



## Research article

# The Decision Making Ecology of placing a child into foster care: A structural equation model



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 31 October 2014

Received in revised form 6 February 2015

Accepted 27 February 2015

Available online 8 April 2015

## Keywords:

Child welfare

Child protection

Decision-making

Foster care

Risk assessment

Structural equation model

Workforce

## ABSTRACT

The Decision Making Ecology provided a framework for empirically testing the impact of *Case*, *Caseworker* and *Organizational* factors on the decision to place children in out-of-home care. The structural equation model we developed fit the data extremely well, indicating a complex relationship between the variables. The main findings indicate that *Case factors*, even as aggregated to the worker level, were of most importance: *Percent Removed* was increased in part by greater average *Risk* being assessed and more families on a worker's caseload being *Low Income*. Furthermore, removal rates were increased by lower proportions of Hispanic families on the caseload, as well as lower organizational support, and a perception of manageable workload and sufficient resources. *Individual* factors, i.e., variables characterizing the caseworkers themselves, were *not* found to directly influence the placement decision, including workers' own race/ethnicity, though various orders of mediated effects were indicated, and these are detailed. Interrelationships between variables that affect case, caseworker and organizational factors are discussed along with implications for practice.

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## Introduction

Certain decisions made by human service professionals are especially “high-stakes,” and the choice to remove a child from his or her home to be placed into foster care is one of them (Schwalbe, 2004). Placement is a characteristically difficult and consequential decision, but is surprisingly little understood by researchers. Placement decisions are part of a class of decision making under uncertainty (Swets, 1992) and as a consequence are likely to be highly influenced by decision-making thresholds which are specific to the decision maker (Dagleish, 1988). It is demonstrable that characteristics of decision makers (e.g., Child Protective Services [CPS] caseworkers) have an influence, but the specifics of these have remained elusive. The aim of the present study is to explore, at the worker level, the context of the placement decision, with the objective of providing a more detailed picture than has heretofore been available of the inter-relationships among case, caseworker, and organizational factors. It is hoped that this endeavor will contribute both a framework for future exploration as well as substantive knowledge about this challenging topic. This is part of a general program of research seeking to better understand

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placement decisions to support their fairness, accuracy, and consistency, and in so doing to promote child well-being, family integrity when possible, and equal protection under the law.

According to data compiled by the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services \(2014\)](#), nationally nearly 400,000 children were in out-of-home placement as of November 2012. With respect to entries into care (the subject of this study), 251,764 children entered into care in 2012. Although the decision to place children outside their home is necessary in many instances, the consequences of this decision to children are numerous. Studies have shown that children who are removed from their homes experience not only significant trauma but also are more likely than other children to experience negative outcomes as adults, including low educational attainment, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, mental health disorders, and criminal justice system involvement ([Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010](#); [Pecora et al., 2003](#)). Although it is unclear whether these outcomes can be attributed to children's placement in foster care or to their abusive family backgrounds, research by [Doyle \(2007\)](#) suggests that outcomes for children at the margin of placement (i.e., cases where there may be disagreement about the need for removal) are better for children who remain in their homes, compared with children removed from their homes (who experience higher delinquency rates, higher teen birth rates, and lower earnings).

### *Limits of Knowledge*

The decision to place a child into foster care has been much studied over the years, but remains not well understood ([Lindsey, 2004](#)). Some researchers ([Runyan, Gould, Trost, & Loda, 1981](#)), finding little power in predicting removal of children based on social, family, and child characteristics, even went so far as to conclude “that assignment to foster care approximates a random process across a large population” (p. 710, emphasis added). Nonetheless, the placement decision is not entirely unpredictable ([Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999](#)), and in fact it has been demonstrated that a great many factors influence the decision-making process. For example, in early work, [Phillips, Shyne, Sherman, and Haring \(1971\)](#) identified 43 child, parent, and family characteristics associated with placement decisions, and other domains of influential factors have been identified as well (see [Baumann, Schwab, & Schultz, 1997](#); [Lindsey, 2004](#)). However, as noted by [Lindsey \(2004\)](#), “early studies of the decision-making process revealed little consensus among caseworkers regarding criteria to use in deciding the future of children and families” (p. 163), and determining which factors are most important in caseworkers' considerations and how they are interrelated has remained an elusive goal. Whatever their basis, there seems to be little doubt that placement decisions are inconsistent ([Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001](#); [Rossi et al., 1999](#)), which is a major problem in view of each decision's “profound and potentially deleterious impact . . . on the child, the parents, and society” ([Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008, p. 108](#)). As noted by [Baumann, Schwab, et al. \(1997\)](#) and [Rossi et al. \(1999\)](#) and as remains true today, a great deal of the variability in workers' decisions remains unexplained.

Increasingly, empirically validated risk assessment protocols such as actuarial models are being used in support of CPS decision making to address these concerns ([Ruscio, 1998](#); [Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005](#)), but with a few exceptions ([Baumann, Grigsby, et al., 2011](#)), these instruments are atheoretical ([Schwalbe, 2004](#)) and inconsistent, with varying levels of research support for the criteria used ([DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994](#)). Further, they do little to shed light on the dynamics of decision making ([Baumann, Law, Sheets, Reid, & Graham, 2005](#)). Consensus-based instruments, on the other hand, generally are not empirically validated, and have not done well in comparison with actuarial measures when the aim is to predict recurrence ([Baird & Wagner, 2000](#); [Baird, Wagner, Healy, & Johnson, 1999](#)). A synthetic view is that both actuarial instruments and clinical judgment have their place in evidence-based practice oriented toward meeting family needs ([Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005](#)). Regardless of what instruments (if any) are used, however, “decision making involving out-of-home placements is often a difficult and confusing process for both the interested parties and the professionals. Identifying and understanding important dimensions of the underlying dynamic process is prerequisite to relieving some of this confusion” ([Britner & Mossler, 2002, p. 328](#)).

### *Influences on Caseworker Decision Making*

A large part of the difficulty in understanding the placement decision is that it is not simply a matter of determining what happened in the family and what is best for the child ([Banach, 1998](#)), difficult as those judgments can be. Additionally, factors not directly related to the case may play important roles, including the question of what constitutes abuse or neglect ([Portwood, 1998](#)), the lack of clear legal guidelines ([Besharov, 1986](#)), and uncertainty regarding what criteria should be used to make a decision ([Gold et al., 2001](#); [Lindsey, 2004](#)). Furthermore, there are numerous possible extraneous influences on decision making that have little or nothing to do with the specifics of a particular case, including the types of information that tend to be used by caseworkers ([Britner & Mossler, 2002](#); [Rossi et al., 1999](#)) and their degree of professional experience ([Gold et al., 2001](#); [Rossi et al., 1999](#)), as well as idiosyncrasies of professional judgment ([Kominkiewicz, 2004](#); [Stein & Rzepnicki, 1984](#)), caseworker tendencies and decision-making thresholds ([Dalglish, 1988, 2006](#); [Rossi et al., 1999](#)), and reactions to issues of poverty, gender, and race, which have been shown to be important factors in decision making ([Dettlaff et al., 2011](#); [Lindsey, 2004](#); [Rivaux et al., 2008](#)).

Generally speaking, social workers' role, their social, cultural, and political contexts, and their professional group membership may all affect their judgments ([Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008](#)), as may their personal values ([Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003](#); [Portwood, 1998](#)), attitudes ([Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008](#)), and beliefs about parenting ([Daniel, 2000](#)). There also are numerous other possible sources of bias, inconsistency, and error ([Ruscio, 1998](#); [Stein & Rzepnicki,](#)

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