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Reasons for placement decisions in a case of suspected child abuse: The role of reasoning, work experience and attitudes in decision-making

Cora Bartelink^{a,b,*}, Erik J. Knorth^b, Mónica López López^b, Carien Koopmans^c, Ingrid J. ten Berge^d, Cilia L.M. Witteman^e, Tom A. van Yperen^{a,b}

^a Netherlands Youth Institute, Utrecht, The Netherlands

^b University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

^c Dutch National Police, Assen, The Netherlands

^d William Schrikker Group, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^e Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare and child protection workers regularly make placement decisions in child abuse cases, but how they reach these decisions is not well understood. This study focuses on workers' rationales. The aim was to investigate the kinds of arguments provided in placement decisions and whether these arguments were predictors for the decision, in addition to the decision-makers' risk assessment, work experience and attitudes towards placement. The sample consisted of 214 professionals and 381 students from the Netherlands. The participants were presented with a vignette describing a case of alleged child abuse and were asked to determine whether the abuse was substantiated, to assess risks and to recommend an intervention. The participants' placement attitudes were assessed using a structured questionnaire. We found that the participants provided a wide range of arguments, but that core arguments – such as the suspected abuse, parenting and parent-child interaction – were often missing. Regression analyses showed that the higher the perceived danger to the child and the more positive the participants' attitudes towards placement, the more likely the participants would be to propose placing the child in care. Arguments related to the severity of the problems (i.e., suspected abuse, parenting and the child's development) as well as the parents' perceived cooperation also influenced placement decisions. The findings indicate trends in the decision-making process, in the sense that participants who decided to place the child out-of-home emphasized different arguments and had different attitudes towards out-of-home placement than those who did not. We discuss the implications of our findings.

1. Introduction

Children are regularly placed in out-of-home care because of abuse or other adverse family circumstances. Out-of-home placement is one of the most intrusive measures professionals working in child welfare can impose. Decisions on out-of-home placement have far-reaching consequences (Taylor, 2010). By removing a child, professionals intervene in the relationship between parents and

* Corresponding author at: Netherlands Youth Institute, P.O. Box 19221, 3501 DE Utrecht, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: c.bartelink@nji.nl (C. Bartelink).

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children and their right to live together. At the same time, there can be very serious implications for a child remaining at home while in danger of abuse. As a consequence, professionals are put in a difficult position when deciding whether to remove children from their homes and parents (Farmer et al., 2008). It is often difficult to tell in advance which intervention (i.e., in-home services or out-of-home placement) will have the most desirable outcome: either intervention can turn out well or badly (Pösö & Laakso, 2016).

Decision-making is an invisible process because it occurs in the minds of the decision-makers (i.e., professionals working in child welfare). Usually only the outcomes (i.e., the judgments and decisions themselves) are studied. Professionals quite often disagree on decisions about whether children are at risk of abuse and should be placed out-of-home (Bartelink et al., 2014; Britner & Mossler, 2002). Our understanding of how professionals reach these decisions and what the potential causes of disagreement are is limited. Better understanding could be obtained by studying child welfare workers' reasons for their decisions, which would provide insight into how workers think and reason about a case. Previous studies show that personal beliefs influence the processes by which individuals seek out, store and interpret relevant information (Gambrell, 2005; Kahneman et al., 1990). People selectively look for information which confirms their beliefs, more readily adopt information which confirms their views, and are more critical of information which challenges or contradicts their views (Munro, 1999).

To gain a more thorough insight into placement decision-making, this study focuses on the arguments decision-makers give when making recommendations. We also investigate how these reasons, combined with some of the characteristics of decision-makers (i.e., risk assessment, work experience and attitudes), affect the decision about whether to remove a child from home.

1.1. Decision-Making Ecology

A range of factors related to the case, the decision-maker, the organization and external factors may influence the decision-making process and thereby its outcomes. Baumann, Fluke, Dalglish, and Kern (2014) proposed a framework for decision-making in child welfare and child protection called the 'Decision-Making Ecology' (see Fig. 1) (for a similar approach, see Benbenishty et al., 2015). It shows that case factors, decision-maker factors, organizational factors and external factors can combine and influence decisions in several ways.

The decision-making process results in both an assessment of the situation and a decision on the course of action to be taken. As part of such a process, the *reasoning of the decision-maker*, be it implicit or explicit, connects the assessment of the situation to the decision being made. It is like a 'debate' professionals have within themselves (and possibly with co-workers) about the case and its context, resulting in a choice about the course of action. Reasons or arguments are the recognizable 'products' of this reasoning process (see Gambrell, 2005).

The Decision-Making Ecology has been applied in a number of studies on substantiation of child abuse (Detlaff et al., 2011; Fluke et al., 2001), placement decisions (Fluke et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2015) and reunification decisions (Wittenstrom et al., 2015). These studies most often focused on the context in which professionals make their decisions (i.e., organizational and external factors). Our study will further elaborate on the Decision-Making Ecology with a focus on *decision-maker factors*. In the following, we will explore how decision-makers' assessments, work experience and attitudes influence their placement decisions.

1.2. Assessment and decision-making

Several studies show that safety and risk assessments are associated with placement decisions (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Horwitz et al., 2011). Higher risk assessments usually lead to a greater chance of out-of-home placement. The case factors which influence risk assessment, substantiation and placement decisions have been widely studied (for an overview see Bartelink, Ten Berge, & Van Vianen, 2015; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Placement is related to child characteristics (e.g., severe behaviour problems, intellectual disabilities), parenting characteristics (including severe child abuse), parent characteristics (e.g., mental health

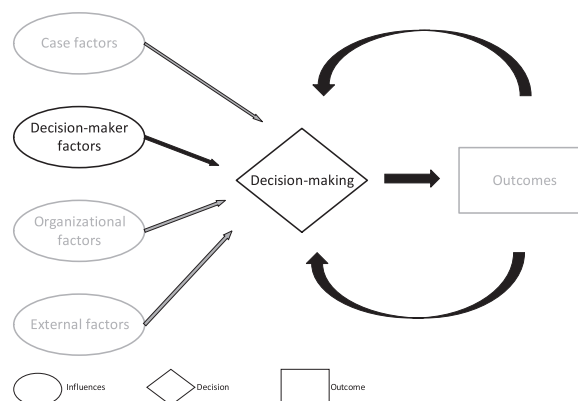


Fig. 1. Decision-Making Ecology (Baumann et al., 2014) [emphasis added].

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