



# Risk assessment in a multicultural context: Risk and protective factors in the decision to place children in foster care



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## ABSTRACT

Decision-making in the child protection services is a challenging task, in particular for workers who operate in a multicultural context. Studies have found that children from immigrant groups are overrepresented in the rates of cases reported to CPSs because of the higher prevalence of some distal risk factors. However, it remains unclear whether these distal factors may also lead to child removal interventions by CPS workers. This research compared immigrant and Italian families on the factors included in the Protocol of risk and protective factors to deepen the knowledge of CPS professionals' decision-making process (Di Blasio, 2005). Social records of 175 immigrant families and 153 Italian families referred for child maltreatment to CPSs were analyzed. The results confirmed the higher prevalence of specific distal risk factors (chronic poverty, low educational level, lack of network and social integration, approval of violence, and punishments as educational practices) among immigrant families. Furthermore, the analysis identified diverse factors that appear to lead to the CPSs workers' intervention (child out-of-home placement or monitoring and parental abilities support) for immigrant and Italian families.

## 1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a major public health issue, which involves both short-term and long-term consequences on minors' adjustment (e.g., for specific Italian outcomes see Camisasca, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2014; Ionio & Mascheroni, 2014). Since it is a relevant economic burden (e.g., see CISMAI, Terre des Hommes, & Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, 2013; Fang et al., 2015; Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; Habetha, Bleich, Weidenhammer, & Fegert, 2012), it highlights the importance of preventive efforts, the early identification of victimized children, and the risk and safety assessment of families referred to Child Protection Services (CPS). In fact, among those referred to CPS services, it is crucial to determine the degree to which a child is likely to suffer maltreatment in the immediate future in order to implement effective protective measures and to avoid recidivisms.

### 1.1. Safety assessment and CPS workers' decision on children removal

Recently, a growing number of studies have focused on the (CPS) workers' child placement decision based on the safety evaluation. This is a complex and challenging task, which appears to be influenced by several factors related to family fragilities and resources as well as individual and organizational attributes (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman,

Baumann, & Fluke, 2015; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015), as underlined by the Decision Making Ecology model (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011).

Multiple approaches have been used in the literature to investigate the factors that influence CPS workers' decision to remove children at risk which could be summarized in two main study designs: quasi-experimental and retrospective designs. The first group includes for example the factorial survey design (Rossi & Nock, 1982). This is based on the use of case scenarios or vignettes that are presented to a social worker who is asked to make a decision about the child placement recommendation. Studies that used this approach selected various factors of interest and tested them randomly, manipulating the presence of these factors assigned to different subsamples of caseworkers and asking them to evaluate the level of risk (Sieracki, Fuller, Leon, Jhe Bai, & Bryant, 2015; Stokes & Schmidt, 2012; Taylor, 2006). The second group includes retrospective studies based for example on the “policy capturing” or “judgment analysis” methodology (Stewart, 1988). It consists of studying the relationships between the workers' decision and the available information cues that were used by the caseworkers as a basis for their judgment. Studies based on this methodology adopt a retrospective approach that requires analyzing the content and characteristics of referred case files and correlate them with workers' decision (Benbenishty & Chen, 2003; Chang, Rhee, & Weaver, 2006).

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The present study utilized the “policy capturing” or “judgment analysis” approach to investigate the association of a set of risk and protective factors related to parenting skills (Di Blasio, 2005) and the CPS workers' placement decision of native and immigrant children referred for child maltreatment. In particular, we referred to distal and proximal risk factors according to the classic distinction made by Baldwin, Baldwin, and Cole (1990). Distal risk factors exert an indirect influence on the parenting practices and the developmental trajectory of a child (e.g., low SES of the family, parents' low educational level, single-parent family, and the like). They concern the nuclear family and may entail an increasing of the level of the parents' vulnerability that, in its turn, may increase the risk of abuse or neglect for infants, toddlers and older children. Therefore, they can be thought of as a condition of vulnerability but not of effective damage. On the contrary, proximal factors have a direct influence on the parent-child relationship and adaptation on daily basis. They can be both risk (e.g., parental drug-and/or alcohol-abuse, parental psychopathology, parental impulsivity, and the like) and protective (e.g., parental self-esteem, empathy, autonomy, and the like) factors.

An extensive literature has investigated risk factors linked to child maltreatment, but a more limited number of studies investigated specifically those factors linked to the placement decision about the children. Critical factors include child maltreatment characteristics, family social status and composition, and child and parents aspects. Zuravin and DePanfilis (1997) found that families with a recurrence of maltreatment and families in which more than one type of maltreatment was identified were more likely to experience the out-of-home placement of the child. Consistent with these results, other studies found that the severity and the chronicity of the maltreatment are critical factors in the workers' removal decision (Dalglish & Drew, 1989; Fialkov & Cohen, 1990). Considering the socio economic status of the family, Lindsey (1991) found that the parent's income level has a large predictive power, while ambiguous results emerged about the race. Zuravin and DePanfilis (1997) did not find a significant association between race and placement while other studies showed that black children are more likely to be removed from home, are less likely to leave custody, and are less likely to be reunified with their parents (Glisson, Bailey, & Post, 2000; Harris & Courtney, 2003; Lu et al., 2004).

