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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

REGARDING PROJECT ON DECISION-MAKING SUPPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this note is to discuss and reflect on the ethical dilemmas associated with project decision support for notifications. The project is about developing a statistical tool that can qualify assessment of notifications about vulnerable children and young people. The overall premise for the project is that the ethically most responsible to vulnerable children and young people is to use all available data to help them. The project is thus based on a basic utility ethical starting point, as the project leads to the best possible for most vulnerable children.

Handling alerts on vulnerable children contains a number of dilemmas. In a project involving static data that has not previously been used in this context, there may be additional ethical considerations that it is relevant to clarify in order to define the project’s ethical framework. It is not immediately clear whether the inclusion of statistics changes existing ethical dilemmas in the work with vulnerable children and young people, and the note therefore discusses a number of ethical considerations, some of which will be directly derived from the inclusion of statistics, while others exist regardless of which methods is used to assess notifications of vulnerable children and young people.

The note begins with a brief description of the content of the project, which is followed by a number of ethical considerations, which it is necessary to discuss in order to ensure that the project becomes sustainable in a social-academic context in Denmark.

CONTENT OF THE PROJECT

Project Decision support for notifications aims to qualify and develop the potential of the information available to social workers when assessing a notification. The content of the project is to develop a statistically based tool for a Danish context, to sharpen, support and assist the assessment of a notification made by the municipalities. The tool must be a supplement to the social science assessment currently being done. is taken in the municipality on the basis of knowledge based on theory, research, experience and law.

The background for the project is that the municipalities receive a large number of notifications, which must be assessed and handled in a busy day. There is great variation in both the nature of and the content of the notifications received by the municipalities. An important challenge in the social workers’ assessments is that they must relate to a large amount of information in a short time and not always have the opportunity to collect the relevant knowledge. Overall, this means that the case handlers have to make some very important and complex decisions in a short time - sometimes on the basis of very diverse information whose significance they do not know - which is of great importance to whether vulnerable children get the help they need for.
The purpose of the project is to include information that already exists in municipal registers and make them available to the advisers in a clear and appropriate manner. The statistical tool compares existing data on a child and its conditions with statistical data from thousands of children previously notified. In this analysis, it will be possible to provide an estimate of whether the information contained in the municipal records of a child indicates that the child is misinterpreted to the extent that it needs help. The tool must thus support the municipal case handler's assessment of the incoming notification, and in this way support professionally-based assessments, so that one more ensures that the children and young people who need help also get it.

**Inspiration**

The development of the tool draws on international research while at the same time cooperating closely with practice to ensure turnover and usability in a Danish social science context. This review of ethical considerations is inspired by ethical analyzes carried out in connection with projects on Predictive Risk Modeling of vulnerable children and adolescents conducted in New Zealand and the United States. See the literature list for further on these analyzes.

**Working process**

This ethical analysis is based on reading literature on predictive risk models and ethical dilemmas in social work. Ethical considerations were a recurring theme during the project's study trip to Allegheny County, Pennsylvania and Los Angeles, California in the United States in November 2017. In addition, ethical considerations have been discussed with the project's follow-up group consisting of representatives of the National Board of Health, the National Association of Local Authorities, the Danish Social Counseling Association, the Association of Danish Social managers, Children's Conditions and social administrations in Hjørring and Silkeborg municipalities.

**SPECIFIC ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Based on reading literature and discussions with relevant professionals, this analysis focuses on a number of concrete ethical considerations. The individual conditions will be presented separately below.

**CONSENT FROM PARENTS**

Protecting the citizen's privacy and legal certainty is crucial in social cases. On the one hand, parents' cooperation is of great importance for the successful implementation of social measures, and secondly, citizens on an overall level may fear arbitrariness and lack of transparency in the authorities' case processing.

On the one hand, the authority is obliged to identify the families that need special support, while on the other hand the same authorities must uphold the legal certainty of the citizens / families and unnecessary interference in private matters.

The purpose of the statistical tool is to qualify the early assessment of a child's need for support. Having to wait for parents' consent will not be appropriate from this practical point of view.
The statistical tool applies in situations where a municipality receives a notification regarding a child or young person who is feared in dissatisfaction. At this point, there is already reason to assume that intervention may be necessary in the family circumstances, and the authority will be required to investigate the matter further.

