

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES: DO WE HAVE TIME FOR THIS?

Ulene Shiller, Marianna Strydom

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South Africa is experiencing a high incidence of child abuse and neglect. The care and protection of children require of social workers to deliver child protection services including compiling reports for Children's Court hearings. This paper focuses on how the Family Assessment for Least Developed Countries (FA-LDC) instrument can be used as evidenced-based practice to assist social workers in statutory investigations. Findings indicate that this instrument directed information gathering more effectively for the finalisation of investigations. The paper concludes by indicating how the utilisation of assessment instruments can assist social workers in dealing with high caseloads.

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## **EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES: DO WE HAVE TIME FOR THIS?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

South African child protection services are overwhelmed with the number of investigations of children who are in need of care and protection (Ndonga, 2016; Schiller, 2017; Van Huyssteen & Strydom, 2016). These needs have escalated owing to the high poverty rate and HIV/AIDS-related deaths that leave children orphaned. Contributing to the need for child protection services is the high incidence of substance misuse resulting in child abuse and neglect. Although children are often cared for by the extended family or communities they live in, the levels of poverty and unemployment mean that families often need extra assistance to provide for the material needs of these children. One of the poverty alleviation strategies in South Africa is the child support grant. Families are assessed by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and may then apply for such a grant. This grant is currently valued at R380-00 and often does not contribute much to alleviate the financial needs of a family (SASSA, 2017). An extended family has another option, which is to apply for a foster care grant which is higher in monetary value (R920-00). However, a family cannot simply apply for this grant, as it requires a full statutory investigation by a registered social worker from a child protection organisation or the government. Because of the ever-escalating social needs as mentioned, social workers are often overwhelmed by such requests. The researchers also observed in practice that social workers have high caseloads (DSD, 2015b, Schiller, 2017) and are inundated with investigations they have to conduct. This results in investigations that are rushed with scant attention to detail, with the consequence that important information about the safety as well as the development of children is often not considered or is overlooked.

The National Family Preservation Network (NFPN) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in the United States of America. They developed the Family Assessment for Least Developed Countries (FA-LDC) tool specifically for least developed countries and in fact it has been field tested in Nepal and Ethiopia (NFPN, 2012). Although South Africa is not considered a least developed country (Fialho & Van Bergeijk, 2017), the researchers in this study explored different assessment instruments and found that this specific instrument could be of value in the South African context, and therefore did some empirical research to determine its value. This paper will focus on how the FA-LDC instrument could add value when rendering evidenced-based services to such families.

### **EVIDENCED-BASED PRACTICE**

Evidenced-based practice refers to the use of scientific evidence in conjunction with practice knowledge and client values as the basis for decision-making rather than relying on the opinions of others (Gambrill, 1999, as cited in Lawson & Berrick, 2013). There is a belief that “in social work, as in many other disciplines that deal with human outcomes, there has been a change in recent years toward the use of evidenced-based practice (EBP) in selecting interventions and making practice decisions” (Lawson & Berrick, 2013: 323). This is supported by Ahn, Osteen, O’Connor and Shaw (2014), who report that as early as in 2008 there was a notable increase in child welfare organisations embracing evidenced-based practice. Additionally, Wells and Correia (2012) argue that evidenced-based practice interventions successfully minimise specific safety dangers and risks to families, and this should be taken into account by the child welfare agencies. Similarly, according to Ahn *et al.* (2014), efforts to embrace and efficiently apply evidenced-based practice have increasingly been made by child welfare organisations to improve outcomes for children and families. This improvement may generally be aimed at the prevention or reoccurrence of maltreatment of the children after they have been reunited with their families.

In this manner evidenced-based practice could help to determine what form of intervention may be relevant for child protection. Many authors argue that it is difficult to develop intervention strategies where an understanding of what might drive problematic behaviour is lacking (Rittner, Affronti, Crofford, Coombe & Schwam-Harris, 2011). The reliance on evidenced-based interventions should be accompanied by proof of effectiveness involving accurate external evidence (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). It has been pointed out that the failure of evidenced-based interventions can be traced to an inability to fundamentally change social work practice owing to its firmly “manualised” interventions not being a useful approach to service delivery (Barth *et al.*, 2011, as cited in Forrester, 2013: 94).

