

Using vignettes to compare the views of social workers and service-users: Some findings and reflections regarding assessments in child welfare

Qualitative Social Work
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–16
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DOI: 10.1177/14733250241307262

journals.sagepub.com/home/qsw



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Abstract

While vignette studies have become more prevalent in social work research, it is, however, uncommon to include both practitioners and service-users in the research design to provide their views on an identical case. In this article, the aim is both to reflect on the usefulness of the vignette method in exploring assessments of the needs for services from the points of view of practitioners and service-users and to explore empirically those views on an identical case. The article is built on 28 group interviews with 120 practitioners and 14 group interviews with 41 care-experienced young people and parents of children in care. There are considerable similarities across the groups in their emphasis on ‘more information’ but the groups of practitioners and service-users also differ in their views on the nature of required information (what vs. why) and the purpose of the assessment (intake vs. solving problems). The analysis highlights some mundane manifestations of the implications of recent reforms in family and child welfare services in Finland, and most importantly, the ethical potential which the inclusion of both service-users and practitioners in the vignette design entails.

Keywords

Vignette studies, child welfare, assessments, comparisons between practitioners and service-users

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Introduction

Vignettes have proven to be important tools when studying attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, norms and reasoning in social work (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006; Wilks, 2004). They are based on simulations of real events or hypothetical situations, and provide an opportunity to learn about subjects' responses to those events and situations. A typical characteristic of vignette studies in social work is that comparisons are made between different professionals, professional teams, organizations, or, for example, child welfare systems, with an interest in looking at the similarities and differences in the responses to identical cases (e.g. Bain, 2024; Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006; Glad, 2006; Guidi et al., 2016; Keddell and Hyslop, 2018; McCafferty et al., 2021; Minkhorst et al., 2016). While respondents to vignettes have often been professionals, there is a growing body of research drawing on populations' views on social work-related vignettes (e.g. Berrick et al., 2022; Skivenes and Benbenishty, 2022). Service-users' responses to vignettes are less common but when included, they can work as instruments to elicit insights from marginalized service-users (Kia 2024). Even less common are comparisons between different service-users in their vignette responses, not to mention comparisons between service-users and practitioners.

As social work practice rests on social workers as well as service-users, knowledge from both perspectives is needed. In our view, vignettes could provide a shared platform to include the views of both practitioners and service-users in the research design. Such knowledge would be necessary, for example, in service-reforms to explore services and their potential weaknesses.

The reform of services for families provides an impetus for our study as well. It is located in the current period in Finnish child welfare during which preventative and early services provided by the Social Welfare Act are prioritized over child welfare services provided by the Child Welfare Act (CWA 417/2007), and families' and children's needs and rights to services should be assessed accordingly. In 2015, the Social Welfare Act (SWA 1301/2014) introduced a new type of 'assessment of the need for services' for families while the CWA continues to require 'assessment of the need for child welfare' to be done, both assessments being consequential for families and children and labor intensive for practitioners. Since the SWA was introduced, there has been and still is confusion and uncertainty among practitioners about the different assessment tasks (Hietamäki, 2015; Yliruka et al., 2022). In the midst of this uncertainty, we wanted to learn about the views of practitioners and service-users regarding the assessment of needs for services, and employed a vignette-design as part of a larger study. The original intention was to learn only about the possible variation among practitioners and among service-users separately. The findings were reported accordingly (Aarnio and Pösö, 2023; Lamponen and Aarnio, 2024; Repo and Pösö, 2024). However, as the separated analysis suggested some similarities and differences between those groups of service-users and practitioners, we moved on to comparing practitioners' and service-users' vignette responses with an open mindset, reported in this article. That comparison crystallizes some key tensions for assessments for services, such as fragmentation and specialization, as will be shown later in this article, and also demonstrates the potential of making such comparisons in vignette studies.

