



Improving accuracy and consistency in child maltreatment severity assessment in child protection services in Spain: New set of criteria to help caseworkers in substantiation decisions

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article describes the work carried out to develop a new instrument/set of criteria aimed at increasing Spanish Child Protection Services (CPS) caseworkers' accuracy and consistency in judgments leading to maltreatment substantiation and eligibility for CPS action decisions. A preliminary test on some of the instrument scales was conducted and presented.

Method: The new instrument was developed based upon a review of the literature, extended discussions with an expert group, and a three-month pilot application. Studies conducted on the instrument used case vignettes and focused on four scales: Physical Abuse, Supervisory Neglect, Emotional Maltreatment, and Parental Incapacity to Control Child/Adolescent Behavior. Three groups of the Basque Region CPS caseworkers participated in the studies: a first group of 515 caseworkers who attended a five-hour session for a general overview of the instrument, and a second and third groups of 137 and 94 caseworkers who attended, respectively, ten- and twenty-hour training sessions about the instrument. A booklet containing four case vignettes was given to each participant. Caseworkers of the first group were asked to rate severity of the assigned case vignettes firstly before the general overview session with their prior criteria, and secondly after the session with the instrument. Caseworkers of the second and third groups were asked to rate the assigned case vignettes after the training sessions with the instrument.

Results: When caseworkers used their prior criteria to rate case vignettes severity, only 20% of them accurately rated all four, or three out of the four, assigned vignettes. This percentage increased significantly to 44.9% after receiving a 5-hour general overview session of the instrument, approaching the percentage achieved by the caseworkers who received 10 h of training (45.5%). The highest percentage of caseworkers who accurately rated all four, or three out of the four, assigned vignettes was found in the group that received 20 h of training (61.7%). The instrument did not allow caseworkers to reach adequate percentages of accurate ratings or inter-worker agreement in most of the case vignettes with moderate levels of severity and in emotional maltreatment vignettes. No significant relationships were found between accuracy of severity ratings and caseworkers' professional discipline, gender, degree of dedication to CPS, and years of experience.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Present findings suggest high levels of inaccuracy and inconsistency in Basque Region CPS caseworkers' assessment of child maltreatment severity. Results support the hypothesis that availability of specific instruments and intensive professional training can contribute to increase accuracy and consistency, and improve substantiation in decision-making processes.

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1. Introduction

Decision-making is a key activity in Child Protection Services (CPS). Work in this field constitutes a decision-making continuum from intake until the end of CPS involvement (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Wilson & Morton, 1997). Decisions such as accepting a report

and determining the need for CPS involvement, determining the need for child removal or reunification, or deciding about case closure, have profound, and in many cases enduring, consequences on the lives of children and families. Following intake and screening decision, substantiation is the second key point in CPS intervention. Based on the legal definition of child maltreatment and threshold for CPS action, substantiation implies deciding about whether maltreatment has occurred and whether the case should be opened for service. Substantiation is based on what happened in the past and focuses on current caregiver behavior, and should be differentiated from safety and risk assessments, which

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concern the prediction of future behavior (Cross & Casanueva, 2009; Drake, 1996, 2000).

Definition of child maltreatment in the National Spanish law is vague and ambiguous. Maltreatment is broadly defined as *any situation due to parents' or legal caretakers' acts of commission or omission that harms the child's personal or social development* (De Paül & González, 2001). No references to degree of harm, types of maltreatment, thresholds for CPS action, or standard of proof for determining when sufficient evidence has been reached are included. Regional Child Protection laws are limited to using the same definition as the National law or else they have continued to be too broad. Some of them differentiate thresholds of maltreatment severity that determine whether CPS action is indicated, and whether the case should receive voluntary services (preventive or family support programs) or a coercive intervention. However, no specific criteria to differentiate maltreatment severity levels are included. Many CPS Regional agencies have developed decision-making frameworks that structure the CPS decision-making process, as well as guidelines to operationalize child maltreatment, to assess its severity, and to establish the standards of harm and evidence for substantiation, with the aim of helping caseworkers in their substantiation judgments and decisions (see for example, Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2008; Diputación Foral de Álava, 2004; Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 2005; Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 2003; Gobierno de Cantabria, 2006; Gobierno de Navarra, 2003; Gobierno del Principado de Asturias, 2008; Junta de Castilla y León, 1995; Región de Murcia, 2009).

No studies have been conducted in Spain about the consistency of CPS caseworkers' judgments of child maltreatment presence and severity, with the exception of Molina (2010) study. His findings with a sample of 84 caseworkers from the same Spanish region showed high levels of agreement about the consideration that maltreatment severity was the most important factor to decide whether CPS action was required and what service should be provided. However, significant differences were found in caseworkers' judgments of the severity of the three case vignettes used in the study. Caseworkers working in voluntary services rated case vignettes as more severe than those working in coercive services, leading caseworkers of both groups to different decisions about which services should be provided.

