# The Expertise of Social Workers

## Knowledge in and about Professional Judgments

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This is the English translation of Chapter 11 from the Anniversary Book published in 2022 to mark the 75th anniversary of the School of Social Work, Lund University (Sweden).

# The Expertise of Social Workers

## Knowledge in and about Professional Judgments

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This text is a translation of the book chapter referenced below, originally published in Swedish.[1][2]


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[1] The text was first translated using ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023). Thereafter, the author conducted a systematic review and revision of the translation to ensure full fidelity to the content of the original language.

[2] Original pagination is preserved and shown in the text.

This is the English translation of Chapter 11 from the Anniversary Book published in 2022 to mark the 75th anniversary of the School of Social Work, Lund University (Sweden).

## Table of Contents[3]



[3] Note: This table of contents has been added for the English translation and was not included in the original text.

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# 1. Introduction – On Expertise, Knowledge Use, and Judgments

Thirty years ago, the highly esteemed social scientist Andrew Abbott published a seminal article reflecting on the future of the professions (Abbott, 1991). A key premise of his argument was that expertise – defined as "the ability to accomplish complicated tasks" (Abbott, 1991, p. 19) – could reside in three domains: within professions or individuals, within organizations (e.g., through the division of labour or regulatory frameworks), and within commodities (e.g., assessment tools or algorithms). He contended that the future of professional practice would be shaped by the relative strength and interaction of these three domains. In research on professions, the bureaucratization and/or commodification of expertise is often framed as a threat to professional autonomy or self-determination (ibid.). A recent example is the implementation of algorithmic systems for assessing financial assistance in Sweden (cf. Svensson, 2019). This perceived threat is largely attributed to the assumption that the bureaucratization and commodification of expertise constrain professional discretion, thereby limiting practitioners' ability to exercise their own expertise and judgment (Svensson, Johnson & Laanemets, 2021). For professions and their practitioners to navigate, balance, and potentially capitalize on developments such as detailed organizational guidelines (bureaucratization) or the adoption of standardized methods for assessment and treatment (commodification), a high level of expertise *among practitioners themselves* is thus required.

This text explores practitioners' expertise – or more precisely, *their use of expertise* – through the lens of knowledge use. It rests on the assumption that practitioners' use of knowledge is chiefly manifested in their judgments and the actions that follow. (For a (**p. 222**) discussion of the central concept of *judgment*, see below. In this text, *assessment* is used synonymously with judgment.) By scrutinizing their judgments and the reasoning behind them, practitioners can identify *the knowledge they draw upon* to solve a particular problem (cf. to accomplish a complicated task) as well as *how they think* when applying this knowledge (Rosen, 1994; Wallander, 2012; 2022). I firmly believe that greater awareness of how one's accumulated knowledge is expressed and shaped in professional judgments can

contribute to professionalization at the individual level – encouraging practitioners to act more constructively and proactively, and to assume shared responsibility for their judgments and decisions (cf. "knowledge governance from within" by the practitioner and the professional collective). At this point, I wish to clarify my stance on the contested nature of expertise. By aligning with Abbott's conception of expertise as "the ability to accomplish complicated tasks" (a realist stance; see above and 1991, p. 19), I deliberately exclude another widely used alternative definition that frames expertise not in terms of substantive knowledge or skills, but as a socially ascribed attribute (a constructivist stance; for discussion, see Kotzee & Smit, 2017).

The structure of this text is as follows: Section 1 provides context, definitions, and delimitations of the subject under discussion. Sections 2 and 3 explore two broad categories of knowledge related to judgment, referred to as *domain knowledge* and *cognitive process knowledge*, respectively. The text concludes with Section 4, which discusses the conscious development and application of both individual and collective expertise in professional practice.

## 1.1. Judgment and Decision-Making – Contextualization and Delimitation

Judgment and decision-making are core components of all professional practice. In social work, assessment and decision-making are complex, context-dependent processes in which many important decisions are made collaboratively between practitioners and clients. These assessments are often informed and shaped by dialogue – among colleagues, across professional and organizational boundaries, and between practitioners and their supervisors or managers (Taylor, 2017a). Some assessments and decisions are formal in nature, adhering to established **(p. 223)** procedures and regulations within the relevant organizations – for instance, the decision to initiate an investigation in a child welfare case. Others are informal, including the practitioner's ongoing, and often subconscious, evaluations of a client's credibility (ibid.; cf. Sahlin, 2019). Many assessments are provisional and subject to continuous scrutiny and revision. Regardless of their nature, professional judgments are shaped by a wide array of factors – ranging from characteristics of the clients involved and the practitioners making the assessments, to the organizational setting

in which the judgments are made, and the broader societal context, including legislation and policies. A range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in social work offer a foundation for investigating the diverse factors that potentially shape professional judgments (for an overview, see Benbenishty & Fluke, 2021).

This text, however, does not engage with the social and cultural contexts in which everyday professional judgment is situated, nor with the factors that shape it. It also leaves aside the bodily and emotional dimensions of professional assessment (cf. Svensson, 2021). Instead, the focus is placed on the cognitive dimension of judgment – a domain primarily explored within the field of psychology. For this reason, I have also chosen to avoid the term "decision", as it implies an action-oriented aspect beyond the scope of this discussion. While such delimitations inevitably simplify the subject matter, they are necessary to allow for a more in-depth exploration of the text's core focus.

## 1.2. Knowledge in and about Judgments – Domain Knowledge and Cognitive Process Knowledge

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (Reber & Reber, 2001, p. 376), judgment is defined as "the process of forming an opinion or reaching a conclusion based on the available material [and] the opinion or conclusion so reached". The distinction between judgment as an outcome and as a cognitive process is a central theme in my discussion of knowledge use in professional practice. A practitioner's *domain knowledge* – *what* they think about – is reflected in their reasoning and the conclusions they draw. This encompasses the knowledge used to describe, interpret, explain, evaluate, and manage practical problems. Domain knowledge is **(p. 224)** specialized and varies both across and within professions; it constitutes what is commonly referred to as the knowledge base, grounded in a variety of sources. However, understanding *how domain knowledge is applied* also requires insight into the underlying cognitive processes – what I refer to as *cognitive process knowledge* (cf. Sheppard et al., 2000, who draw a similar distinction between "product knowledge" and "process knowledge"). Variations in conclusions regarding a particular practical problem cannot be attributed solely to differences in domain knowledge; they also stem from differences in how knowledge is cognitively

processed and translated into conclusions. In contrast to domain-specific knowledge, knowledge of cognitive processes is general in nature. Accordingly, the theories and research presented below draw on studies of human cognition more broadly, as well as investigations into the specific cognitive processes involved in professional practice.