It is worth noting that the statistical tool uses personal data already obtained. We do not consider this information to be problematic, as it is already available to the social authority, and has already obtained consent to obtain the information at an earlier date.

See section on privacy below in relation to processing personal data by linking.

The project's follow-up group, which consists of relevant actors in the field of child care, recommends that no parents' consent be sought for the use of data in connection with assessment of notifications. If data is used later in a child case, the parents must be informed of this.

**False negatives/false positives**

A statistical tool works by deriving conclusions based on large amounts of data. It can thus be calculated which characteristics are among children placed outside the home or receiving other types of measures. Statistical calculation, however, is never 100% valid, since one's characteristics do not give equal results in all children. Thus, there is a danger that a statistical calculation will provide a number of false positive or false negative assessments.

A false positive assessment will be if a child's characteristics mean that the child is deemed to be very exposed, but not really exposed. A false negative is an assessment in which a child is judged not to be exposed on the basis of characteristics, but where the child is actually exposed and in need of assistance from the social authorities.

The risk of making mistakes is thus present when using a statistical risk assessment tool. However, the same risk is also present in a manual, qualitative assessment of notifications. Since the tool is based on existing knowledge and experience with vulnerable children and young people, there is thus a further risk that earlier errors are reproduced in the statistical tool. As this is an assessment that intends to assess both a child's current vulnerability (acute danger) and a longer-term risk of exposure, there will always be uncertainty about outcome. The purpose of the assessment is to initiate an effort to minimize the risk of the vulnerability leading to worse outcomes for the child in the longer term, and prospects will always contain some uncertainty.

The statistical tool is designed to be an addition to the existing qualitative assessment of a notification and a child's vulnerability. Thus, it is expected that different types of inputs to the assessment will contribute to minimizing the number of false positive and negative assessments.

Although there is uncertainty about all types of assessments, there must of course be systematic work to minimize both types of errors. The statistical tool will be thoroughly tested precisely in order to minimize the number of false positive and false negatives in the assessment.

**Stigmatisation**

There is a risk that being judged to be exposed and being the subject of a municipal investigation leads to stigmatization of the child and its family. Parents may experience it as very stigmatizing to be the subject of investigation or assessment, especially if it is the parenting ability that causes a notification and subsequent investigation. This potential stigmatization occurs when the municipality
receives a notification and thus does not have a peculiar relation to the assessment tool. In Denmark, the municipalities are obliged to assess all notifications received about vulnerable children and young people. This means that the tool will not have to be used to assess whether the child / family should be looked at, but to assess which factors are decisive in relation to and to what extent the child is exposed or not.

**Ethnic discrimination**

Dilemma on ethnic discrimination is widely debated in the United States, for example, where the social divide between black and white Americans is large. In Denmark, there are dilemmas associated with ethnic origin and religious affiliation, but the connection is not unambiguous when looking at notifications. Looking at notifications of, for example, violence and abuse, there are different arguments as to whether a notification should lead to a further investigation of a child's well-being. In the project's qualitative study of work on notifications in four municipalities, arguments were put forward that violence is more acceptable among ethnic minorities, and therefore notification of violence in families with other ethnic backgrounds is not so worrying. Conversely, others argued that violence always causes vulnerability in the child, and further studies on the child's situation must be made regardless of family ethnicity.

Ethnicity research indicates that there are ethnic differences. An example of data that can give the impression of ethnic discrimination in Denmark is the statistically significant over-representation of young boys of other ethnic background in criminal records compared to young people of ethnic Danish background. This over-representation is statistically significant, but that does not mean that all young boys with different ethnic background commit crime. If ethnicity is included as a variable in a statistical model, there is thus a risk that a large proportion of false positives will occur, where boys of an ethnic background other than Danish are judged to be more vulnerable than they are.

The purpose of this tool is to qualify the work that is being done to improve the well-being of vulnerable children. The factors involved in the statistical model must be relevant to whether a child thrives. The initial studies have shown that ethnicity is not in itself a significant risk factor in the model, as other factors have a greater effect. International studies show that statistical screening tools reduce any ethnic bias, as ethnicity becomes a statistical variable on an equal footing with others, while in the social-professional qualitative assessment, it is often weighted separately - either as an aggravating or mitigating circumstance in relation to the child's vulnerability. Overall, at present, there is no evidence that the statistical tool will lead to ethnic discrimination.