### **The use of assessment instruments as evidenced-based practice**

Agencies that provide safety to children have increasingly accepted assessment instruments to improve decision-making in child protection cases (Pecora, Chahine & Graham, 2013). However, Pecora *et al.* (2013) recommend that, irrespective of the ultimate usefulness of the safety and risk tools in child protection, effective decision making and competent assessment depend on sound professional judgement and a comprehensive systemic approach that goes beyond the use of a specific instrument. They claim that the effectiveness of risk and safety assessment in the protection of children depends on the utilisation of intuition together with rational decision making (Pecora, *et al.*, 2013). However, research shows that whereas intuitive decisions by experts can be accurate, too exclusive a reliance on intuition can be dangerous (Khaneman, 2011). Hence, the use of assessment instruments is relevant to assist with decision making in child protection. Assessment of risk and safety is essential in decision making relating to what actions need to be taken to protect children from ill-treatment (White & Walsh, 2006). Additionally, assessment instruments could also be used to determine the specific needs of a child (Pecora *et al.*, 2013). However, the broader systemic context should also be taken into account, as child protection service decision making not only takes place in the context of the child and family, but also within organisational contexts, such as the welfare organisation, the judicial system, and educational and health contexts (Baumann, Fluke, Dalglish & Kern, 2014).

Contrary to the assumed benefits of assessment instruments, a study revealed that a number of assessment instruments designed to help with the decision making of practitioners in child protection in the United States did not promote consistency in decision making, but were rather seen as an administrative burden (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010). In fact, service providers have to do more: they need to go beyond risk assessment instruments, given that their focus is on effective practice and making good decisions (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White & Pithouse, 2010). Of great assistance here would be to involve parents in identifying the risk. Moreover, assessment instruments which pose no threat are well suited to the child welfare setting and would allow parents, who are usually receiving services involuntarily, to share the frequently important power differential with the service provider (Williamson & Gray, 2011). Wells and Correia (2012) claimed that child welfare organisations could use assessment instruments to connect families with services.

It is evident that assessment tools could be used in a number of ways. The argument, however, is that assessments alone will not keep a child safe (Pecora *et al.*, 2013). In this regard, assessment instruments should be used in line with professional judgement and with connecting families with other relevant services.

Assessment instruments should furthermore be in line with the needs of a specific population. This means that the assessment instruments need to be tested with the intended group to create a higher predictive validity rate (Singh, Grann & Fazel, 2011). For true prediction by the instrument, high-quality and usable information should be produced; in this regard, the predictive validity becomes important.

The literature shows that the use of assessment instruments addresses gaps in service delivery (McLendon, McLendon & Hatch, 2012). However, there is an argument around paradigms rooted in the debate on objectivity and subjectivity. The claim is that the objectivist position is preoccupied with prediction and control, whereas proponents of the subjectivist position aim to re-establish the role of intra-personal and inter-personal perspectives in assessment (Stroud & Warren-Adamson, 2013: 38).

The use of assessment instruments revolves around social indicators, as social indicators provide a chance to understand people's circumstances (King, Reno & Novo, 2014). However, caution is needed when using social indicators as, for instance, a person may be wealthy, yet feel dissatisfied with life (King *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it is important to use these indicators in an attempt to understand people's circumstances, but attention should also be given to meanings that people attach to such indicators in order to understand their circumstances as they view them.

### **The FA-LDC instrument**

The instrument for Family Assessment for Least Developed Countries was developed in North Carolina under the auspices of the National Family Preservation Network (NFPN, 2012). The FA-LDC tool focuses on the income of the family, their health, education, employment, safety environment and a summary of family vulnerability. These domains can provide a sense of the wellbeing of the family, and serve as indicators for decision making in child protection services. Noting the aspects that the FA-LDC instrument encompassed, they were found to be in line with the information that social workers in South Africa require for their statutory investigations. The tool gives some important guidelines for the social worker to concentrate on that could assist with their professional evaluation. Because of the copyright protection of the FA-LDC tool the exact information cannot be published in this article.