## 1.3. Background and Examples

My approach to structuring and conceptualizing the content of this text has developed over the past two decades through an ongoing interplay between research and teaching. My theoretical interest in judgment was originally sparked by a sense of frustration over the lack of conceptual depth that, nearly twenty years ago, characterized the type of experimental vignette studies I conducted on social workers' assessments (vignette = fictional case; Wallander & Blomqvist, 2005). At that point in time, the growing body of research surrounding the debate on knowledge application in social work – intensified by the rise of evidence-based practice – offered new conceptual tools for interpreting my findings (Wallander, 2012). My thinking has been shaped by texts and conversations with scholars from a range of disciplines, brought together by a common interest in professional practice, judgment, and expertise (see, for example, Kirkebøen, 2012; Smeby, 2013; Molander, 2016; Taylor, 2017a; Munro, 2020). The perspectives and theories presented in this text – though well-established in the broader academic literature – are offered here as a personal synthesis, illustrated with examples from the field of social work.

My strong interest in the subject has led me to seize every opportunity to teach it, both to students and practitioners. This text summarizes the core content of the material I (**p. 225**) currently teach during the third semester of the social work program, as part of a module in which students conduct a child welfare investigation. This text is also grounded in an ongoing research project on knowledge utilization in child welfare social work, in which approximately 50 practitioners and students have analyzed and reflected on two extended fictional cases (for details, see Wallander, 2022). One of these cases centers on a four-year-old boy living with his mother, and the conclusions and statements referred to below as *knowledge fragments* serve as empirical illustrations of how social workers assess the family's situation. Nearly all of

the practical applications discussed in this text pertain to social workers' assessments of children and young people at risk of harm – assessments conducted either in direct interaction with clients or in connection with, or as part of, formal investigations. While the examples presented are drawn from a specific subfield of social work, I contend that the theories and perspectives explored are broadly applicable and relevant across multiple areas of specialization and levels of practice within the wider field of social work.

Although this text focuses on knowledge use within *social work*, the theoretical foundations are primarily drawn from other disciplines, particularly psychology. As such, the discussions are intended to be relevant and applicable to client-centered assessments across a range of professional contexts. To reflect this broader applicability, I frequently use the neutral terms *practitioner* and *client*.

## 2. Domain Knowledge

As noted above, I argue that professional judgments constitute the most tangible expressions of practitioners' knowledge utilization, with *domain knowledge* forming the core content – the substance of both conclusions and their justifications. In professional practice, typical judgments include descriptive conclusions, which often involve identifying one or more problems in need of intervention, such as: "In this case/this family, there are probable signs of neglect". An action-oriented conclusion, by contrast, concerns how to address an identified problem – for example: "For this family, interaction therapy using video recordings is likely to be beneficial". Other common types of conclusions involve explaining or interpreting a specific issue and its underlying causes or assessing the likelihood (**p. 226**) that a situation may deteriorate (cf. Rosen, 1994; Wallander, 2022).

To identify the domain knowledge underpinning a particular conclusion, it is necessary to examine the reasoning behind the judgment. In its simplest form, such reasoning can be articulated through "if... then" statements, which illustrate how the information used (e.g., about a child or a family) leads to a specific conclusion (cf. Toulmin, 1958; Wallander & Molander, 2014). Examples of such statements include: "If a young child has never visited a dentist, is left to brush their teeth

without supervision, and has yellow-brown teeth (information), then neglect is likely present (descriptive conclusion)"; or "If a parent lacks reflective capacity and does not recognize how their behavior affects the child (information), then interaction therapy using video recordings is likely to be an appropriate intervention (action-oriented conclusion)". Such statements represent isolated fragments of domain knowledge – fragments that must be contextualized, substantiated, qualified, and, in most cases, integrated with additional pieces of knowledge (see Wallander, 2022).

As previously noted, this type of knowledge is domain-specific and therefore varies both across and within professions. In this text, the term *domain* refers to a particular area of practice or problem type, rather than to an academic discipline or professional field. Social workers, for example, commonly work with issues such as poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, and children at risk of harm, often developing specialized expertise in one or more of these areas. In research on domain knowledge and knowledge utilization in social work, knowledge is often categorized in various ways (for a brief overview, see Avby, 2018). A common approach is to classify knowledge according to its source. Typical sources included in such classifications are theoretical frameworks, empirical research, formal education, personal and professional experience, laws and regulations, ethical guidelines, policy documents, as well as clients' experiences and preferences. Empirical studies have shown that certain sources of knowledge are perceived as more central to everyday practice than others. A relatively recent Norwegian study (Iversen & Heggen, 2016), based on a survey of 390 social workers in child welfare services, found that colleagues and supervision – followed by personal experience – were regarded as the most important sources of knowledge. In contrast, education, policy documents, and academic literature were seen as less central to daily practice. Naturally, much could be said about the validity, reliability, and practical relevance of different knowledge sources – **(p. 227)** an extensive discussion that lies beyond the scope of this text (see, for example, Gambrill, 2018; Munro, 2020).

## 2.1. The Integration and Structure of Domain Knowledge

That domain-specific knowledge in professional social work stems from multiple sources is hardly surprising. The Norwegian philosopher Harald Grimen (2008)

argued that, with few exceptions, the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of professional knowledge is intrinsic to its character. According to Grimen, it is the practical problem itself – such as a child at risk – that serves as the integrative force, bringing together disparate fragments of knowledge into a coherent whole. Empirically capturing how this integration of knowledge occurs is extremely difficult – if not impossible (cf. Hogarth, 2010). Nevertheless, several scholars within the field of professional studies have theorized this process. In medicine, for example, Gabbay and Le May (2010) introduced the concept of *mindlines* – or "guidelines-in-the-head" – to describe the tacit, integrated knowledge that practitioners draw upon to address practical problems. Gabbay and Le May's model visualizes mindlines as a loosely woven ball of yarn, with threads from various sources dynamically intertwined. The content of these mindlines may correspond to the types of knowledge fragments – expressed as statements – that I illustrated earlier. In social work research, Gredig and Sommerfeld (2008) have introduced the concept of *hybridization* to describe a similar process: the integration of knowledge from diverse sources into new, hybrid forms of knowledge. This hybrid knowledge crystallizes into individual cognitive patterns, which in turn underpin professional judgment and action.