Following from that mindset, the aim of the article is both to reflect on the usefulness of the vignette method in exploring assessments in child welfare from the points of view of practitioners and service-users as well as to explore empirically those views on a similar case. In concrete terms, this article is built on 28 group interviews with 120 practitioners and 14 group interviews with 41 care-experienced young people and parents of children in care. All groups were provided the same vignette and the groups were asked to elaborate the vignette from their point of view, either that of a practitioner or of a child/parent in an assessment case. In a manner typical for vignette studies, the analysis focuses on the similarities and differences in their responses. Before presenting the findings, we will first describe the practice context – assessments regarding children’s and families’ needs for services – which is followed by the presentation of the features of vignettes which, in our view, make them relevant for practitioner - service-user comparisons.

Assessments as the practice context of ‘ordinary social work’

Assessing the needs of families and children is one of the many tasks of statutory child welfare. When conducting assessments, certain routines exist: there is a referral or contact to the statutory agencies which leads to an assessment following the institutional guidelines and legislation, and as a result, families are selected either into or out of services. In child welfare, those routines encompass concerns about the welfare of children and rest on professional assessment whether children or families require services, and if they do, which services would be relevant. ‘Processing people in and out services’, as worded by [Hasenfeld \(1989\)](#), is indeed ordinary social work. Despite being ‘ordinary’, conducting assessments is a complex cognitive, social, interactional, and bureaucratic process in social work ([Jaakola, 2020](#); [Lamponen and Aarnio, 2024](#)).

As assessments of service-needs are consequential for children and families as their welfare may be at stake, it is essential how assessments are made. As solutions to safeguard the quality of assessments, the standardization and proceduralisation of assessments have been suggested, albeit not without meeting some skepticism ([Lätsch et al., 2021](#); [Ponnert and Svensson, 2016](#)). At the moment in Finland, assessments in child welfare are regulated by legislation and organizational guidelines, while standardized assessment tools are in use only occasionally. There is still some space for case-based discretion and tailored assessments, suggesting assessments to be ‘craftwork’ practice ([Lamponen and Aarnio, 2024](#)).

At present, with regard to conducting assessments of families’ and children’s entry to the services, assessment practices are challenged by uncertainty and confusion regarding the two types of services: family services regulated by the Social Welfare Act (SWA 1301/2014) and child welfare services regulated by the Child Welfare Act (CWA 417/2007) and related criteria, as described in the introduction. The preliminary assessment is called ‘assessment of the needs for services’, based on the SWA. If needed, the SWA assessment includes the assessment of the child’s needs for protection as defined by the Child Welfare Act. As a result of the assessment, carried out within a period of 3 months or shorter in cases of urgency, children and/or families are selected to receive either family social services provided by the SWA or child protection services provided by the CWA, or

eventually guided to other services. Services provided by the SWA are voluntary for families whereas certain child welfare measures by the CWA can also be provided against the wishes of parents and/or children. As the criteria for voluntary in-home services provided by the CWA and for some family services by the SWA are almost identical, practitioners face challenges to decide the outcome of their assessment (Jaakola et al., 2024). Since the SWA was introduced in 2015, while the number of child welfare notifications has increased, the number of children receiving in-home services by the CWA has considerably decreased and the number of families receiving family services by the SWA has increased (Jaakola et al., 2024). This tendency highlights that the assessments made by social workers select families and children into family services more than into child welfare services.

Since the introduction of the SWA in 2015, many statutory agencies have organized new structures for conducting assessments of the needs for services. The assessments are often made by ‘assessment teams’ which have the sole task of assessing the needs for services. They consist of social workers and social instructors, occasionally including other professions as well. The existence of these assessment teams demonstrates phase specialization (Steve et al., 2023), a relatively new phenomenon in Finnish child welfare.

Vignettes for comparing practitioner and service-user views

For social work research, one essential feature of vignettes is that they allow research to focus on ‘ordinary social work’ by presenting mundane practice situations and cases for informants to elaborate (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006). Carrying out assessments, as mentioned earlier, is ‘ordinary social work’ and has been so since the early years of the profession (Richmond, 1917). Vignettes have provided practitioners a forum to think aloud about their ordinary social work and verbalize it (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006). However, talking aloud about practice does not necessarily correspond to how practitioners would act in real life situations. Talking aloud or responding to vignettes in other ways exclude the unconscious, sensitive, secret, and unrecognized elements of practice, and the responses may reflect what is seen as being socially and professionally acceptable and good (Bain, 2024; Wilks, 2004). Consequently, vignette responses may provide a partial, if not even biased view on practice. The discrepancies between ‘telling’, ‘knowing’, and ‘doing’, known to shape empirical research in general (Alverson, 2012), is deeply embedded in vignette designs.