The purposes of this tool include allowing social workers to identify and prioritise a family's needs and services in the helping process, and aid in assessing the family's general wellbeing (NFPN, 2012). The instrument was developed with the assistance of five international organisations, notably from Ethiopia and Nepal, participating in field testing of the tool. The instrument helps to capture the family's needs, and so can help in addressing those needs. The delineation of this instrument seemed to be appropriate for the South African context, but its applicability and relevance had to be tested.

## **SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL WELFARE APPROACH AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Welfare services in South Africa should be delivered within a social developmental paradigm (Patel, 2015). The social development perspective emphasises the social development of people while seeking to improve the environment in which they function. The fundamental goal is to improve the wellbeing of the people (Cox & Pawar, 2013). This approach includes the change from a treatment model to a developmental service delivery model (Patel, 2005).

As proposed by Cox and Pawar (2013), the social developmental welfare approach proposes planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development. The key ideology of the social developmental welfare approach, therefore, can be linked to the general enhancement of society. Also fundamental to this approach is the management of social developmental shortcomings (Cox & Pawar, 2013).

A counter-argument is that social ills will not be effectively addressed by the use of the remedial approach to social welfare; rather these ills demand a developmental approach (Hochfeld, 2010; Patel, 2005;). However, in practice the shift from the remedial to the developmental social welfare approach does not exclude the use of the remedial approach (Holscher, 2008; Midgley, 2010, as cited in Lombard & Twikirize, 2014). A further common factor is that developmental welfare suggests a focus on poverty, that it is rights-based and people-centred (Gray & Lombard, 2008). The focus on poverty and human rights is a typical indication that the element of assisting people is still part of the developmental social welfare approach. The focus of this approach is on the government's legal responsibility to deal with any imbalance and discrimination in meeting the basic needs of people, which makes the approach redistributive and inclusive (Patel, 2015).

Patel (2015 : 58) argues that themes that emerge in adopting the developmental social welfare approach in the South African context include: its being rights-based; democracy and participation in development; the interrelations between social and economic development; social welfare pluralism in

development; and reconciling the micro-macro divide in developmental social welfare theory and practice.

However, most relevant to this study is the aspect which refers to developmental welfare being rights-based and people-centred, envisaging social justice and dedication to meeting the needs of all South Africans, requiring the state to meet the needs and protect the rights of all children. Another aspect of the study concerns the micro-macro divide, with Patel (2015) claiming that developmental welfare attempts to harmonise micro, mezzo and macro interventions. She argues that in this approach intervention should not present as casework only; the methods should rather be expanded to include group, organisational, and research and policy interventions. The reality is that child protection services are still predominantly casework-based because of the high demand for investigations into child abuse and neglect, and the lack of resources to address issues on the early intervention and preventative levels.

The use of the instrument creates an opportunity for continuous development in service provision, specifically regarding child protection services. It therefore provides the foundation for dealing with social problems and empowers practitioners and families, and also addresses human rights for the purpose of development.

The utilisation of assessment tools generates an opportunity for participation by both service providers and service users, and a chance for constant development in service delivery, specifically regarding child protection services. Moreover, it includes the family in the process of child protection. This resonates with the key ideology of the developmental approach and can therefore be linked to the changing of society for the better.

Briefly, using the social developmental welfare approach in this study entailed the application of the fundamental aspects of the theory, such as human rights, participation in development, the promotion of wellbeing, and the response to developmental shortcomings. The process to determine the relevance and application of the FA-LDC instrument was guided by applying intervention research.

## **INTERVENTION RESEARCH AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researchers adopted the process of intervention research as outlined by Rothman and Thomas (1994). The FA-LDC instrument was introduced to social workers in practice, after which further development of the instrument took place to ensure its relevance for social workers in South African. The steps of intervention research will be set out below, followed by discussions of the research design, sampling, data collection and analysis.