The most well-established theories on how human knowledge is integrated and structured in judgment and decision-making stem from psychological research on expertise. Anders Ericsson (e.g., Ericsson & Pool, 2016) uses the term *mental representations* to describe these internal knowledge structures. A mental representation is a mental structure – a pre-existing pattern of "facts, images, rules, relationships, and so on" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016, pp. 60-61) – that corresponds to the concrete or abstract object that the brain is thinking about. (**p. 228**) A variety of terms are used in the literature to describe such cognitive patterns, including mental maps, mental models, schemas, scripts, templates, and prototypes. These concepts emerge from different theoretical traditions and sometimes refer to cognitive patterns or processes at varying levels of abstraction. Mental representations, which are typically organized hierarchically – much like an organizational chart – enable us to recognize familiar patterns and to solve problems that resemble those we have previously encountered (ibid.). One of the knowledge fragments presented earlier – "If a young child has never visited a dentist, is left to brush their teeth without supervision, and has yellow-brown teeth, then neglect is likely present" – can be

viewed as a small component within a broader mental representation that, at a more abstract level, encompasses the full range of possible indicators of neglect. Similarly, mental representations can encode patterns of correlation and causality, which serve as cognitive tools for explanation, prediction, and the formulation of recommended actions (ibid.). Mental representations develop through both formal learning – structured and intentional processes such as education – and informal learning, which is unstructured, often unconscious, and occurs continuously through professional practice. As a result, knowledge fragments from diverse sources become integrated into these cognitive patterns. It is now well established that a key characteristic of individuals with exceptional problem-solving abilities is the presence of advanced and highly abstract mental representations (ibid.). I will return to this point in the concluding section of the text.

## 2.2. The Inevitable Uncertainty of Domain Knowledge

You may have noticed that both of the earlier examples of knowledge fragments included a qualifier – *likely*. This qualification plays a crucial role by underscoring the inherent uncertainty of domain knowledge. Such uncertainty is an unavoidable feature of all professional practice. As Eddy (1984, p. 75) eloquently observed in the context of medicine: "Uncertainty creeps into medical practice through every pore. Whether a physician is defining a disease, making a diagnosis, selecting a procedure, observing outcomes, assessing probabilities, assigning preferences, or putting it all together, he is walking on very slippery terrain. It is difficult for (**p. 229**) nonphysicians, and for many physicians, to appreciate how complex these tasks are, how poorly we understand them, and how easy it is for honest people to come to different conclusions". This inherent uncertainty is multifaceted and manifests across several dimensions (for a discussion, see Ponnert, 2013). The first type of uncertainty I wish to address pertains to the degree of uncertainty inherent in the practical problems that a given profession is expected to manage – specifically, uncertainty regarding *what is*. This form of uncertainty directly shapes the extent to which we can attain reliable knowledge about the nature of the phenomena in question.

To elucidate this, it is helpful to observe that phenomena and events in both the natural and social worlds exhibit varying degrees of systematicity and randomness

(cf. Stanovich, 2010). The ability to understand, explain, and manage a given phenomenon hinges on identifying its systematic features – that is, the patterns and regularities that characterize it. In doing so, one gradually acquires the relevant domain knowledge. Practitioners who work with static problems grounded in physical, biological, or chemical processes are more likely to encounter stable patterns and consistent regularities. Consequently, the knowledge base in such domains tends to be more robust, professional judgments can be made with greater confidence, and the outcomes of actions can be predicted with a higher degree of certainty (Shanteau, 1992). Practitioners who engage with dynamic problems – those concerning human beings and their needs or well-being – must navigate weaker and less stable regularities. This is due to the fact that human thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are shaped by a multitude of interacting factors, whose causal relationships are highly complex and rarely deterministic (ibid.). As a consequence, the knowledge base in such contexts is more uncertain, professional judgments are less clear-cut, and the outcomes of specific actions are often difficult to predict. This implies that even when a social worker bases their intervention recommendation on the knowledge that "if a parent lacks reflective capacity and does not recognize how their behavior affects the child, then interaction therapy using video recordings is likely to be an appropriate intervention" (cf. above), they can never be certain that this intervention will be appropriate for the specific family – given its unique constellation of challenges – before them.

The degree of certainty we can attain *in our knowledge about a phenomenon* is thus inherently limited by the degree of regularity within the phenomenon itself. Practical (**p. 230**) problems or phenomena marked by high levels of uncertainty have been described in the literature as *wicked problems* (as opposed to *tame problems*; cf. Rittel & Webber, 1973; Devaney & Spratt, 2009), but also as messy, unstructured, or contested problems. A so-called wicked problem is typically characterized by several defining features – among them the absence of a clear-cut definition. Instead, multiple, often conflicting definitions tend to coexist, each grounded in different explanatory frameworks. For example, there is no universally accepted, context-independent definition of what constitutes child abuse (Munro, 2020). Moreover, such situations rarely involve a single, clearly delineated problem. Instead, they typically comprise multiple, interrelated issues, the connections between which are complex and difficult to untangle. It is often unclear which problem

should be regarded as primary. Ethical considerations frequently arise, as different stakeholders – such as those involved in child welfare – may hold conflicting views on what is, and is not, considered problematic. Furthermore, wicked problems rarely lend themselves to clear-cut solutions that can be deemed unequivocally right or wrong. Rather, they involve a range of better or worse alternatives, each of which must be tested in practice – often without any real guarantee of success. Addressing one problem, or even a part of it, may also give rise to new and unforeseen challenges (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Devaney & Spratt, 2009).

