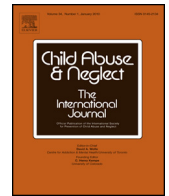


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# Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

## The decision of out-of-home placement in residential care after parental neglect: Empirically testing a psychosocial model<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Out-of-home placement decisions in residential care are complex, ambiguous and full of uncertainty, especially in cases of parental neglect. Literature on this topic is so far unable to understand and demonstrate the source of errors involved in those decisions and still fails to focus on professional's decision making process. Therefore, this work intends to test a socio-psychological model of decision-making that is a more integrated, dualistic and ecological version of the Theory of Planned Behavior's model. It describes the process through which the decision maker takes into account personal, contextual and social factors of the Decision-Making Ecology in the definition of his/her decision threshold. One hundred and ninety-five professionals from different Children and Youth Protection Units, throughout the Portuguese territory, participated in this online study. After reading a vignette of a (psychological and physical) neglect case toward a one-year-old child, participants were presented with a group of questions that measured worker's assessment of risk, intention, attitude, subjective norm, behavior control and beliefs toward residential care placement decision, as well as worker's behavior experience, emotions and family/child-related-values involved in that decision. A set of structural equation modeling analyses have proven the good fit of the proposed model. The intention to propose a residential care placement decision was determined by cognitive, social, affective, value-laden and experience variables and the perceived risk. Altogether our model explained 61% of professional's decision toward a parental neglect case. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed, namely the importance of raising awareness about the existence of these biased psychosocial determinants.

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### Introduction

The decision to keep a child in the family or to put her in out-of-home placement – following a case of parental maltreatment – has been characterized as complex, ambiguous and full of errors and uncertainty. In Portugal, like elsewhere, the law has been described as vague and as lacking in definitions of key concepts and terms to case assessment and decision-making

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(Banach, 1998; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Rodrigues, 2012; Torres et al., 2008). The decision-making is even more difficult and uncertain for instances of parental neglect in which, although the long-term effects are detrimental (DePanfilis, 2006), the physical proofs are hard to obtain (Beckett, McKeigue, & Taylor, 2007; Dickens, 2007; Rodrigues, 2012; Stowman & Donohue, 2005). The invisibility of parental neglect behavior and of its immediate effects on the child makes it hard, not only for worker's assessment of it as maltreatment, but also to get a court-valid proof that can legally sustain decision-making. The lack of specific guidelines makes the decision-making process heavily susceptible to worker's subjectivity and interpretation. Furthermore, the uncertainty and ambiguity of the decision making context makes the workers more aware and afraid of institutional and social judgment, making them more likely to adopt self-defensive decisions and to postpone the intervention until a 'catapult' event occurs (Dickens, 2007; Torres et al., 2008). Therefore, there is a striking need to better understand the factors involved in the decision of out-of-home placement of neglect children and how these factors relate to each other.

The study of decision-making factors in the child protection field has been mostly focused on variables of the child (e.g., age – Dagleish & Drew, 1989), the parents and parenthood (e.g. cooperation, health problems – Davidson-Arad, Englechin-segal, & Wozner, 2003; Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997), maltreatment characteristics (e.g., severity, chronicity – Dagleish & Drew, 1989; Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999) and of the family and social context (e.g., income; social support – Festinger, 1996; Fialkov & Cohen, 1990; Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997). Despite the relevance assumed by all those case variables in out-of-home placement in residential care—particularly in risk assessment – those variables are only one part of this decision-making process equation (Baumann, Dagleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Munro, 2005; Summers, Gatowski, & Dobbin, 2012). The Decision Making Ecology framework adequately shows so by stating that, in the decision process, case risk assessment is combined with worker's factors and external and organizational factors for determining the threshold of action (Baumann et al., 2011; Dagleish, 1988).

Although the lack of and need for studies on the role played by worker's psychosocial variables in the decision has been acknowledged for a long time (Belsky, 1991; Munro, 1999; Portwood, 1998), the great majority of the studies undertaken in this field still focus mostly on worker's socio-demographic variables (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008). The few studies that attend on the role of worker's psychosocial variables focused on the role of worker's perception of the risk for and well-being of the child (e.g., Dagleish & Drew, 1989; Jagannathan & Camasso, 1996; Sullivan, Whitehead, Leschied, Chiodo, & Hurley, 2008) and of worker's attitudes in the decision-making process (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Peters, 2001; Rodrigues, 2012; Shemmings, 2000). Nevertheless, those studies have mainly used qualitative methodologies or descriptive and simple statistical analysis of variable associations (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008).

Moreover, research has not been able to demonstrate how the worker integrates multiple factors in the definition of his/her decision threshold, i.e. a *personal 'line in the sand'* that sustains an out-of-home placement decision (Baumann et al., 2011, p. 7; or decision proposal to be discussed in collective board decisions). Thus, considering all the arguments mentioned above, there is a need for the theoretical design and empirical test of psychosocial models that operationalize the process under which the worker integrates Decision-Making Ecology factors and, thus, explain how the decision threshold is defined.

Accordingly, the goal of this paper is to present the test of a psychosocial model of the residential care placement decision-making process in the context of a parental neglect case, taking as a starting point theoretical models of behavior and decision-making predictions widely studied in Social Psychology (Ajzen, 1985).

### *Decision-Making Topic Research and its Application to the Field of Child Protection*

Legal, institutional and social guidelines determine that the decision-making process should be sustained in a rational, objective and rigorous weighing of both benefits and negative effects of all available alternatives. One of the most known and validated rational models in the study of decision-making is the one from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) which defines that an intention to take an action or undertake a certain behavior is predicted by the positive or negative attitude toward that behavior, as well as by the subjective norm (i.e. the influence others have on us), and the perceived behavior control over barriers to that behavior. In that model these predictors are in turn predicted by one's beliefs. This model has been applied to a variety of contexts such as the study of sexual behavior (e.g., Boldero, Moore, & Rosenthal, 1992), health-related practices (e.g., Godin & Kok, 1996) or pro-environmental behavior (e.g., Castro, Garrido, Reis, & Menezes, 2009). It has also been applied to ethical decisions like medical (Randall & Gibson, 1991) or financial decisions (Buchan, 2005). In the field of child protection there is a team of researchers that has demonstrated the empirical utility of this model to explain child abuse reporting behavior among nurses and kindergarten teachers (Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010; Feng & Wu, 2005). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, the model from the Theory of Planned Behavior has never been tested in the field of child protection workers' decision of out-of-home placement in residential care of children victim of parental neglect.

It can be assumed that the rational information processing that the theory of planned behavior model describes is the groundbase for every decision taken about out-of-home placement following parental maltreatment. Indeed, the decision should be a result of a deliberate and systematic assessment and evaluation of case information and it should be sustained on valid assessment tools (Rzepnicki & Johnson, 2005; Schwalbe, 2004) and on legal and socio-political criteria (Backe-Hansen, 2003).

Nevertheless, inconsistencies both between and within workers assessments and decisions (e.g., Britner & Mossler, 2002; Peters, 2001), as well as errors and biases (e.g., partial use of available information, lack of long-term perspective and lack of attention to family history; Munro, 1999), have been found in the decision-making process. Also, the recognition that

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