



Current status and prospects for improving decision making research in child protection: A commentary



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Introduction

Individual child protection decisions are some of the most important and least understood processes in the provision of child welfare services. Although there has been a fairly substantial degree of rigorous empirical

attention paid to risk assessment instrumentation and, to a lesser extent, how caseworkers assess risk, there has been insufficient empirical attention paid to how decisions are made, the nature and extent of influence of individual biases and preferences, and the way in which context influences decisions at various points

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in the continuum of child welfare services. To be sure, these are alluded to in the literature, and interpretations have been made based on various observational studies describing potential relationships between specific actions and their attendant systemic outcomes (e.g., opening an investigation; closing an investigation; placement into out of home care; reunification or restoration; termination of parental rights). It is safe to say, however, that we have not sufficiently observed how these individual decisions are made; we have not tested the many theories that might explain individual, group, and corporate behavior; and we have not sufficiently explored ways in which decisions can be optimized.

In 2000 and 2001, I had what I would call an academic opportunity of a lifetime: to co-edit a two-volume special issue on risk assessment and decision-making in child protection services with Eileen Gambrill, one of the foremost social work scholars in the area of critical thinking. Although our primary focus was risk assessment, we stressed that the assessment of risk is only valuable if it improves decisions. That is, the assessment alone is insufficient without considering how it will be used. We opened the special issue with the following statement:

Decisions are made in a context of uncertainty. Caseworkers must distinguish between child neglect, bad parenting, and the effect of poverty, and they must do this with imperfect assessment tools. Both personal and environmental factors influence decisions. Barriers to accurate decisions include: (1) limited knowledge; (2) limited information processing capacities; (3) personal obstacles such as lack of perseverance, reliance on ineffective problem-solving strategies and lack of familiarity

with problem-related knowledge; and (4) the task environment. Problems that confront clients are often difficult, challenging even the most skilled staff. Predictions must be made under considerable uncertainty in terms of the relationship between the information at hand (predictor variables) and service outcome. Rarely is all relevant material available, hampering problem-solving efforts. Even when a great deal is known, this knowledge is usually in the form of statistical associations that cannot readily be calculated without assistance (Dawes, 1988). Competing values may also influence error. For example, steps must be taken to protect children from abuse while maximizing the decision-making freedom of parents (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000: 814)

The second volume explored the many types of risk posed to children and families, including the risk posed by the system itself (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2001). In essence, caseworkers can only do as well with clients as the system in which they conduct their work. Moreover, assessment of risk tends to be somewhat unidimensional. The most predictive tools may say little or nothing about what drives behavior. Further, they may not be useful for measuring risk over time because of the presence of a high number of static factors that, once observed, do not change (Schwalbe, 2004), while some tools containing more dynamic or changing factors have been found to be less predictive in other fields (Baird et al., 2013). More importantly, risk assessment tools say nothing about what is needed to improve behavior, or related context, over time (Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005).

This point brings us to the current special issue. Rami Benbenishty, John Fluke, Erik Knorth, and Mónica López have put together a truly international compilation that heralds the

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