The study was guided by the following research question: How could evidence-based practice assist social workers in delivering child protection services?

The study proceeded along the steps outlined below.

- Problem analysis and project planning

The researchers, along with the directors and managers of three NGOs in the Eastern Cape, identified the high caseloads borne by the social workers. The FA-LDC instrument was identified as an assessment tool that could possibly assist social workers when doing family assessments as part of their statutory investigations. It was decided that, along with the identified NGOs, the social workers would utilise the FA-LDC instrument for three months, after they received training on how to apply it as part of their statutory investigations to determine the relevance and applicability of this assessment instrument. The social workers would then be convened in a focus group to present comments and suggestions on the application of this assessment instrument.

- Information gathering and synthesis

Information and comments from the participants (social workers) were collected the after the three-month period of implementation of the FA-LDC instrument. All participants gave feedback in focus group discussions as to which aspects of the instrument were helpful to them and which were not.

- Design

This led to the next phase during which the researchers added these revised aspects to the “adapted” FA-LDC instrument to ensure that it was more appropriate to the South African context. The field tests expanded to the Western Cape for the subsequent phase of the study.

- Early development and pilot testing

Following the design phase, the assessment instrument – adapted to fit the South African context – was further developed and piloted for another period of three months. An additional 20 participants (social workers) who deal with family assessments in a different province participated in the study.

- Evaluation and advanced development

After the pilot-testing phase in the Western Cape, the “adapted” FA-LDC instrument was re-evaluated. The researchers took into account the final comments of the participants and made final adaptations to the instrument.

- Dissemination

Finally, the primary developers of this instrument, the National Family Preservation Network (NFPN 012), will collaboratively decide on how this instrument could be disseminated in South Africa.

## **Research Approach**

A qualitative research approach (Maree, 2016) was used to gain a holistic understanding of how social workers incorporated the FA-LDC instrument into their investigations. This kind of research approach was suitable as it “opened up new understandings” (Babbie, 2007; Maree, 2016) that could contribute to addressing the specific problem in practice. This approach was selected to encapsulate the “lived challenges” that social workers had to deal with during their practice.

## **Data-collection method**

Six focus group discussions were held with four different NGOs (three in the Eastern Cape and one in the Western Cape) that participated in the study. In the Eastern Cape the workshops were held to train the social workers how to use the FA-LDC instrument in their assessments. Formal focus group discussions took place after these training workshops.

The first phase of the research was done with 30 participants in the Eastern Cape. This phase consisted of three focus group discussions with three different NGOs. Participants were required to implement the instrument in their daily practice when rendering child protection services. This process lasted for three months, after which the focus group discussions were held and adjustments were made to the instrument.

The second phase was done in the Western Cape, where the adapted instrument was also introduced to 20 participants. These 20 participants utilised the instrument for another period of three months and feedback was discussed in two focus groups. In the first focus group the feedback was obtained about further adjustments to the instrument. In the second focus group the utilisation of the instrument was discussed. This whole process entailed 18 months of field testing.

In both phases the feedback by the participants was discussed in detail to develop a more relevant assessment tool for the South African context.

It was evident that data saturation was reached when no significant new information was forthcoming from the focus group discussions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Maree, 2016).

## **Sampling**

Participants in the study were purposively selected to form part of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The researchers contacted the directors of NGOs that predominantly deliver statutory services in the two provinces and were willing to take part in the study. All the participants were social workers

dealing with child protection and family assessments in child welfare service delivery. To preserve all ethical mandates of research, the directors of these organisations first gave permission for the study. Participants signed an informed consent form listing their rights and what was expected of them during the research. The Universities' Research and Ethics Committees at the University of Fort Hare provided ethical clearance for the research.

Trustworthiness as described by De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpont (2011) was promoted by ensuring transferability with the triangulation of multiple focus group discussions. Dependability (reliability) was ensured, a logical research process was followed and a steady audit trail was kept throughout the research process (De Vos *et al.*, 2011, 122-124).