When asking practitioners to talk aloud about their responses to a vignette about a case, they are invited to imagine what they would do while drawing on their professional knowledge and experience. According to McLeod and Thomson (2009), imagination is an underused resource in social sciences, while remembering ‘the past’ has been acknowledged as a more valid method for learning about social issues. What they share in qualitative enquiry is that they are both subjective accomplishments (Camargo-Borges and Gergen, 2022; McLeod and Thomson, 2009). They are not inseparable as imagination is interwoven with – yet not determined by – what we know about the past and present (Hodgson, 2022). The invitation to imagine what would be done in the case provided in the vignette is not so uncommon in practice as social workers work with hypotheses about

the likely outcome of a specific intervention based on the more or less limited information available (e.g. [Juhasz, 2020](#); [Korpinen and Pösö, 2021](#); [White, 1998](#)). Would the future serve the child's best interest if the child were removed from its parents' care into public care? How likely is it that the abusive elements of care would continue? When working with such questions and hypotheses, the future is anticipated by using professional imagination, the same type of imagination which vignette studies in social work often rest on.

The past and the memories thereof characterize, however, the body of research regarding service-users in social work. Many studies focus on their personal experiences of services in child welfare, some of which may have taken place a long time ago (e.g. [Bijleveld et al., 2015](#); [Toros et al., 2018](#); [Wilson et al., 2020](#); [Toros, 2021](#); [Witte et al., 2021](#)). Particular moments of practice such as the first assessment of service-needs do not necessarily figure among the many assessments during their pathways as service-users and memorized accounts of practice may thus be of more general than specific nature.

Echoing [Williams \(2017\)](#), it would be ethically, practically, and politically important to consult service-users' views on child welfare in a wider sense than regarding only their personal experiences. Vignettes as used in our study will deviate from the memorised personal experiences as they invite imagination as if the respondents were in the position of the service-users of the vignette. Their responses in imagining the vignette from the point of view of a service-user are informed about their personal experiences as service-users but are not restricted to those. Instead, the responses are seen as being a mixture of personal experiences of services and informed (lay) views of services.

As our interest is not to hear solely about the personal experiences of service-users, we decided to present vignettes to experts by experience. The very term 'expert by experience' (of child welfare, for example) acknowledges the emphasis on knowledge which is generated by one's own experiences of using services ([McLaughlin, 2009](#)). It introduces 'experiential authority' to challenge 'traditional authority', the latter resting on formal qualifications and professional positions ([Alm Andreassen, 2016](#); [Noorani, 2013](#)). Service-user activism of experts by experience often takes place in groups in Finland. In addition to peer support, those groups transform their personal experiences and related knowledges into shared viewpoints of service-users to make those views heard and have an impact on practice and policy. Those viewpoints are relevant for vignette studies as they rest both on personal experiences and wider views and give information accordingly (cf. [Williams 2017](#)).

Data and method

Ordinary case-talk, a typical element of social work vignette-studies ([Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006](#)), is approached in two ways in the empirical design of our study. First, case-talk deals here with a family's contact to social services requiring assessment of their service-needs, a very distinctive part of services as it is only about conducting an assessment; secondly, the same vignette is provided to practitioners as well as service-users, both being elementary parties of an assessment, albeit having different positions. The

analysis examines the similarities and differences in case-talk between the groups of practitioners and service-users based on an identical vignette.

