



## Research article

## Reunification in foster care: Influences on decision-making

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## ABSTRACT

An important goal of out of home care is to prepare the family and child for reunification. Practitioners are often required to make the decision whether to reunify a foster child with their biological family. This study examines this complex reunification decision in Portugal. Using the Judgments and Decisions Processes in Context model, the authors presented to Portuguese child protection workers and higher education students (n = 400) a case vignette of a child in foster care in which reunification is considered. The vignette consider two scenarios related to the child's wish to go back or not to her biological family, each one presented to half of both samples. The study examined judgments regarding physical and emotional risk and the decision on whether to reunify the child with their biological family, and analyzed the associations of case characteristics, the decision-making context, and the child's wishes regarding reunification with the participants' judgments and decisions. We have used a randomized factorial survey within a quantitative approach and we have performed descriptive, inferential and content analysis of data. The findings indicate that a large majority of professionals and students recommended that the child remain with their foster family, though both groups recommended reunification more frequently when the child wished to return to their biological family. A comparison with findings from other countries suggests that country context can be an important factor that leads to different outcomes. Implications for both practice and research are presented.

## 1. Introduction

Professionals who work in the child protection system have a great responsibility since their judgments and decisions will influence the lives of children and young people at risk and the lives of their families. Their decisions regarding the most effective interventions in each case cannot just depend on theories since they need to take into consideration a wide range of factors such as each specific case characteristics, the local context (Benbenishty et al., 2015), guidelines on practice, and attitudes of their peers (e.g., Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010; Martin, Peters, & Glisson, 1998).

In some countries, such as Spain and Portugal, when the child is in a stable foster care placement, practitioners tend not to recommend reunification, and the vast majority of children remain in the system for many years (e.g., Delgado, Carvalho, & Pinto, 2014; López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013). This is despite the fact that in Portugal, for instance, practitioners are instructed

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and expected to examine, as the first option, the possibility of reunification of the child with their birth family. There may be several reasons for such decision-making practices. For instance, if in most cases parents may be judged as not ready or not willing to accept the child back, practitioners may prefer the stable foster home. It could also be the case that practitioners prefer the stability and positive outcomes of a good foster home over the uncertainty of a reunification, even if parents are showing progress and willingness to reunify. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent the workers' decisions are influenced by the child's voice and preferences. In order to help better understand these decision-making processes in the Portuguese child protection system it is important to identify how reunification decisions are made in a controlled environment to help understand how current and future professionals, in different country contexts, make these important decisions (Delgado et al., 2014).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child forms the basis of child protection system law in most countries, including Portugal, highlighting the importance of the participation of children in decisions that have impact on their lives. Despite these clear guidelines, there is evidence that the voices of parents and children may be heard but do not have an impact on the decisions reached by professionals (Delgado et al., 2013; McLeod, 2010).

According to Portuguese law (Law No. 147/99, September, 1st), in order to propose an intervention that safeguards the best interests of the child, professionals need to consider the actual situation of the child or young person through the evaluation of their closest relationships, life habits, and their ability to adapt to change. Nonetheless, the law is also quite clear that professionals should avoid unnecessary interventions and they should give priority to interventions within the biological family. In fact, in comparison with other European countries, Portuguese professionals remove children and young people from their biological families less frequently than their counterparts in other countries (Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2014; Carmo, 2010; Delgado et al., 2013; Gersão, 2014).

In this study, we collected and analyzed data on judgements and reunification decisions of professionals of the Portuguese child protection system, and of higher education students (undergraduate and postgraduate) in courses that are related to this area of social intervention. This research is part of an international comparative study based on the Judgments and Decision Processes in Context model (JUDPIC) that used the same set of vignettes to examine placement recommendations in multiple protection system contexts: Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, and Spain. Participants were presented with a vignette of a case of alleged child maltreatment and were asked to determine whether maltreatment was substantiated, assess risk, and recommend an intervention using structured instruments. The current study focuses on reunification decisions and it has the following research questions: (1) is there any relationship between sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and their judgements and decisions on reunification? (2) Are there differences in risk judgements and reunification decisions between professionals and students? (3) is there any difference in the reunification decision between professionals and students, considering the child's wishes? (4) what are the rationales provided by the participants to explain their decision? And finally, (5) are the Portuguese findings similar to those reported in other countries?

## 2. Reunification decision

The removal decision can be quite difficult; studies have shown that there is a wide range of similar psychological, social, and cognitive impairments whether neglected and abused children are kept at home or are removed from their family (e.g. Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, & Wozner, 2003). Similarly, regarding reunification, it is known that there are negative outcomes when children are reunified with their families in a situation where both the child and the family were not ready, which may lead to a subsequent removal, as well as when reunification doesn't happen, which may condemn the child to be separated from their birth family for many years (Farmer, 2009; Sinclair, 2005). Reunification can be considered a success only when it leads to a stable and secure life with the birth family, and avoids multiple placements and their negative impact (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009). Nonetheless, according to Bellamy (2008), reunification after long term placement has no direct positive effect on behavioral outcomes.

The ecological approach to decision making (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Baumann, Kern, & Fluke, 1997) has shown that decisions in this area are influenced by multiple layers and factors in the decision-making ecology, including professional experience, case characteristics, organizational factors, process guidelines, the legal framework, critical events, and community involvement.

Evidence suggests that there is variability among child protection system professionals' decisions and studies have identified that this variability can be explained by their different status, roles (Britner & Mossler, 2002; Evans, 2011; Friedson, 2001; Mandel, Lehman, & Yuille, 1995; Rose & Meezan, 1996), and country context (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001). Furthermore, there is also variation at the personal level, indicating that professionals use their discretion to assess the situation, allowing for their opinions, personal and professional experience, and attitudes to play a role in their decisions (Evans, 2011, 2016). Research has shown that people selectively look for evidence that confirms, rather than disproves their views, therefore their assessment of the case can be biased by their own beliefs (Beckstead, 2003; Munro, 1996).

Child protection cases normally require a quick decision in a scenario characterized by uncertainty as a result of the lack of information about the cases, the impossibility of direct observation, and the existence of conflicting information (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003) and the fear of parents' reactions or making a wrong decision, feelings of guilt for breaking trust, or sympathy for the families with whom the intervention is to be made (Horwath, 2006). On top of this, professionals many times are pressured by multiple parties involved as well as by social media (Casas, 2010; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010).

Gambrill (2008) considered that professionals use different heuristics during the decision-making process. "A heuristic is a strategy that ignores part of the information with the goal of making decisions more accurately, quickly and frugally (i.e., with fewer pieces of information) compared to more complex methods" (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2015, p. 913). Gambrill identified four

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