### Data analysis

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques as described by De Vos *et al.* (2011). Thematic analysis was done as advised by Ryan and Bernard (2003 in Bryman, 2011), where the categories were identified. Codes were also used in transcripts, which enabled thematic clustering of the data. The researchers clustered together the themes indicating how the participants experienced the use of the FA-LDC instrument before and after it had been adapted to the South African context.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The motivation for the selection of this specific assessment instrument was to assist social workers doing family assessments. It was also supported by the social developmental welfare approach, which is to enhance society by managing social developmental shortcomings (Cox & Pawar, 2013), in this case service delivery to vulnerable families in child protection services.

All participants were child welfare social workers mainly responsible for family assessments and practising in the field of child protection; they were involved in making decisions about the care and protection of children. It should be noted that all the social workers who participated in this study indicated that they were all confronted with high caseloads, with some 100-150 families in every caseload.

Thirty social workers who participated in the first phase of the research were from the Eastern Cape and twenty social workers were from the Western Cape.

The majority of the social workers had a BSW degree and a few had a postgraduate degree such as a Master's degree in Social Work.

The following themes emerged from the discussions – held with the participants both in the first and second phase of the research – on how the FA-LDC tool could assist them in child protection services.

**TABLE 1**  
**EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPANTS ON THE UTILISATION OF THE FA-LDC INSTRUMENT**

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1. Relevant information obtained	1.1 Comprehensive household information gathered 1.2 Instrument needs to be adapted to SA context
2. Assessment instrument should not inhibit professional judgement	2.1 More provision for one's own professional judgement 2.2 Critical thinking and analytical skills are still required
3. Heavy workloads experienced in child protection	3.1 Assessment instrument is too time-consuming 3.2 Administrative burden during statutory investigations 3.3 High caseloads inhibit social work innovation

### Theme 1: Relevant information obtained

From the analysis it was suggested that the information that was obtained with the use of the assessment instrument was comprehensive, but that it needed to be adapted to the South African context. A number of sub-themes emerged.

### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Comprehensive household information gathered***

In this study the FA-LDC tool was found to be useful in collecting household information. One of the participants in the focus group discussions suggested that the FA-LDC tool would allow one to get a more comprehensive view of the household. The participant claimed that:

*“I would use this tool because then it will give me a broader view of what is going on in ...”*

Another participant added:

*“This form assisted me in asking things I have never thought of; this allowed me to complete my investigation quicker, as I did not have to come back for the clients to follow up information.”*

Since the first phase of the study revealed that the FA-LDC tool could be relevant to child protection in the South African context, it was adjusted to cover additional information needed for child protection.

### ***Sub-theme 1.2: Instrument needs to be adapted to the South African context***

Initially participants mentioned that the FA-LDC tool does not yield all the information required for child protection investigations in the context of South African families, such as making important observations on family composition and family dynamics. One of the participants mentioned during the first phase of the study, and was supported by the group, that:

*“I realised the information that we have to collect makes up a small portion of the report.”*

Another participant observed:

*“If the assessment form was more in line with our format that we need for our statutory investigation, we were going to use it more...”*

An additional view was that:

*“...it is difficult to indicate all the important aspects on the assessment form as needed by the children’s court investigation. A good idea will be to add maybe a genogram to the assessment tool.”*

They added that conditions where they had to render services often require of them to investigate more than one family living on the same property. This participant mentioned:

*“... it means you will have three forms or four forms alone for that one house, one yard because sometimes the gullies or shacks have families in there and there are two families living in the house.”*

Before the second phase of the study commenced, the instrument was adapted to include a section where the social workers could make use of a genogram and eco-map, as well as providing enough additional space for comments.

The second group all indicated that they had utilised the eco-map and the genogram that formed part of the “adapted” FA-LDC. This contributed to getting a better visual understanding of the family composition, as well as the family dynamics and available resources. Participants highlighted the advantages of completing the genogram and the eco-map.