The vignette was developed to be a mundane description of a typical contact to social services. The first draft of the vignette was written by the research team, and then tested and elaborated with a number of practitioners and service-users. It aimed to be relevant for practice as vignettes in social work studies aim to be – or even aim to mirror real life practice (Bain, 2024) – and also to be approachable for service-users in its terminology. The vignette reads as follows:

Elias (9) and Anna (14) live with their parents. Elias has difficulties in school. His grades haven't been great, and he doesn't have any friends in school. He has told the teacher in tears that he is afraid of telling his parents about his difficulties with homework. The school hasn't been able to get in touch with the parents. Some mornings the father has brought Elias late to school seeming disoriented. Elias has been psychologically tested in the family counselling centre and based on the results it has been assessed that his special needs aren't met at home.

Anna is doing well in school and she has a lot of friends. However, Anna has visited the school nurse several times this fall because of vague pains and tiredness. Lately she has spent nights away from home. Anna hasn't told her parents where she has been.

Both parents have mental health issues. In the meetings at the family counselling centre the parents have talked about their difficulties in supporting Elias and Anna. Anna hasn't come to the meetings at all. The psychologist from the centre and the parents have contacted the social services.

This vignette was presented to groups consisting of practitioners involved in service-need assessments, and experts by experience of child welfare (young people and parents as service-users separately) in different parts of Finland. A group interview format, quite typical for qualitative vignette studies, was chosen here as well. It is known practitioners negotiate their cases in team meetings in their everyday practice (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006) and the particular assessments studied here are carried out in pairs or teams (Lamponen and Aarnio, 2024). Talking in groups is thus 'ordinary social work'. Furthermore, many of the activities of experts by experience also take place in groups as described earlier. We asked the practitioners to elaborate the vignette as their own case (what they would do in their team/agency in this situation) and the service-users to imagine that they were either Anna and Elias (young people's groups) or parents (parents' groups) and what the assessment would look like for children and parents respectively in that case. The practitioners were asked to base their views on their practice whereas the young people and parents were asked to base their views on their activities as experts by experience.

In order to present the vignette to these groups, a complicated process of permission and access negotiations was required. First our study, a part of a wider project¹, was reviewed by the ethics committee of Tampere University after which we requested the research permits from the municipalities as well as from the organizations hosting the groups of experts by experience. After that we discussed with team leaders and other

gate-keepers to find appropriate ways to reach relevant groups of practitioners and experts by experience to ask about their interest to join the study. Regarding children and young people, we only invited young people as experts of experience who had reached the age of 18 and who were no longer in care to ease the permission process within the time frame available for this study. Finally, we negotiated the times and places for the groups to meet. The practitioner groups were mainly existing groups – teams – which make assessments of service needs. Likewise, some groups of service-users had their own history of shared activities in their roles as experts by experience. The number of the participants in groups varied from 1 to 8, with an average number of four. Some groups were reduced to solo interviews due to a sudden absence of participants. Most groups were interviewed by two researchers – the authors of this article – some only by one. Due to the COVID pandemic and its aftermath, several interviews were carried out via Teams at the request of the participants. The topic of the study was obviously met with interest as we managed to speak with 28 groups of practitioners (120 participants who were mainly social workers or social instructors but also other practitioners such as doctors, youth workers, and psychologists in the multiprofessional assessment teams) and 14 groups with 41 experts by experience of child welfare (21 parents in six groups and 20 young persons in eight groups) in autumn 2021. The practitioners were quite experienced in their practice as the majority had worked from three to 5 years in family and child welfare. In a similar manner, the majority of the service-users had long involvement in the activities of experts by experience.

We had two interview schemes for semi-structured interviews, one for practitioners and the other for service-users, including topics about the likely assessment process initiated by the case description. Both interview schemes shared five themes (the assessment process, practitioner-related factors, factors related to the case and family-members, organizational elements and services and child's best interest), but some themes included different questions for practitioners and service-users. Practitioners were asked, for example, to elaborate what they would do in the assessment process whereas service-users were also asked some concrete questions about the process (e.g. should the assessment process include a home visit, should the home visit be unannounced) as we anticipated that some administrative elements of the statutory assessment process were not all well known to service-users. The interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. They were voice-recorded and transcribed. The analysis was first done within the frame of inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to explore the descriptive accounts about the process of making the assessment. We came across some re-occurring codes in all groups about information gathering: the assessment process would start by collecting *more* information, that is to say that the given information in the vignette did not inspire any group (or any members of the groups) to draw any conclusions about the service needs. There are, however, differences in how 'more information' is approached by different groups which we first noticed in the codes about 'explanations' in the service-user group data only. For this reason we moved towards a more latent and interpretative thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 84), that type of analysis aims to identify 'the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data'. This round of

interpretative thematic analysis consists of dynamic reading of the first stage analysis in order to understand better the latent features of the group talk.

