



Research article

Decision making in child protection: An international comparative study on maltreatment substantiation, risk assessment and interventions recommendations, and the role of professionals' child welfare attitudes[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Child welfare professionals regularly make crucial decisions that have a significant impact on children and their families. The present study presents the Judgments and Decision Processes in Context model (JUDPIC) and uses it to examine the relationships between three independent domains: case characteristic (mother's wish with regard to removal), practitioner characteristic (child welfare attitudes), and protective system context (four countries: Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Spain); and three dependent factors: substantiation of maltreatment, risk assessment, and intervention recommendation. The sample consisted of 828 practitioners from four countries. 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. Participants' child welfare attitudes were assessed. The case characteristic of mother's wish with regard to removal had no impact on judgments and decisions. In contrast, practitioners' child welfare attitudes were associated with substantiation, risk assessments and recommendations. There were significant country differences on most measures. The findings support most of the predictions derived from the JUDPIC model. The significant differences between practitioners from different countries underscore the importance of context in child protection decision making. Training should enhance practitioners' awareness of the impact that their attitudes and the context in which they are embedded have on their judgments and decisions.

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Child welfare professionals are entrusted, both morally and legally, with acting in children's best interests, and regularly make crucial decisions that have a significant impact on children and their families (e.g., Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Packman, 1986; Solnit, Nordhaus, & Lord, 1992; Taylor, 2010). Such decisions include whether to remove an allegedly maltreated child from home, keep the child at home even though there are concerns for his or her welfare, or reunify a foster child with their biological family. Such decisions may influence both positively and negatively short and long term outcomes for children (Farmer, Sturges, & O'Neill, 2008).

Given the importance of these decisions it is imperative to understand how they are being made and what factors impact them. The present study utilizes the Judgments and Decision Processes in Context model (JUDPIC, Benbenishty & Davidson-Arad, 2012) to examine domains that are associated with judgments and decisions in cases of alleged child maltreatment. This is an international study that compares practitioners from four different countries.

Judgments as to whether a child is at risk and the decision whether to place a child out of home are hard to make (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Lindsey, 1992; Pösö & Laakso, 2014). There are clear cut cases either where danger is imminent and removal is clearly warranted, or when there are no compelling reasons to even consider removal. Still, many other cases are 'gray instances', in which it is not clear, even to the most experienced and informed workers, what would be the best course of action. Decisions are often made under less than ideal circumstances: pressure of time; inadequate resources for ensuring the child's well-being, whether at home or in placement; and often on the basis of insufficient and ambiguous information (Knorth, 1998; Munro, 2008). Moreover, our present knowledge of child development does not provide sufficiently clear guidelines as to when the child's well-being would be best served by removal and when by being kept at home (Thoburn, 2010).

The model of Judgments and Decisions Processes in Context (JUDPIC) was suggested as a model describing decision making in cases of alleged child maltreatment (Benbenishty & Davidson-Arad, 2012). According to this model, professionals make their judgments (e.g., case substantiation and risk assessments) based on case information on the child (e.g., physical signs of alleged abuse) and the family (e.g., parents' explanations of these signs). Further, according to the model, the information on these case characteristics are processed by professionals in social agencies who are influenced by their personal characteristics (e.g., their personal experiences of abuse and their attitudes toward child removal) and their agency features (e.g., placement policies and guidelines). These judgments (i.e., whether maltreatment has been substantiated, risk for future harm) lead to intervention decisions. This link between judgment and decisions is moderated by a large number of factors, such as policies as to what threshold warrants child placements, available knowledge and evidence that connect between case characteristics and appropriate interventions, and values and attitudes as to the relative merits of protecting the child and maintaining the family unit. Finally, the link between judgments and interventions may be mediated by available resources and constraints; a certain level of risk may lead to foster placement in one place but not in another place in which foster placements are scarce. All these case-level considerations are embedded within wider contexts, such as the ecological context of the family, the organizational context of the decision making agency and wider contexts relating to the overall characteristics of the service system and the multiple cultural contexts (e.g., the public attitudes toward the protective system or national child welfare legislation) (for a similar approach see Bauman, Fluke, Dalglish, & Kern, 2013; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010).

As described by this model, judgments and decisions in cases of alleged maltreatment are the result of complex interactions between case characteristics and the characteristics of the professionals who make these decisions in a specific context. For instance, Rivaux et al. (2008) and Dettlaff et al. (2011) demonstrate that case characteristics such as ethnicity, poverty, and risk, are associated with both maltreatment substantiation and placement decisions. A series of studies showed how practitioners' decisions were associated with the child's race (Drake et al., 2011; Fallon et al., 2013).

Judgments are influenced not only by case features but also by the decision maker's characteristics. Findings show that younger, less experienced, and childless workers, and those with a childhood history of corporal punishment or abuse, generally perceive higher risk and are more likely to recommend placing the child in care (Brunnberg & Pečnik, 2007), while more experienced workers are less prone to implement removal recommendations (Davidson-Arad, Enlechin-Segal, Wozner, & Gabriel, 2003). Other findings show that workers who experienced previous traumas were *less likely* to assess a child as being at risk (Regehr, LeBlanc, Shlonsky, & Bogo, 2010) and that white and more educated workers were more inclined than others to classify physical injuries as abuse rather than corporal discipline (Jent et al., 2011). Findings, however, are not all consistent. Portwood (1998) found that workers' personal experience of child rearing and child maltreatment had only marginal effects on their risk assessment. Regehr et al. (2010) found no association between professionals' risk assessment and either education or age.

There is also strong empirical evidence that the contexts in which the decisions and judgments are made have a strong impact. Gold, Benbenishty, and Osmo (2001) demonstrated the impact of the larger country context in a study comparing decisions and rationales made by practitioners in Canada and Israel. This study indicated that the same case vignettes were judged differently by practitioners from the two countries, to a large extent reflecting historical developments in public attitudes regarding the costs and benefits of removing children from home (Benbenishty et al., 2003). In another study, Brunnberg and Pečnik (2007) found that Croatian social workers were more likely than their Swedish peers to assess a situation as requiring child protection and to favor removal, but no differences were found in judgments about the action needed in response to second-hand information in a case of child maltreatment.

Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes (2011) show that some of the between-countries differences reflect the variations in their welfare regimes. The authors describe a *child protection orientation* that leads to social workers framing referred families as

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