The fact that the practical problems encountered in social work are characterized by a high degree of inherent uncertainty does not, of course, mean that one should resign oneself to that uncertainty. Devaney and Spratt (2009) also caution against the temptation to respond with overly simplified or generalized solutions. Instead, practitioners may remind themselves that domain-specific knowledge within the academic discipline of social work is continuously expanding, while also acknowledging and learning to navigate the challenges inherent in a profession marked by high levels of uncertainty and complexity. One constructive way to approach this complexity is to engage actively and reflectively with one's own use of knowledge – an approach to which I will return in the concluding section of this text.

## 2.3. Why Such a Focus on Knowledge Sources? – A Critical Perspective

As a final note on domain knowledge, I would like to highlight the ongoing debate and body of research concerning knowledge utilization in social work. I would argue that this discourse has, for too long, placed disproportionate emphasis on the *sources* of knowledge, while paying insufficient attention to the *content and structure* of the domain knowledge that informs professional practice. **(p. 231)** One illustrative example is the continuing debate about the relative importance of evidence versus practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in social work (Petersén & Olsson, 2015; Gambrill, 2018). While the origin of knowledge is undoubtedly relevant to assessments of its validity, reliability, and relevance, its specific source becomes secondary once we acknowledge that, in practice, knowledge from multiple sources is routinely integrated. Moreover, research on knowledge utilization has shown that practitioners

and decision-makers often struggle to identify the precise origins of the domain knowledge they draw upon – an insight exemplified in Weiss's classic study (1980).

In this context, it is important to underscore that the source of knowledge is not synonymous with its content. This distinction can be usefully illustrated through the concept of mental representation. In practice, it is plausible that (a) fragments from multiple sources of knowledge may be integrated into a single coherent mental representation, and (b) a single source of knowledge may give rise to several, potentially conflicting, mental representations. As an example of the latter, scientific knowledge can be used to justify different, and sometimes opposing, intervention recommendations for the same problem. Given that the generation of both scientific and experience-based knowledge involves – albeit to varying degrees of formalization – the identification of patterns and regularities within or around a given phenomenon, I would argue that the development of practitioner knowledge and expertise would be better supported by shifting the focus away from the sources of domain knowledge and towards how such knowledge is applied in professional judgment and action.

## 3. Cognitive Process Knowledge

As mentioned in the introduction, knowledge of cognitive processes – what I refer to as *cognitive process knowledge* – is indispensable for a nuanced understanding of how domain knowledge is applied in the execution of complicated tasks (cf. expertise). The ways in which domain knowledge is processed in thought can directly shape the conclusions drawn, such as determining which problematic issues are most central within a given family or assessing the level of risk that a child in that family may come to harm. Eileen Munro (1996) articulates this influence effectively through her distinction between professional mistakes that are avoidable and those that are not. Given that professional practice is inherently characterized by uncertainty (see above), (**p. 232**) practitioners will inevitably encounter situations in which they misjudge present or future circumstances – despite having acted to the best of their ability, drawing on client information and the available domain knowledge. Such instances are what Munro (1996) refers to as *unavoidable mistakes*. *Avoidable mistakes*, by contrast, are those attributable to cognitive errors, including various forms of

cognitive bias – mistakes that stem from the ways in which we process information and reason. Munro's research (1996), along with studies conducted in the field of medicine (see e.g. Groopman, 2007), has demonstrated that a substantial proportion of errors in professional practice could, in fact, have been prevented through improved thinking processes.

In my discussion of cognitive process knowledge, I draw on the well-established distinction between two types of thinking processes: intuitive (*Type 1*) and analytical (*Type 2*) thinking (e.g., Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011). While this distinction has been a fixture in psychological research for over four decades (Evans & Stanovich, 2013), it has only gained wider public recognition in recent years – most notably through the work of Daniel Kahneman (e.g. 2011). According to dual-process theories, intuitive thinking is characterized by speed, automaticity, and a lack of conscious effort, whereas analytical thinking is slow, deliberate, and consciously controlled (Evans, 2008). Humans are sometimes described as *cognitive misers* (Evans & Stanovich, 2013), as we tend to favour the quick and effortless intuitive mode over the slower, more effortful analytical process, which requires sustained attention and imposes a higher cognitive load. Particularly relevant to the discussion that follows is the fact that intuition primarily draws on long-term memory, whereas analytical thinking – being consciously processed – relies on the relatively limited capacity of working memory (Evans, 2008).

## 3.1. Thinking Slowly and Analytically

There are numerous methods and models designed to guide the slow, often stepwise analysis of a situation or phenomenon. A relevant example within social work is the *critical appraisal* model, commonly associated with evidence-based practice (Gambrill, 2018). In psychological research on judgment and decision-making, however, the most frequently cited model is *decision analysis* (for a comprehensive overview, see Dowie, 1993). **(p. 233)** Decision analysis refers to the process of making a deliberate and rational choice by systematically identifying, evaluating, and estimating the likelihood of various potential outcomes associated with different courses of action. In contrast to judgment – which in this text denotes different types

of conclusions (see above) – a *decision* is defined as a choice between alternative actions (i.e., an action-oriented conclusion).

In the context of child welfare, for example, a decision may involve choosing between allowing a child to remain with their biological parents or placing the child in temporary foster care. In accordance with decision analysis, the process begins by identifying a range of potential outcomes for each available course of action. These outcomes—or scenarios—might include: (1) positive change, (2) no change, and (3) negative change. The next step involves listing the potential advantages and disadvantages of each outcome, followed by an evaluation of their overall *utility*, weighing both benefits and drawbacks. In the context of child welfare, *utility* should be interpreted broadly – as the degree to which an outcome is desirable, primarily in terms of how well it supports the child's present and future well-being (Munro, 2020). The next step is to estimate the likelihood that a particular action or intervention will lead to a given outcome. Both the evaluation of an outcome's utility and the estimation of its probability are grounded in domain knowledge – and, in practice, are likely also influenced by subjective values. These assessments are typically expressed in quantified form, using scales that range from a minimum to a maximum value. According to decision analysis, the most rational choice is to select the course of action or intervention that maximizes the *subjective expected utility* for those affected. This value is calculated by summing, for each alternative, the products of the utility and the probability associated with each possible outcome. For a detailed and pedagogically clear account of how decision analysis can be applied in the context of child welfare, see Munro (2020); see also O'Sullivan (2008).