The following presentation of the findings first presents the similarities between the groups and then moves to the differences. As the elaborations of the groups of parents and children differ only little, if at all, in their ways of talking about the vignette, we treat all service-user groups together. Differences between the young people's and parents' groups will be mentioned when recognized in the analysis.

Similarities and differences in the vignette responses

Similar views about assessments being information sensitive

The groups of the practitioners and service-users equally share the view that the vignette calls for a scenario to gather more information. The information provided about the case is not seen to be sufficient to elaborate whether the family or children need services, not to mention the type of services. This is also to say that the troubles mentioned in the vignette (e.g. parents' mental health issues, the likely special needs of the boy, the girl's nightly absences from home) are not indicative as such of any assessment outcome but the troubles are seen to require that the family's need for services *should be assessed*. In order to assess the family situation, more information for example is needed about whether the parents are already receiving treatment for their mental health issues, and where the girl spent her nights. All groups share the view that the practitioners doing the assessment should contact the parents and children both individually and together as a family unit, as well as teachers from the school and the psychologist working with the family. The expressed requirement to gather more information highlights that assessment of the needs for services is seen to be more complex than just responding using the ready-set categorizations in the service-request. Instead, it is essential for the groups of practitioners and service-users equally to learn what those categories mean in the particular family's case. There are, however, differences regarding information gathering between the groups: information should be gathered to map out the case (practitioners) or to explain and solve the family problems (service-users).

Practitioners: Comprehensive information to map out the case

In the group discussions, the practitioners say that they would seek information in a variety of contexts to obtain a comprehensive overview of the case and what the family situation is like. For them, 'more information' means comprehensive information. They would check the existing client information systems, they would contact the parents and children to talk with them individually and together, they would talk with the psychologist who submitted the application for service needs assessment as well as with the teachers of both children. If it was discovered that other professionals were in contact with the family, they would be talked with as well. A typical description of this approach towards comprehensive information is as follows:

Practitioner 1 But basically, we follow a certain scheme in that sense that we start to find out things from different perspectives, and whether there is a previous clienthood here or not, or somewhere else, this information is shared, we start meeting different parties. If something out of the ordinary doesn't come up now, then we'll go with those normal ways.

Practitioner 2 Personally, I would probably think, when it says at the end [of the vignette] that the parents and the psychologist at the family counselling clinic had contacted social services together, the first meeting could be with, say, the family and the practitioners at the family counselling clinic, that somehow together they would talk more about the family's situation. (Practitioner group 6)

In a very mundane way, the practitioners describe above the search for information as the standard scheme to map out the case. Different voices, views, contacts, and sources of information – they would all be needed to make the assessment about whether and where services should be provided.

Such a comprehensive overview would give meaning to the parents' mental health issues, for example, to learn about existing treatment. If the parents are in contact with psychiatric care, the notion about 'mental health issues' would need much less attention in the assessment process compared with a situation in which they would be without mental health services. In a similar manner, the girl's absence from home at night requires more detailed information: where does the girl stay? Is it a safe place to stay? If she stays with a relative or a friend's family, there would not be so much concern. More information would guide their interpretations of the troubles, and consequently, of the needs for services.

Service-users: Searching for explanations and remedies

While describing the importance of gathering more information for the assessment, the service-user groups frequently use the word 'why', equally so in parents' and young people's groups. The common expression in the groups is that the task of the assessment is to learn *why* the parents and children behaved in a certain way, that is, to find reasons and explanations for the troubles described in the vignette. The interest in 'why' is different from the interest in 'what', evident in the practitioners' groups. In the service-user groups, the reasons for the troubles are regarded as fundamentally important for changing the family situation, with the change and improvement being seen as equal with the task of the assessment.

