



Less effort in worsening child protection cases? The time-course of intensity of services[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The need to intervene in a worsening child protection case may interfere with the involved professionals' expectancies of controlling the outcome. However, empirical data on intensity of services in child protection are scarce. To fill this gap, the present study analyzed a sample of Swiss child protection case files opened between 1993 and 2002. Intensity of services in worsening cases was compared to intensity of services in cases where child or family functioning improved. As hypothesized, the intensity of services in worsening cases declined over time and was significantly below the intensity level in improved cases. Unexpectedly, the intensity of services was already lower at the beginning of service provision in cases later classified as "worsening." The alarming finding could both be associated with an instance of self-fulfilling prophecy or with the effects of "creaming".

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1. Introduction

Circumstances for decision making in child protection are typically stressful, complex and full of uncertainties. For an intervention to be judged appropriate, it must seem promising with respect to obtaining the desired outcomes given the available resources. This assessment of the appropriateness of intervention is likely to be adjusted on the basis of immediate results. If the results are continually unfavorable, it will be more and more difficult for the professionals involved to maintain their expectations. In response to increasingly negative feedback, professionals may become hesitant about some interventions and eventually reduce service intensity. Reduced intensity may then in turn have an adverse effect on the development of the case, subsequently hampering expectations even further. The case might then be trapped in a vicious circle. The question arises as to the extent to which a decline of intensity of services in worsening cases is inevitable. The present paper addresses this question on the basis of empirical material drawn from a sample of Swiss child protection case files and analyzes it from an extended action theory perspective (Jud, 2008).

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1.1. The Swiss child protection system

Government interventions to protect children in need differ in policy and structure. In Switzerland, public child protection has its legal base in family law, more specifically in the part on tutelary law which regulates restrictions of individual freedom of action for protection purposes – be it the protection of adults or children. Orders to protect children or adults are generally enacted by the "tutelary authority" of a person's place of residence. Tutelary authorities are comparable to child welfare courts. However, the structure of these authorities varies considerably by region. Some child protection authorities are based in the court and others take the form of administrative authorities. Authority members in cities are usually professionals, most rural authorities are constituted of lay members. In most child protection cases, tutelary authorities issue a general and unspecified mandate to a social worker appointing him/her assistant to the child. In more severe cases tutelary authorities can withdraw parental care (along with placing the child in out-of-home care) or finally withdraw parental custody by appointing a "tutor". Of the 40,878 child protection orders enacted in 2006 (Konferenz der kantonalen Vormundschaftsbehörden (VBK), 2008) around two-thirds appointed an assistant to the child, to support the parents in their provision of care. The legal mandate secures funding for the clinical social work and obliges the appointed assistant to take further steps if the parents are unwilling to cooperate. As part of the staff of a communal or regional child protection agency the appointed child protection worker does not work under the direct supervision of the mandating authority. He or she only has to report periodically –

biannually in most cases – on his/her actions and the case progress to the mandating authority (Häfeli, 2005). As a consequence, the assistant or tutor has considerable leeway to act at personal discretion.

Like child protective services professionals in the United States, appointed assistants in Switzerland are often not the only professionals involved with a child protection case: psychotherapists, general practitioners, school social workers, lawyers, and others are involved in the cases over a period of months and sometimes years. Some of these professionals are involved because the child protection worker has referred the child or family members for specialized services; others work with the child or parents on a voluntary basis. If risk is imminent and the voluntary interventions do not work out, professionals can report to the tutelary authority which will decide upon enacting an order or if an assistant has already been appointed inform the latter. Note that there is no nationwide mandatory reporting in Switzerland.

The long-term professional support in Swiss child protection together with the high individual discretion provides an ideal field for research on changes in professional decision-making. A temporally expanded expectancy-value model (Jud, 2008) provides the theoretical frame to interpret the variations of intensity of services, which at least for child protection have not been analyzed empirically from an action-theoretical perspective.