Most researchers in the field of judgment and decision-making agree that the analytical approach outlined above offers several important advantages – for example, it makes the knowledge and values underlying a decision more transparent and highlights the uncertainty inherent in the situation (see, for example, Munro, 2020). At the same time, there is broad consensus that this approach does not accurately reflect how people typically think in real-world contexts. Decision analysis represents a *prescriptive* approach to judgment – that is, it outlines how a rational individual *should* think – rather than a *descriptive* account of how individuals actually make decisions in practice. In everyday professional contexts, (**p. 234**) the application of formal decision analysis is often constrained by situational factors such as time

pressure, incomplete information, and limited access to relevant knowledge (cf. Lipsky, 1980). Moreover, humans face inherent cognitive limitations: we struggle to consistently and accurately process large volumes of information and to evaluate all possible courses of action and their potential consequences (cf. Miller, 1956).

A widely cited example of how human reasoning departs from strictly rational models is Herbert Simon's (1956) seminal concept of *satisficing* (cf. "bounded rationality"). According to this view, when faced with limited time and resources, individuals tend to select the first satisfactory option encountered, rather than exhaustively evaluating all possible alternatives. In the context of social work, one might envision a scenario involving an experienced social worker working a night shift. The worker is dispatched to a family well known to both social services and the emergency duty team, where young children have been left unattended while their parents are out at a bar. The situation requires an immediate and decisive response. Rather than evaluating all possible courses of action, the social worker – following a brief but deliberate reflection – opts to contact the children's maternal grandparents, who live nearby and have previously demonstrated their reliability as caregivers, to ask if the children can stay with them overnight (adapted and abridged from Taylor, 2017a, p. 181).

## 3.2. Thinking Fast and Intuitively

In practice, human thinking is largely governed by intuition, or *Type 1* processing (see above). Over time, researchers have proposed a variety of – at times competing – explanations of what intuition actually entails (cf. Epstein, 2010; Hogarth, 2010). Today, however, there is broad agreement that Type 1 thinking comprises a range of cognitive systems and processes that enable rapid information processing (Glöckner & Witteman, 2010; Evans & Stanovich, 2013). This form of intuitive thinking is generally characterized by its speed, efficiency, automaticity, and lack of conscious deliberation (see above). In considering what intuition *is not*, Hogarth (2010) argues for a clear distinction between intuition and related concepts such as instinct or insight. The role of emotion in intuition remains a subject of debate. While Epstein (2010) contends that most conceptualizations of intuition are strictly cognitive, Hogarth (2010) maintains that intuitive judgments may originate in emotional

responses – such as fear – and **(p. 235)** are often accompanied by a subjective sense of certainty. In the following section, I examine both a "positive" and a "skeptical" perspective on intuitive thinking.

### 3.2.1. Thinking Fast and Intuitively – Pattern Recognition

Herbert Simon (1992), the renowned Nobel Prize–winning social scientist, described experts' use of intuitive thinking as follows: "The situation has provided a cue; this cue has given the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition" (Simon, 1992, p. 155). This type of *pattern recognition* can be understood as situational cues or signals automatically triggering associations with relevant domain knowledge stored in long-term memory in the form of mental representations (cf. Ericsson & Pool, 2016). The more developed an individual's domain knowledge – reflected in the richness and organization of their specialized mental representations – the greater their ability to intuitively detect meaningful patterns in what might otherwise appear to be unrelated or random information (ibid.).

Gary Klein (2008), one of the most prominent researchers in this field, has conducted numerous large-scale field studies examining how professionals such as firefighters and nurses utilize what he terms *intuitive expertise* to solve problems. According to Klein, intuitive expertise involves more than the rapid identification and interpretation of key cues in a complex situation – the recognition process itself also generates an initial, plausible course of action. This initial intuition is typically followed by a phase of analysis, during which the expert mentally simulates potential consequences of the proposed solution. If the solution appears sufficiently viable, it is selected (cf. *satisficing*, above); if not, the expert moves on to consider the next plausible alternative (ibid.).

In the field of social work, Laura Cook (2017) has conducted interview-based research examining how practitioners use pattern recognition to quickly and intuitively assess, during home visits, the level of risk a child may be exposed to in their family. She identified five key indicators that practitioners were able to articulate retrospectively: (1) the extent to which the parent(s) **(p. 236)** were open to discussing sensitive issues; (2) the coherence and comprehensibility of the parent's

narrative; (3) the degree of consistency between the parent's emotional expressions and the content or severity of their narrative and the overall situation; (4) the way the parent spoke about their child; and (5) the parent's expressed willingness to take responsibility for the child's well-being (ibid.). These indicators may also be articulated as fragments of domain knowledge – for example: "The greater a parent's willingness to take responsibility for their child's well-being, the lower the risk that the child will suffer harm."

### 3.2.2. Thinking Fast and Intuitively – Heuristics and Biases

While intuitive expertise – such as pattern recognition – is invaluable in professional practice, it should not be relied upon uncritically. A key reason is that the accuracy and reliability of rapid, intuitive thinking are partly shaped by contextual factors within the environment or domain in which the relevant expertise has been developed (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). This issue will be addressed again in the final section of this text. Another reason is that humans tend to rely on *cognitive shortcuts* when thinking rapidly – shortcuts that can sometimes lead to accurate conclusions but also to systematic errors. These shortcuts, known as *heuristics*, and the *biases* they may produce, have been a central focus of research recognized by the 2002 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, awarded to Daniel Kahneman (cf. Kahneman, 2011). It is also noteworthy that Mary Richmond – one of the pioneers of social work – addressed the issue of bias in inferences and conclusions as early as 1917, in Chapter 5 of her seminal work *Social Diagnosis*. To date, more than 100 empirically studied cognitive biases have been identified (see Wikipedia; for a list contextualized within social work, see Taylor, 2017a, p. 98). However, due to space constraints, this text will address only a select few.