A typical example of the emphasis on the explanations is demonstrated by the following extract from the young people's group:

Young person 1: Maybe they should examine Anna's situation, first of all, where she spends those nights and what is the cause of those pains and what causes that fatigue and all that.

Young person 2: So it just occurred to me that whether she would be pregnant, and I just thought about sexual violence anyway, whether she had been exposed to it at home or somewhere else. So, of course, it can't be ruled out for boys either, but it's probably a bit more common in the light of statistics among girls.

(Young people's group 2)

In that extract, the focus is on explaining behavior. It could also be opinions which need explanations. One task of the assessment is to dismantle the standpoints each party had taken and to find out why the standpoints are as they are, as highlighted by an extract from one parents' group.

Why do parents think this or why do they even oppose the view of experts, professionals. They should start dismantling it in a way, and why do experts, professionals, then think that somehow it should be dismantled

(Parents' group 3)

The service-user groups talk a lot about the skills and expertise which practitioners should have to conduct assessments: practitioners should know a lot about family dynamics and drug abuse, among other things, in order to be able to dig properly into the troubles. Without relevant knowledge the assessment is likely to remain on an artificial level, just reporting the state of the family. Practitioners should also be skillful in creating confidential relations and arenas for interaction in which parents and children would feel safe to express their own views and concerns. Young people's groups emphasized the confidential contact with children somewhat more frequently than the parents' groups but otherwise detailed, nuanced, and explanatory information for changing the family's situation is the core of the assessment in both the parents' and young people's groups.

Discussion

In our vignette study, the groups of practitioners and service-users are aligned with the assessment to be done in the case of a family contacting family services, with more information to be gathered. Service-users as well as practitioners do not question whether public services would have a role in the family matters presented by the vignette; instead, a thorough assessment of the case is desired to take place. No threats to privacy or concerns about power imbalance in the assessment relations – common for critical views of assessments (e.g. [Milner and O'Byrne, 2002](#); [Hennum, 2011](#)) – are worded in this data, suggesting that there is a somewhat shared view that public services, whether provided by the SWA or the CWA, are relevant to families and children.

While emphasizing the importance of gathering more case-specific information needed to make the assessment, the practitioners and service-users also demonstrate differences in their ways to approach what would be relevant information and what it is needed for. The differences are in what- and why-information (horizontal vs. vertical information), which suggests different approaches to the task of the assessment. In the practitioners' groups, more detailed information about different family members is said to be needed for making the assessment whether there should be services provided according to the existing legislation ('intake decision'). The service-user groups, those of parents and young people

alike, also emphasize more information to be gathered in a case-sensitive way but the motive would be to explain the family's situation and to change it accordingly.

These two different scenarios of assessment obviously clash: the practitioners are inclined to accomplish their assessment task to decide about the intake, while service-users expect the troubles to be solved. As the assessment of the need for services is a separate statutory task, service-users will face another assessment after the intake decision has been made. The following assessment either in family or child welfare services will then lead to a client plan and eventually services given to the family (Aarnio et al., 2023). As the assessment studied here may take 3 months to be completed, it is likely that the time before services will be given will be several weeks, if not months ahead. It is also likely that the following assessments will be made by other practitioners as assessments of the need for services is often carried out by practitioners and their teams specializing only in these assessments.