*“I find that when I first meet the family it sorts of gives me a picture ... this one has a child with that one and that child is not living ... and you know it makes more sense when you draw it.”*

*“...that it is important to draw the genogram when there are a lot of people living there, where some people are not related to the family that you are working with, sometimes it is confusing ... some children talk about my sister or my brother, but they are not really related.”*



Participants confirmed that comprehensive information was obtained through the instrument and were of the opinion that the assessment tool had the potential to elicit the necessary information for them to conduct their child protection investigations:

*“... after using the tool I had more than enough information to support my investigation.”*

The participants also mentioned that the adapted instrument helped them to compile a Children’s court report.

*“...it is comprehensive info and it is usable.”*

*“Yes, you could use the information to compile your report.”*

Although participants observed that the tool would assist them to complete Form 38 of the Children’s Court report, the tool was not aligned with the format of Form 38.

## **Theme 2: Assessment instrument should not inhibit professional judgement**

The second theme that arose was that the utilisation of the instrument should not inhibit the professional judgement of social workers and ensure that the social workers still have to use their own analytical skills during assessments and investigations. Two sub-themes were identified.

### ***Sub-theme 2.1: More provision for one’s own professional opinion***

A theme that clearly emanated from the focus group discussions was the fact that participants realised the necessity to apply their own professional judgement to cases and not to be steered only by an assessment instrument. This view is supported by one of the participants who expressed the following view:

*“It is important that the social worker has a space on the form to indicate their own professional observations.”*

Participants further indicated that an assessment instrument could inhibit your listening and observation skills:

*“I think it will be difficult if I have the form and even when you do an interview then you tick because you... kind of like to be relaxed and listen to the person more than filling in the form.”*

Another participant mentioned:

*“When I was filling this part I didn’t even ask certain things from them. I was just observing.”*

The opinion expressed above seems to correspond with views such as those of Barkley (2013), who suggested that assessment instruments for family assessment should be able to record what is also observable in the family home. The FA-LDC tool poses certain questions in the family environment section that require the social workers to make observations.

### ***Sub-theme 2.2: Critical thinking and analytical skills are still required***

The study further indicates that it is important that an assessment instrument not be merely applied as a checklist as this will affect the quality of service delivery. This is supported by the following remarks:

*“...critical thinking, analytical skills, assessment skills will be nothing than to tick boxes on a form...”*

*“You can say in all of those boxes, for a lot of city clients, they have access to running water... They’ve got access to toilet facilities, electricity, but the reality is it is more disgusting than if they didn’t.”*

The above view appears to suggest that the “boxes” cannot replace what the participant may observe during the assessment of the family. Assessment tools are not able to keep a child safe simply by being used as a rating or a checklist; rather their use should be accompanied by strong practices (Pecora *et al.*, 2013). It has been said that an assessment tool should not replace professional decision making

(Gillingham, 2011). The results produced by an assessment tool should be reviewed in a professional manner (Pecora *et al.*, 2013).

It is also emphasised that, irrespective of the ultimate usefulness of the safety and risk tools in child protection, decision making and competent assessment should tie in with sound professional judgement (Pecora *et al.*, 2013:143). There is a strong conviction that assessment tools alone are not capable of ensuring child safety.

In the second phase these points of emphasis by the participants were confirmed in the focus group. Participants felt strongly that while utilising the instrument, the focus should still be on building a relationship with the family and on getting to know them.

*“I sometimes feel that by ticking boxes, you are lowering your professional opinion and the way that you conduct the interview is also influenced.”*

*“...the form could be like a wall between you and your client.”*

*“...the instrument is good, but I would rather ask my clients to tell me more about themselves, about their daily routines.”*

The importance that the participants place on their own professional judgement is noteworthy, but at times in statutory investigations professional judgements need to be supported by evidenced-based practice; this could contribute to sound professional practice that would be more difficult to be challenged by practitioners of law. This would also be better understood and accepted if explained to families who are resistant to social service delivery.