1.2. Theory foundation

1.2.1. Action theory and temporal aspects

There is a long theoretical and empirical tradition in predicting human actions through subjective expectations of achieving a desired outcome and its valuation (cf. Feather, 1982; Greve, 2001). Contemporary expectancy-value models usually account for constraints in the human capacity to receive and process information (cf. Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996; Gigerenzer & Selten, 2001; Kahneman, 2003) and do not claim complete consciousness or intentionality for actions. However, there is no temporally expanded expectancy-value model; although there are theoretical approaches to contexts of negative developments that are found in worsening child protection cases. One of these approaches is modeled on the paradigm of escalated commitment (cf. Karlsson, Juliusson, & Garling, 2005; Moon, 2001; Staw, 1976, 1997), a situation occurring on the basis of sunk costs combined with high expectations (Janoff-Bulman & Brickman, 1982). As this combination is not always met in the field of child protection, we focused on a second, general approach by Schwarzer (1986, 2000), integrating the paradigm of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975), the theory of psychological reactance (Wortman & Brehm, 1975), and Lazarus' cognitive appraisal model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to this approach, a person passes through different phases of cognitive and behavioral patterns when confronted with persistent negative feedback (Schwarzer, 1986, 2000): the first negative events in a subjectively relevant situation will be appraised as a challenge, and the behavioral pattern displayed will be reactance (e.g., anger, increased effort). With ongoing negative outcome, attributions will change from 'insufficient effort' to certainty that there is 'lacking competence.' The increasing ambiguity of the situation switches the appraisal from challenge to threat and finally to loss; emotions like sadness and resignation increase. Behavior patterns change from reactance to passive-resignative behavior. Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1992) and Schwarzer, Jerusalem, and Stiksrud (1984) showed empirically the development of hopelessness with ongoing lack of controllability, but to date the model has not been completely evaluated.

Based on Schwarzer's integrative model (Schwarzer, 1986, 2000) we procedurally expand a differentiated expectancy-value model (Krampen, 1988, 2000). The following description will focus on the procedural expansion of the core variables in the model. An extensive discussion of

the differentiated expectancy-value model (Krampen, 1988, 2000) and the temporal expansions of the variables are found elsewhere (Jud, 2008), as is also a detailed description of Schwarzer's integrative model on negative developments (Schwarzer, 1986, 2000).

1.2.2. Intensity of services in contexts of negative developments

In order to assure the functioning in everyday professional work, expectancies and valuations must fulfill some specific conditions (e.g. Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Vrugt, 2004). Effect expectancies – the expectation to competently carry out an action controlling the situation – should generally be at a high or medium level. In addition, the desired outcome of professional decisions – in child protection mostly the improvement of the child's wellbeing – should generally be valued highly.

The evolution of the effect expectancies can be deduced from the phases described in Schwarzer's model (Schwarzer, 1986, 2000) using propositional logic (cf. Krampen, 2000). For an individual showing a reactance behavioral pattern in a first phase of negative feedback, expectancies have to be high. An ongoing negative development that is appraised as threat supposes expectancies at a medium level. The final stage of loss, helplessness, and hopelessness presumes low expectancies. So, a continually worsening development of a child protection case will go along with gradually decreasing expectancies of achieving a desired outcome.

The evolution of the valuation of the desired outcome cannot be deduced in the same way as the expectations; published research on procedural aspects of action valuations – empirical or theoretical – is lacking. As closely related constructs like social job values show a high temporal stability (Johnson, 2001), we assume high valuations of the desired outcome in spite of a worsening development. It is possible that in an advanced stage of negative outcome – temporally and differentially – the valuation will decrease.

As expectancies of achieving a desired outcome and valuations of the outcome are multiplicatively linked in the decision process, the resulting action tendency will be near the variable with the lower level. So, although the desired outcome should be valued highly despite a worsening development, the action tendency will decrease continually, as the effect expectancies diminish. Exceptions to this ongoing decline in intensity of services occur at the beginning and in a far-progressed stage of negative outcomes. These qualitative different stages are connected with several imponderabilities. However, in professional child protection it will be difficult to determine a precise point in time when a series of negative outcomes started. And the stage of cognitive and emotional impairments indicating a far advanced duration of negative outcomes is not very likely in professional child protection.

1.3. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of this study was to explore variations in the intensity of service responses in child protection cases. Two hypotheses of services intensity response in child protection cases were tested empirically: first, we expect the intensity of services in worsening cases to decline continually. Second, in a temporally advanced phase the intensity of services in worsening cases is expected to be significantly below the intensity level in cases where progress is being made. Our empirical evidence covers the predicted level of activities, whereas the action-theoretical assumptions respective to expectancies and valuations cannot be tracked.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Sample

To reproduce the variations of intensity of services in child protection, a random sample of cases opened between 1993 and

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