Research about decision-making processes has provided clear evidence of the vulnerability of human reasoning and decision-making processes to biases, errors, and inconsistencies. Although it could be expected that maltreatment characteristics were the main factors that influence CPS judgments and decision-making, many studies have found that other variables, including child and family, the decision maker, organizational, and external factors, can significantly affect caseworkers' judgments and decisions (Baumann et al., 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003; Gambrill, 2008; Munro, 2005).

Inconsistency in caseworkers' judgments and decisions to substantiate has been found to be related to different factors. These include type, severity, and evidence of maltreatment; child and family characteristics (such as the child's age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, the family's response to CPS investigation); characteristics of the referral source; prior history of the case with CPS; availability of services; workload pressures; caseworkers' individual tendencies, experience, self-assessment of skills, facility with information processing, relationship with co-workers, and agreement with State policy; quality of supervision; or agency policies related to number of decision categories and standards of evidence required to substantiate a referral (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003; Cross & Casanueva, 2009; English, 1997). As proposed in the General Assessment and Decision-Making Model (GADM), inconsistency can derive from judgmental and/or decisional divergences. The former includes differences in the assessment of the case factors and the integration of the case-factor information into a summary assessment, whereas the latter includes differences in the threshold and the decision whether or not to take action (Baumann et al., 2011).

As factors leading to inconsistency in CPS judgments and decisions are systemic, measures to increase consistency in decision-making processes

should be multiple (Gambrill, 2008). Development of structured or standardized tools aimed to help caseworkers to make the judgments that will lead to effective decisions is one such measure. Researchers have made many significant contributions to the development and validation of instruments to assess maltreatment occurrence and severity (for a review, see Amaya-Jackson, Socolar, Hunter, Runyan, & Colindres, 2000; Baker, 2009; Dubowitz, 2006; Portwood, 2006; Runyan & English, 2006; Stowman & Donohue, 2005). However, few of these instruments differentiate and describe levels of maltreatment severity, and provide thresholds to relate judgments and decisions. The Eligibility Spectrum (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2006) is perhaps the most comprehensive instrument developed to assist CPS workers in making consistent and accurate decisions about substantiation and eligibility for child protection service at the point of referral. The Spectrum contains five child protection sections (physical/sexual harm by commission, harm by omission, emotional harm/exposure to conflict, abandonment/separation, and caregiver capacity) and five sections that outline non-protection or voluntary services (request for counseling, request for adoption services, family-based services, volunteer services, and request for assistance). The five protection sections have scales that detail two to five different forms of child maltreatment regarding each section. Each protection scale in each section is divided into four levels of severity (extreme, moderate, minimal, and not severe), and each level of severity has one or more descriptors. The child protection entry point for each scale is between the moderately severe and minimally severe levels. The current version of the Eligibility Spectrum has been supported by reliability and validity studies and extensive field practice (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2006).

Other instruments designed to assess family functioning also include scales to assess the presence and severity of maltreatment, and provide descriptors for each level of severity. These are, for example, the Child Well-Being Scales (CWBS; Magura & Moses, 1986) and the Family Assessment Form (FAF; Children's Bureau of Southern California, 1997). Both instruments differentiate levels of child care, ranging from *adequate* to *severely inadequate* in the case of CWBS, and from *above average* to *danger to children's health, safety, and well-being* in the case of FAF. Finally, instruments as the Ontario Child Neglect Index (CNI; Trocmé, 1996), the Graded Care Profile Scale (GCP; Srivastava & Polnay, 1997), or the Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS; English & the LONGSCAN Investigators, 1997) also differentiate different types of maltreatment and provide descriptors for different levels of severity, but no labels and indications for CPS action are assigned to each severity level.

These instruments present differences in child maltreatment types and subtypes that are reflected in the behaviors and situations included in each of them, the degree of concretion with which they describe the behaviors and situations included in each level of severity, the interval of the "continuum" of the parental behavior they comprise, and the number, denomination, and meaning of the diverse levels of severity that they establish. However, they coincide in several important issues. All of them: (a) include parental behavior and harm/risk of harm to the child as the two main components for assessing child maltreatment severity — assigning a differential weight to these components as a function of the child maltreatment type; (b) assess the frequency and intensity of parental behavior; (c) differentiate levels of harm/risk of harm to the child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development; and (d) develop severity scales for specific types and subtypes of maltreatment.

In Spain, no instruments have been developed or adapted to be used by CPS caseworkers to assess child maltreatment severity and to provide guidance to decisions concerning maltreatment substantiation and eligibility for CPS action. This article describes the work carried out in the Basque Country (Spain) to develop such an instrument, and the design and results of a set of preliminary studies with four of the instrument scales carried out to test: (a) whether the use of such an instrument by Spanish CPS caseworkers was associated with

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