### **Theme 3: Heavy workloads experienced in child protection**

The third theme identified was that the participants have to deal with heavy workloads in child protection. Social workers are often hesitant to try out new ways of delivering services because of the administrative burdens that are placed on them to finalise a statutory investigation. The following sub-themes emerged during the discussions on this topic.

#### ***Sub-theme 3.1: Assessment instrument is too time consuming***

The participants mentioned that they are so overwhelmed by conducting investigations that they have huge backlogs and are hesitant to try new assessment instruments with which they are not familiar. This is revealed in the following statements:

*“There is a whole lot of other stuff and we are already behind just doing the bare minimum job.”*

*“The first thing I can say, it was time-consuming....”*

*“I mean at ... there is one social worker servicing the township. What is the person supposed to do with the caseload?”*

*“We [social workers] are also under-resourced.”*

Another participant observed:

*“There is complete lack of resources. There is this massive amount that needs to change all at once and which needs to be sustainable and we are one social worker servicing an entire...”*

#### ***Sub-theme 3.2: Administrative burden during statutory investigations***

In the first phase of the study a few participants mentioned that they have to complete various forms to prepare a Children’s Court report:

*“...we haven’t got time for a lot of forms and I think just to minimise it, it might be easier, otherwise it is not going to be used.”*

*“...When I went through the form ... it is a very long form if you take into consideration the forms that you have to complete.”*

In the second phase participants felt strongly about the administrative burden placed on them because of the number of forms that need to be completed; they added that this affects service delivery negatively. Participants said:

*“We are sitting with prescribed forms from DSD. Then you have to complete Form 22 with your safety assessment and Form 23 with your risk assessment... and then also the consensus-based assessment...”*

*“...our work is becoming administrative... we have got so many forms to complete, that in the end we do not have time to deliver services...”*

Participants felt strongly that new instruments should add to the information already gathered in existing forms.

*“Any new instrument should add on to existing forms ... and not just to obtain more information. Forms should be consolidated...”*

*“If this instrument could have been more in line with the consensus-based form...”*

Concerns were raised about the effect that this emphasis on the utilisation of forms could have on the way that young social workers perceive practice. This is revealed in the following statement:

*“I think experience plays a role ... I have got years of experience, but somebody who is in the field for two years, means that she is growing up with this idea of forms, one that I did not grow up with, and then she is going to see it as the format.”*

### ***Sub-theme 3.3: High caseloads inhibit social work innovation***

The research found that use of the FA-LDC instrument was mostly viewed by the participants in the first and the second phase as a daunting task. Observations about the FA-LDC instrument, include:

*“... and the time you have to put into it to collect this information.”*

*“... we spend a lot of time doing it.”*

The fact that participants found the instrument to be very time-consuming could be linked to the already heavy workloads experienced in child protection service delivery in South Africa, as confirmed again and again in research (Schiller, 2017; Ndonga, 2016, Van Huyssteen & Strydom, 2016). It was noted that the social workers who mentioned that they started using the assessment tool in all their investigations first had to familiarise themselves with the instrument. But after they became familiar with the instrument they were very positive as to how it assisted them with completing their investigations. The tension between heavy caseloads that social workers had to bear, versus adding new alternative ways of rendering services or doing assessments that were often seen as more of a burden than an innovation. It is thus possible that innovation in service delivery in child protection could be negatively affected, as social workers are so swamped with work that they find it difficult to objectively evaluate new ways of rendering services. This situation could also lead to a preference to tick boxing or to utilise instruments that maintain the status quo.

## **DISCUSSION**

Boldis and Tomlinson (2014) maintain that assessment instruments used in child protection services need to be precise and need to fit into a particular context. The FA-LDC instrument is viewed as a tool that can be useful in that it meets the needs of the participants in child protection assessment. The instrument assisted them to gain comprehensive information by including the families in their investigations, which can be viewed as a people-centred approach. This is also in line with the social developmental welfare approach to ensure that families should participate in their own development.