According to Kahneman (2011, chapter 9, p. 420), heuristics operate by unconsciously substituting a complex question with a simpler one, which we then answer in its place. For instance, the *representativeness heuristic* involves replacing the question "What is the probability that object A belongs to category B?" with the more intuitive "How representative is object A of category B?" Norwegian psychologist Geir Kirkebøen (2012, p. 62) offers the following example: the complex question (**p. 237**) we seek to answer is "How likely is it that someone who tries

cannabis will go on to use harder drugs?" However, without being aware of it, we may instead answer the much simpler question, "How common or typical is it for individuals who use hard drugs to have started with cannabis?" Since many individuals who use harder drugs did, in fact, begin with cannabis, reliance on this heuristic can lead to the erroneous conclusion that cannabis use frequently – or even inevitably – leads to the use of harder substances. The flaw in this reasoning becomes even more apparent when one considers that nearly all individuals who use harder drugs also began with breast milk (ibid.). The representativeness heuristic can also be understood in terms of *stereotyping*, and it may contribute to discriminatory judgments based on factors such as social class, gender, or ethnicity. A vignette study involving 105 Israeli social workers assessing children at risk (Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky, 2015) found that participants were more likely to recommend out-of-home placement when the child's family had a low socioeconomic status or belonged to an ethnically marginalized group – even though the objective and subjective risk levels were identical to those of the comparison cases.

The cognitive bias most frequently cited in the social work literature is *confirmation bias* – the tendency to seek out and give greater weight to information that supports one's pre-existing beliefs, while ignoring, dismissing, or reinterpreting information that challenges them. A vignette study involving over 200 Northern Irish social workers assessing children at risk (Spratt, Devaney & Hayes, 2015) found that practitioners' initial hypotheses regarding what was in the child's best interest – whether remaining in foster care or returning to their biological parents – noticeably influenced how they interpreted the child's own expressed wishes. Social workers who believed that foster care was in the child's best interest generally interpreted the child's wish to remain in foster care as a sign of insight. Conversely, when the child expressed a desire to return to their biological parents, these same practitioners were more likely to view the child as too young to understand what was best for them (ibid.). Such confirmation bias in professional judgment can, for instance, lead to either an overestimation or underestimation of the risk of harm to a child – potentially with serious consequences.

In her content analysis of all public inquiries into child welfare cases with tragic outcomes – comprising 45 reports published between 1973 and 1994 – Munro (1996, 1999) identified evidence of **(p. 238)** several cognitive biases in the decision-

making of British social services. In addition to finding that the social workers involved were slow to revise their assessments in light of new evidence – an indication of confirmation bias – Munro (1996) observed that reports of concern were treated differently depending on their source. Specifically, reports submitted by professionals were significantly more likely to prompt thorough investigations than those submitted by neighbors or relatives. This pattern suggests the influence of *credibility bias* – that is, the tendency to give greater weight to information from sources perceived as trustworthy or authoritative (cf. Taylor, 2017a). Moreover, Munro (1999) found that the information most influential in social workers' assessments was often that which was easily accessible, vivid, or concrete – indicating the presence of *availability bias*; emotionally charged – reflecting *affect bias*; or that which appeared either early or late in the assessment process – suggesting *order effects bias*.

For readers seeking a deeper understanding of cognitive biases, the comprehensive review by Bowes et al. (2020), which explores the application of these concepts in psychological practice, is highly recommended. Also of interest is the recent systematic review by Featherston et al. (2020), which offers valuable insights into the current state of research in the field.

## 3.3. A Combination of Intuition and Analysis?

Researchers in the field of cognitive psychology broadly agree that the ideal mode of thinking is not a matter of analysis *or* intuition, but rather a combination of both. However, views diverge regarding how these processes interact. Some scholars argue that Type 1 (intuitive) and Type 2 (analytical) processes operate in parallel, competing for dominance. Others suggest that intuitive, automatic thinking functions as the default mode, with analytical reasoning activated only when required (cf. Evans, 2008; Glöckner & Witteman, 2010).

An alternative perspective proposes that thinking occurs *along a continuum* between analysis and intuition, with varying degrees of each being activated depending on contextual factors and the specific characteristics of the task at hand (Hammond, 1996; Dhami & Thomson, 2012). Complex situations – characterized by practitioner familiarity with the task, the availability of extensive information requiring interpretation, multiple possible courses of action, and time pressure – are

more likely to elicit intuitive thinking. In contrast, analytical thinking tends to be activated in unfamiliar situations, where information is limited (**p. 239**) and time constraints are less pressing (Dhami & Thomson, 2012). On this basis, one might be tempted to draw the premature conclusion that the complexity of social work practice inherently favors intuitive over analytical thinking – and that intuition is therefore the superior approach. However, as will be discussed in the concluding section, the reality is considerably more nuanced.

Another approach to managing situational complexity involves (more or less) *deliberately* simplifying the information used in decision-making – consciously applying heuristics that are particularly well-suited to the context at hand (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; cf. satisficing, above). The work of German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer on so-called *smart* or *rational heuristics* has laid the foundation for a relatively new and rapidly expanding field, one that holds considerable promise for future research on professional cognitive processes. Within the domain of social work, research in this area remains in its early stages. One notable finding from a vignette study involving 20 Dutch practitioners responsible for matching children with foster families was that decision-making at times relied on the so-called *one-reason heuristic*, whereby a single factor was deemed sufficient to exclude a family from further consideration (Zeijlmans et al., 2019). Factors considered decisive included, for example, a mismatch between the child's age and the foster family's preferences, or the child's need for a type of care the family was unable to provide (ibid.). Another deliberate strategy for managing the complexity of social work practice with children at risk of harm may involve basing judgments on a *selected* set of key risk factors, rather than attempting a comprehensive evaluation of all known risk indicators (Taylor, 2017b). However, a major challenge in deliberately reducing complexity through cognitive shortcuts lies in the need for highly developed domain knowledge to accurately judge which information can be safely disregarded. Furthermore, this approach carries the inherent risk of introducing cognitive biases – such as confirmation bias, as previously discussed.

This is the English translation of Chapter 11 from the Anniversary Book published in 2022 to mark the 75th anniversary of the School of Social Work, Lund University (Sweden).

(p. 240)

# 4. On the Conscious Development and Application of Expertise

Thus far, I have examined how practitioners deploy their expertise through the lens of knowledge utilization, working from the premise that this use of knowledge is most clearly manifested in their professional judgments. I have distinguished between domain knowledge – the substance of those judgments, focused on a specific practical problem – and cognitive process knowledge, which concerns the mental operations through which domain knowledge is shaped and applied. I now turn to the deliberate cultivation and practical deployment of practitioners' expertise in professional work.

