concerns. Specifically, there is a need to have more objective risk assessment tools that can assess the overall risk and protective factors of the child within the family. In turn, this highlights the larger need for more intra-agency support for social workers handling child protection cases in the form of supervision, case conferences, and competency-training.

A second and more nuanced implication is the call for practitioners to be reflexive and communicative. That is, there is a need for awareness
of self and others within one’s social context, and subsequently, a need to communicate rational viewpoints in a manner which facilitates understanding and dialogue.

D’Cruz et al. (2007) elucidate the concept of reflexivity in social work practice by suggesting three variations of its meaning. First, reflexivity can mean the ability of individuals to acquire an understanding of their social circumstances and make informed choices. Second, it can mean being self-critical and always questioning how knowledge is constructed, as well as how relations of power operate in this process. Third, it can mean a concern with how emotions affect the practice of social work. While the first concerns the client’s issues, the second and third meanings are centred on the role of the practitioner, and are emphasized here.

Given the subjective nature of a practitioner’s knowledge and emotions in child protection cases, reflexivity in the second and third forms allows the practitioner to recognize his/her limits, creating greater self-awareness for the practitioner. For example, a social worker who perceives his/her role in child protection cases to be one of prevention may decide to refer a case to CPS, only to be told to hold on to the case. As a result, much frustration may surface on both sides, an indirect manifestation of D’Cruz et al.’s (2007) first form of reflexivity where practitioners from different social situations attempt to make informed choices for the case. Ironically, the structuring of the child protection system begets the tension arising between the parties involved. Thus, reflexivity in the second and third forms becomes important in helping practitioners look beyond the practical constraints of the child protection cases they are handling, and focus on the larger structures of the system as well as the influence of
their emotions on their subjective understanding of the situation. In other words, practitioners need to be aware that their subjectivities are largely shaped by the interconnectedness of their roles and their partners’ under the framework of the child protection system.

Finally, insofar as practitioners have the responsibility to deliberate and decide on their own views pertaining to child protection cases, they subsequently need to communicate them rationally to their partners. Given the multi-faceted nature of child protection work, communication through rational discussion, with an intention towards building consensus, is required to build a greater collaborative context between practitioners, an important step towards achieving an integrated child protection system.

**Conclusion**

This study sets out to examine FSC-based social workers’ perceptions and practices in relation to the child protection cases they work on. The dearth of local literature on child protection work in the community means that the aim of this study is exploratory. Through semi-structured interviews, data are collected and analyzed. Subsequently, four themes emerge. The findings shed light on social workers’ perceived and lived realities when handling child protection cases, as well as the challenges they face in their work. The themes collated suggest that the knowledge and practices of FSC-based social workers are often constructed in relation to the CPS at any particular point in time. This takes place in the context of the integrated direction the child protection system in Singapore is heading towards, one where there are shared roles and responsibilities amongst the various partners.
Finally, given the subjective nature of knowledge and practices, social workers often have to find a delicate balance between “what is” and “what ought to be” amidst the intricacies of handling a child protection case. As such, the main recommendation derived from this study is the need for reflexivity and communication. Specifically, one needs to enhance one’s awareness of how the structure of the child protection system shapes the subjectivities of different professionals. This is followed by communication, with the aim of building a greater collaborative context in child protection work.
References