This study found that the use of the FA-LDC tool is perceived as additional work and that it shifts attention away from the service user when the social worker has to record what is being said. A study suggests that note-taking detracts attention from the people who receive services during the interview, as it breaks eye contact more frequently and shifts attention away from the clients, thereby diminishing their sense of importance (Forbes & Watt, 2016).

Based on the National Family Preservation Network (2012) which developed this tool, the FA-LDC tool was developed and adapted to be used for identifying and prioritising the needs of families and services to assist them, as well as to assess the state of family well-being and provide a source of comprehensive data. Moreover, the use of family assessment tools helps to organise the massive amount of different kinds of information obtained from the family (Wright & Leahey, 2013), and assists in developing a coherent investigation. Participants who used the instrument indicated that it helped them to obtain all the relevant information and to compile a comprehensive Children's Court report.

The views shared above also agreed with Gillingham and Humphreys (2010) that the assessment tool can be time-consuming, which then affects its use. It has been noted that the administration of assessment instruments should be quick and should require only a small portion of the professional's time (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2013). The statements by the participants with regard to time spent using the FA-LDC tool reveal the impact of the amount of time needed to use the tool, together with the impact of the workload. It also indicates that the time used to administer assessment instruments directly affects the utilisation of such instruments. Conversely, the participants were also of the opinion that it contributed value to their investigations, as the instrument guided them to elicit appropriate information for their reports.

The comments above affirm the consequence of a lack of human capital on the use of the FA-LDC instrument. The shortage of social workers results in very high caseloads in the child protection sector (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Participants highlighted that there is also a lack of resources and funding in the child protection sector (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). The combination of all these challenges could be contributing to the lack of innovation in social work service delivery.

The participants' statements seem to reflect their sense that the FA-LDC instrument is merely a form that needs to be completed rather than an assessment tool to be used for assessment purposes. The statements also reflect that the collection of information is often seen as a challenge rather than contributing to decision making in child protection. Wells and Correia (2012) suggest in a discussion of the Structured Decision Making (SDM) assessment tool that an assessment tool should contain some form of checklist designed to demine the current situation of the child's safety. This implies that sometimes the difference between an assessment tool and a form may not be obvious, since they may serve the same purpose, which tended to engender resistance to a new approach when doing family assessment.

The way in which the views above are articulated also indicates that the FA-LDC tool is viewed as a form that creates additional work. Gillingham and Humphreys (2010) confirm that assessment tools designed to aid decision making in child protection are seen as administrative burdens. The assessment tool is seen as an administrative task that needs to be done, while its potential to help is disregarded. Gillingham (2011) found that assessment tools were considered to be used to ensure accountability rather than for decision making.

The above statement seems to contradict Taylor (2012), who suggests that assessment instruments are not supposed to do away with the professional decision making, as there still remains a need to analyse and decide on the significance of the information in the assessment tool. Other scholarly material also suggests that assessment tools should be used to encourage decision making (Gillingham & Humphreys 2010; Holland, 2011; Taylor, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The utilisation of the FA-LDC instrument could be valuable in child protection services if it is aligned with the requirements for a Children's Court investigation in South Africa. It assists social workers in enabling a more comprehensive assessment and saving time by ensuring that all relevant information is

obtained while assessing the family. Assessment instruments should not replace the professional judgement of the social worker, but should rather be seen as a supportive tool in delivering services in a more accountable way. In ensuring that services in South Africa are rendered according to a developmental approach, families should be afforded the opportunities to participate and be included in a comprehensive assessment that could contribute to the socio-economic development of families and communities. This would allow the social worker to do a proper assessment and follow up with suitable social support services to families. In the current dispensation South Africa lacks the capacity to provide sufficient social workers to deliver comprehensive services, and they end up doing administrative tasks complying with governmental requirements for families to obtain social security, leaving them unable to focus on the developmental needs to redress inequalities.

This study strongly recommends looking at an integrated assessment instrument to assist social workers with managing all the administrative burdens that they experience during their investigations, so that more time can be spent on maintaining contact with families and less on administration.

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