## 4.1. What Defines an Expert?

Researchers aiming to understand what distinguishes experts and how expertise evolves through practical experience typically adopt one of two approaches: they either observe individuals recognized for their exceptional ability to perform complicated tasks, or they compare professionals with extensive experience in a given domain to those who have only recently completed their formal education. These groups are commonly referred to as *experts* and *novices*, respectively (Feltovich, Prietula & Ericsson, 2018). In research on professional practice, discussions of the differences between experts and novices often reference the five-stage model of expertise acquisition proposed by the Dreyfus brothers (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). However, as this model has faced growing criticism over the years (Kirkebøen, 1999; Gobet & Chassy, 2008), I instead draw on more recent psychological research in the field.

Several of the most widely recognized characteristics and abilities attributed to experts in the literature closely align with what has previously been described as pattern recognition. A key distinguishing feature is experts' selective attention to cues and signals: compared to novices, experts are significantly more skilled at discerning which elements – within a complex and information-rich environment – are most critical for making a particular judgment (such as identifying signs that a child may

be at risk; cf. Cook, above). Experts detect relevant cues more rapidly – often without conscious awareness – and consider a broader range of indicators, including those that **(p. 241)** may at first appear unrelated to the case at hand (cf. "selective cue use is a hallmark of expertise", Larrick & Feiler, 2015, p. 700; see also Feltovich, Prietula & Ericsson, 2018). Another defining feature of expert performance is the ability to perceive cues and facts as components of broader, more complex patterns rather than as isolated pieces of information. Experts tend to interpret problems at a deeper, more abstract level and offer more integrated and coherent explanations than novices (Feltovich, Prietula & Ericsson, 2018; cf. "experts see the forest when everyone else sees only trees", Ericsson & Pool, 2016, p. 63).

These advanced cognitive abilities allow experts to think more rapidly than novices and to make decisions at a faster pace. Such manifestations of expertise are generally attributed to the extensive and highly specialized mental representations that develop over time and are stored in long-term memory (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). This underscores the central role of domain-specific knowledge in cognitive processing: the more developed an individual's domain knowledge, the more quickly they can reach a potentially accurate conclusion. It also reinforces the notion that expertise is inherently tied to specific domains (Feltovich, Prietula & Ericsson, 2018).

## 4.2. Conditions for Reliable Intuitive Expertise

Extensive practical experience within a specific domain is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the development of intuitive expertise – that is, advanced domain knowledge applied with ease and immediacy (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). A commonly cited benchmark is 10,000 hours or approximately 10 years of practice. However, it is important to note that Anders Ericsson, the originator of this so-called "10,000-hour rule", has been strongly critical of its oversimplified use across various contexts. In practice, extensive experience does not automatically translate into reliable intuitive expertise. Research indicates that although practitioners' confidence in their own expertise tends to increase over time, it is entirely possible to be a better practitioner five years after graduation than after 30 years in the profession (ibid.). This may be partly explained by memory decay, as well as by the fact that experts are not immune to the cognitive biases discussed earlier (cf. Kahneman, 2011).

Another important explanation is that certain features of the practice context affect the *reliability* of the knowledge acquired through the implicit, and often unconscious, learning that takes place in professional experience. Research has shown that experienced professionals working with **(p. 242)** static phenomena in *friendly* environments – characterized by stable patterns and immediate, accessible feedback – tend to perform better, for example in describing problems and making predictions, than those operating in *unfriendly* contexts (Shanteau, 1992; Hogarth, 2010). The latter are typically defined by dynamic, often human-related phenomena, marked by unpredictability and feedback that is delayed, ambiguous, or difficult to obtain (ibid.; cf. the distinction between tame and wicked problems, discussed earlier). Meteorologists and physicists exemplify professionals who operate in friendly contexts, whereas judges, clinical psychologists, and social workers typically work in unfriendly environments (Shanteau, 1992). The explanatory model used to account for these differences suggests that the development of *valid* and *reliable* domain knowledge is facilitated by practice environments that exhibit clear, recurring regularities – patterns that practitioners can observe, respond to, and receive timely feedback on (Shanteau, 1992; Hogarth, 2010; Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

Although social workers generally operate in "unfriendly" contexts, it is still possible to observe and internalize patterns – albeit weaker and less consistent ones – and there is also variation in the availability and immediacy of feedback. While feedback on whether and how a specific intervention contributes to a client's long-term positive development is often delayed or entirely lacking, social workers may receive immediate feedback on their interpersonal interactions through clients' body language, tone of voice, and verbal responses (cf. Kirkebøen, 2012).

## 4.3. The Conscious Development of Expertise

How, then, can practitioners develop and maintain their expertise in unfriendly practice environments? The near-unanimous conclusion in the literature is that practitioners must adopt a more proactive and deliberate approach to the use of domain knowledge (Shanteau, 1992; Hogarth, 2010; Ericsson & Pool, 2016). In essence, this means cultivating strategies for slow thinking – becoming more consciously aware of, critically evaluating, refining, and reinforcing the domain knowledge that underpins professional judgments and actions. Such slow-thinking

strategies are sometimes compared to the reasoning processes of detectives or researchers (Hogarth, 2010; Sheppard, 1995), and they need not **(p. 243)** be as formalized as the decision analysis discussed earlier. In social work, the concepts of *critical reflection* and *critical thinking* are commonly used to describe broader professional approaches that incorporate slow, analytical thought processes, and there is a substantial body of literature on the topic (e.g., Fook & Gardner, 2007; Gambrill, 2018). Personally, I find the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin's model of argument (1958) particularly useful. It offers a practical and broadly applicable tool for articulating – and specifying the degree of certainty or uncertainty in – the domain knowledge underlying a given conclusion. In a 2016 article, Anders Molander and I explore how Toulmin's model can be applied in the teaching of professional reasoning and judgment in social work (Wallander & Molander, 2016). Anders Ericsson argues that the deliberate development of expertise – such as through slow-thinking strategies – is most effectively achieved under supervision, meaning with the guidance of one or more experienced colleagues, instructors, or mentors (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