**Professional competences**

A statistical tool based on all available data can only work as intended, if the personnel using the tool have the resources and competencies to understand and use the tool in the social work with vulnerable children and families. Thus, there is a risk that the tool will be used incorrectly if the professional professionals' conditions for using it correctly are not present.

In connection with pilot testing of the tool, teaching is carried out in the light of and use of the tool. Part of the teaching contains a clarification that there is a statistical risk assessment, which must be one element of the assessment of the individual child's vulnerability. During the pilot test, a process evaluation is carried out, which aims, among other things, to create knowledge about the impact on the social workers' decision-making process. The results of this process evaluation will be included in the further work with the tool and will be incorporated into the teaching offered to future municipalities that will use the tool.
Allocation of resources

Implementing a statistical tool for assessing notifications can cause a fear that the tool intends to save resources on social work. In fact, the intention is the opposite, namely to qualify the social work by directing resources to the cases where the most needed action is needed. The tool must thus make it possible to focus on the most vulnerable children.

It is beyond the scope of the tool and the project to assess whether the tool can eventually result in changes in the resource allocation for assessment of notifications. The main purpose of the tool is to increase the quality of the assessments that are prepared and this focus is conveyed throughout the project.

PRIVACY

A prerequisite for the statistical tool to have effect as intended is that sufficient personal data could be included as part of the calculation basis. The public's use of personal data is regulated throughout in a number of rules originating from both the Danish Parliament, the EU and the Council of Europe. Citizens' right to privacy is a fundamental principle of law. However, it is a principle that can be limited by societal considerations (Langsted and Jakobsen, 2014), why one must keep a possible violation of private life against the good that one wants to achieve.

Interconnection is a particularly intrusive form of data processing for the citizen as it involves obtaining information from multiple sources. Interconnection also allows the data processor to gather information from various registers and actors to compile these so that a profile is created over the citizen. The fact that the authorities get such close knowledge of the citizen on the basis of information obtained from a number of different authorities can give the citizen an experience of facing an overwhelmingly total authority work (Blume, 2013). Thus, the traditional manual use of personal data will be perceived as less intrusive in relation to interconnection, as a new information about the citizen is created through interconnection and profiling.

Interconnection for use in control has previously been subject to clear legal requirements and has to be justified outside of control situations on the basis of a need for necessity to a greater extent than required by the use of other therapies.

Conversely, it is precisely because via linking and profiling one can create such a systematic picture of the citizen that the tool becomes relevant to the case handler - and can contribute to the qualification of the assessments of notifications.

In order to meet the citizen's perception that the use of the statistical tool is a violation of their privacy in relation to manual processing of personal data, it will be essential to consider how to involve the citizen in the performance of the statistical tool. In this way, the citizen's experience of the authorities' use of personal data will to a lesser extent be perceived as arbitrary.
Quality of data

Interconnection allows the data processor to gather information from different registers and actors, so that a profile is created over the citizen. Whether the profile is true depends on the quality of the data base that has been collected. If one considers that information in one or more registers is not kept up to date or is dependent on manual and / or continuous additions, one may risk getting an inaccurate end product. One should therefore relate to the various registers and their quality. Likewise, case officers should also be aware of the importance of data quality, as it may be relevant to the use of the tool.

Today, the citizen has the opportunity to gain knowledge about the information that the municipality makes assessment and decisions according to. Involving the citizen in the data base of the statistical tool will enable the citizen to rectify where the data quality is low.

SUMMARY

There are a number of ethical dilemmas associated with implementing a statistical tool that assesses vulnerability among children and young people on the basis of statistical data. However, on the basis of the points outlined in this note, it is assessed that it is ethically justifiable to test the tool in practice. Daily assessments are made of notifications about vulnerable children and young people. The assessments and decisions made on the basis of these are complex and contain a large amount of information and a number of dilemmas, whether or not a statistical tool is used. The intention is to help vulnerable children and young people as best as possible, and implementing a statistical tool as a support for the qualitative assessment, is thus considered to be an ethically sound and potentially improving contribution to helping vulnerable children and young people.

LITTERATURE

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