The scenarios and related clashes presented by the groups demonstrate the implications of phase specialization in the Finnish family and child welfare services. According to Steive and her colleagues (2023), phase specialization means that the exercise of public authority is divided into smaller parts, e.g. statutory procedural phases, and social workers' tasks and expertise are shaped by those phases. Phase specialization differs from other types of specialization which address certain fields of practice (child welfare vs. elderly care) or target groups (children vs. elderly). Phases – as for example intake and assessment – are defined by legislation and bureaucracy. Steive et al. (2023) point out several critical implications of phase specialization, the simplification of social work and fragmented understanding of service-users being some of them. For service-users, phase specialization means lack of continuity in relations with social workers (Steive et al., 2023). In our study, phase specialization does not meet well service-users' wishes about assessments solving their problems; it narrows the temporal trajectory of practitioners only to the assessment phase, and their expertise only to make assessments. Consequently, the service-user and practitioner responses to the identical vignette suggest that the reform introduced by the new Social Welfare Act in 2015 and related new assessment practices are not unproblematic for practitioners and service-users.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that vignette studies – as any type of research – require method-sensitive conclusions (Bain, 2024). The very similarities and differences are drawn from the positions of practitioners and service-users, as the participants were invited to elaborate the vignette from the point of view of their above-mentioned positions. Positionality is, however, a complex issue as the position of a practitioner or service-user may be only one of the many positions which participants had when elaborating the vignette (e.g. Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019; Piedra, 2023). Some service-users for example expressed their own professional expertise in the social care of children and that expertise could have influenced their views in addition to their own service experiences and activism as experts by experience (Aarnio and Pösö, 2023).

Furthermore, the similarities across the service-user groups may, to some extent, be a result of their involvement in the recent activities as experts by experience in the development and training projects in child welfare in the national context, focusing strongly on trauma-informed care. We came across some terms in the group discussions which are

typical for trauma-informed care, suggesting that the reoccurring talk about reasons and explanations could be inspired by that training. On the other hand, trauma-informed terminology is not evident in the practitioners' talk despite the similar training and development projects. The group-discussion format is known to emphasize consensus and therefore it is likely that weak views and voices are muted by the stronger ones (Morgan 2002). Consequently, it is pivotal to acknowledge that the similarities and differences among the groups and within the groups demonstrate *only* the worded group views. In our study such group views are relevant; however, in order to learn about the more personalized views of service-users and practitioners, vignettes should be provided as part of a survey or individual interview. For more personalized research interests, it would be relevant to reach to service-users individually and not only through the activities of experts by experience as done in our study. While the experts by experience in our study voiced the views of service-users in a powerful way, the views cannot be seen as representing service-users in general as the activities of experts by experience may not be of interest or available to all the variety of service-users. Our design excluded younger children, for example.

From the perspective of the method-sensitive conclusions, many other typical considerations of the limitations of qualitative data are indeed relevant for using vignettes for comparing service-users and practitioners and drawing conclusions from their responses. Our analysis presented in this article is robust as we focused on the overarching themes in the group discussions, and it is based on an uneven number of practitioners and service-users. Nevertheless, the comparison portrays the assessment for a need of services in a way which did not become evident when analyzing the group data separately. Therefore, we suggest that such comparisons should be welcome. When writing about updating approaches to qualitative data collection and its engagements, ethics, and entanglements, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020: 124) introduce the notion of 'inviting data possibilities', including experiment, play and trying new things. When studying complex social work practices, such a call for 'data possibilities' is more than relevant. In our exercise, the particular strength of the vignette comparisons between practitioners and service-users is in ethics: the identical vignettes provided to practitioners and service-users enable an equal informant role for both.

Conclusion

We found certain patterns of similarities and differences in service-users' and practitioners' group responses to the identical vignette about a case regarding assessment of the needs for services. All groups highlighted the importance of having more information but they differed in their views about the nature of required information (what vs. why) and the purpose of the assessment (intake vs. solving problems). The analysis of the similarities and differences highlights clashes in their approaches to conducting assessments, and the mundane manifestation of the phase specialization of social work. Although the comparison of practitioners and service-users is on a small scale in our study, it hopefully highlights the potential which such comparisons could have for vignette studies in social work.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is a part of the project ‘Child welfare in the best interest of a child? Assessments at the juncture of social services and child welfare’, funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland (VN/25308/2020).

Ethical statement

Ethical approval

The ethics approval statement has been received from Tampere University, Finland on June 14, 2021 (application 36/2021).

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Note

1. This article is a part of the project ‘Child welfare in the best interest of a child? Assessments at the juncture of social services and child welfare’, funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland.

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