DeRoma, Kessler, McDaniel, and Soto (2006) analyzed the ratings and ranking of 35 risk factors by social services caseworkers who identified as relevant factors for their evaluation the parent's ability to set limits with the perpetrator of abuse and the parental motivation to actively partner with CPS workers. Other critical factors included parents' substance abuse, mental health difficulties, and the presence of domestic violence (Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997). Regarding child's characteristics, externalizing problems and disability appear to increase the time spent in custody (Glisson et al., 2000). Conversely, other studies did not find an influence of child's temperament and diseases on the workers' safety assessment (Milani & Gagliardi, 2013; Miragoli & Verrocchio, 2008).

### 1.2. Risk, safety assessment and decision making with immigrant families

The foreign-born population has dramatically increased in recent years. In 2014, 1.3 million foreign-born individuals moved to the United States, reflecting an 11% increase from 1.2 million in 2013 and comprising > 13.3% of the total U.S. population in 2014 (Zong & Batalova, 2016). In EU and OECD areas, immigrant population has grown by > 30% since 2000 (OECD & European Commission, 2015). In 2015, the number of people living in the EU-28 who were citizens of non-member countries was 19.8 million while the number of people living in the EU-28 who had been born outside of the EU was 34.3 million (Eurostat, 2016).

The risk and safety assessment and placement decisions could be even more complex in the case of CPS workers who operate in a multicultural context, considering that immigrant families are highly

vulnerable in many areas. In fact, migration may constitute a traumatic experience itself, implying the loss of the cultural frame of reference (Nathan, 1988) and consequently lower confidence in their own ability to understand and adapt to the expectations of the new cultural context (Valtolina, 2013). Moreover, immigrant parents have to face challenges like acculturation, new language, and access to assistance and support programs. These challenges may increase their level of stress, which in turn may affect the quality of family relationships (Beiser, 2005; Yu, Huang, Schwalberg, & Nyman, 2006; Yu & Singh, 2012). However, immigrants constitute a heterogeneous group, and immigrants with different backgrounds may experience varying degrees of challenges and related effects on health and behaviors (Berry, 2005; Millett, 2016).

International literature on CPS has given some attention to the influence of immigration and cultural background on incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment (LeBrun et al., 2015; Millett, 2016; Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015), highlighting some critical questions and ambiguous results. Several studies have identified the overrepresentation of immigrant children in the rates of the cases reported to CPSs (Alink, Euser, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Euser, van IJzendoorn, Prinzie, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011; Vinnerljung, Franzén, Gustafsson, & Johansson, 2008). Concerning Italy, the first nationwide survey of the cases in the care of Child Protection Services found a considerable discrepancy between prevalence rates of Italian (0.8%) and immigrant (2.0%) children (Autorità garante per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, Terre des homes, & CISMAI, 2015). Similarly, Dutch national studies reported an overrepresentation of children from both traditional and nontraditional (from countries with a recent history of immigration to Netherlands) immigrant families in the CPS data compared to children from native families (Alink et al., 2013; Euser et al., 2011).

This overrepresentation seems to be partially explained by socio-economic disadvantage and distal risk factors related to maltreatment and referral to CPS that often characterize immigrant families. National reports confirmed that most immigrants in developed nations have a lower socio-economic status compared to native-born people when considering the educational level, the employment rate, and the average income (Grieco et al., 2012; OECD & European Commission, 2015). In fact, some studies demonstrated that the differences in maltreatment prevalence rate disappeared for some immigrant groups when accounting for socioeconomic factors (Alink et al., 2013; Euser et al., 2011; Vinnerljung et al., 2008). However, children of refugees (Alink et al., 2013; Euser et al., 2011) born in Sub-Saharan Africa or in Asia outside the Middle East remained at increased risk for child maltreatment even after correcting for SES (Vinnerljung et al., 2008). Therefore, more attention to proximal factors is needed. LeBrun et al. (2015) pointed out that the over-representation of immigrant cases referred to CPS, in particular for physical abuse, may be related to harsher discipline practices among some immigrant or refugee families.

In contrast with previous results, some studies and systematic reviews found a lower risk of maltreatment among immigrant families. For example, Dettlaff and Johnson (2011) found that immigrant Latino children are underrepresented among children in the child welfare system, and they found no significant differences between immigrant and U.S. born children regarding substantiation patterns. Moreover, the systematic review by Millett (2016) supported the “healthy immigrant paradox” also for child maltreatment.

Consequently, recent research pointed out that in this field, it is important to consider the unequal resource distribution together with multiple moderating factors, such as protective cultural factors and access to services, supports, and resources (see Cram, Gulliver, Ota, & Wilson, 2015). However, results about the risk of child maltreatment among immigrants are too contradictory to be conclusive (LeBrun et al., 2015) and need further investigation.

However, while a rich line of research explored the factors linked to the risk of maltreatment, few studies investigated factors associated with the workers' placement decision regarding immigrant families

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