A reasonable counterargument in this context is that there is neither time nor opportunity in everyday practice to engage in slow, deliberate analysis of the basis for every judgment and decision. However, the aim is not to replace intuitive judgment entirely – which would be both impossible and undesirable – but rather to establish structures that integrate conscious knowledge use into routine practice, thereby strengthening both individual and collective expertise. Elements of this already exist in social work, for example through supervision and case conferences. Such efforts can also generate positive feedback loops: the more detailed and reliable an individual's domain knowledge (cf. mental representations), the more effectively they can assimilate new information (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). Similarly, the more one engages in analytical thinking, the more efficiently such thought processes can be carried out over time (cf. "making scientific method intuitive", Hogarth, 2010, p. 348). Moreover, the role of informative feedback in the development of expertise cannot be overstated (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). When such feedback does not occur naturally – as it often does for meteorologists, for instance – practitioners must take active steps to obtain information about the outcomes of their judgments, decisions, and actions. In social work, *feedback-informed treatment* provides a clear example of this approach, as practitioners systematically **(p. 244)** collect and utilize client feedback on both the therapeutic alliance and the outcomes of the intervention

(Miller & Bertolino, 2014; see also the ORS and SRS in the methods guide from the National Board of Health and Welfare, 2022).

## 4.4. The Conscious Use of Expertise

Slow, deliberate reflection on the domain-specific knowledge that underpins professional judgment and action not only fosters the development of expertise but also enables practitioners to recognize and mitigate potential cognitive biases in their intuitive thinking – thereby reducing the risk of bias-related errors (see above; Kahneman, 2011; Munro, 1999, 2020). It is important to note, however, that the ability to detect and correct cognitive distortions through analytical thinking is also contingent upon possessing *relevant* domain knowledge (Evans, 2020). A relatively recent narrative review highlights the limited research available on *debiasing strategies* within the context of social work (Featherston et al., 2019).

The slow and deliberate application of domain knowledge can also be viewed from the perspective of professional ethics. One could argue that professionals – entrusted with resources that may significantly affect individuals' lives – have a moral obligation to make explicit the domain knowledge that underpins their judgments and actions (cf. Molander, 2016). This applies both in relation to colleagues and other decision-makers – who should have the opportunity to scrutinize and contribute to the use of knowledge (cf. peer review) – and in relation to clients, who should be provided with relevant information and, where possible, be enabled to participate actively in shared decision-making (cf. Wallander, 2022).

However, articulating the domain knowledge underlying professional judgment and action is not always feasible. Professionals also possess knowledge that is difficult to express – practical, experience-based knowledge that is closely tied to the individual practitioner and the specific contexts in which it is applied (Grimen, 2008). I argue that knowledge should not be uncritically categorized as tacit – as if it *must* remain unspoken – but rather that the distinction between tacit (or implicit) and explicit knowledge should be understood as a continuum, along which domain knowledge can potentially shift. Certain domain-specific knowledge acquired through formal and deliberate learning – such as learning to drive – is gradually automated and eventually used intuitively (Larrick & Feiler, 2015).

(**p. 245**) Similarly, domain knowledge gained through formal education, such as higher studies, may become increasingly intuitive over time as it is repeatedly applied in professional practice. Conversely, it is possible that a meaningful share of the knowledge acquired informally through professional practice can be brought to awareness and articulated. For instance, one of my own studies within the aforementioned project on knowledge use in child welfare services demonstrated that domain knowledge can become more explicit when practitioners are supported in reflecting on their own thinking (Wallander, 2022). Even when knowledge cannot be expressed verbally, it can often be conveyed through other means – for instance, through demonstration (Grimen, 2008). Naturally, there is always a risk that the intuitive basis of a given conclusion may, in the process of verbalization, be replaced by something entirely different (cf. post hoc rationalization; Evans, 2020). Nonetheless, verbalization enables what is made conscious and articulated in words to be subjected to critical scrutiny and dialogue (ibid.).

## 4.5. Taking Collective Responsibility for Expertise

Throughout this text, the primary focus has been on individual expertise and how knowledge is employed in the judgments and decisions of individual practitioners. However, both the use and development of knowledge are inherently collective processes and constitute a shared professional responsibility. Ideally, the reliability, validity, and relevance of the domain knowledge underpinning a descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, or action-oriented conclusion should ultimately be assessed based on the extent to which both the knowledge and the conclusion are aligned with the professional collective (Munro, 2020).

In this regard, both the profession at large and local professional communities play a critical role. Engaging in group-based reasoning and deliberation can lead to more well-founded and carefully considered judgments and decisions (cf. Mercier & Sperber, 2011). This is partly because the group, as a collective, holds a broader range of domain knowledge than any individual practitioner. However, for a group to genuinely "think better" than an individual, a deliberative discussion climate is essential – one in which differing perspectives are systematically articulated, challenged, and critically examined (ibid.). This can be fostered, for example, by

encouraging group members to adopt each other's perspectives or deliberately take on the role of "devil's advocate" (cf. Janis, 1971).

Ultimately, the responsibility for creating structures and allocating time for both individual and collective learning – as well as for facilitating peer support and the review of **(p. 246)** practitioners' knowledge use – rests with social work organizations and employers (Munro, 2020). It is also important to recognize that social workers' discretionary space is limited by legal frameworks, political directives, economic constraints, and "pre-packaged solutions" (such as a restricted range of procured interventions). As a result, practitioners are not always able to *act* fully in accordance with professional judgments grounded in their own expertise (cf. Jönsson, 2021; Svensson, Johnsson & Laanemets, 2021). These constraints and limitations have, however, been examined in greater detail elsewhere (e.g., Svensson, Johnsson & Laanemets, 2021).

Instead, this text has been guided by a belief in the emancipatory potential of individual expertise. The core idea is that increased awareness of – and more deliberate engagement with – both the domain-specific knowledge underlying professional judgments and the cognitive processes that shape them can jointly contribute to professionalization at the individual level. Strengthening practitioners' expertise in this way may also contribute to a more resilient profession – one that is better equipped to respond to, and counterbalance, the challenges posed by an increasing bureaucratization and commodification of professional knowledge.

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