Family preservation or child safety? Associations between child welfare workers' experience, position, and perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In child welfare, there is sometimes a false dichotomy between child safety and family preservation. In an evaluation of Family Group Decision Making in four child welfare jurisdictions, worker surveys were administered to caseworkers, supervisors, program directors, and program coordinators asking about worker perceptions, demographics, organizational culture and climate, and job characteristics. The surveys contained the Dalgleish Scale, an instrument designed to measure the perspectives of workers across the continuum of child safety versus family preservation beliefs. Assessing a number of worker characteristics, an analysis of the Dalgleish Scale revealed that staff who have worked in child welfare longer are more likely to be oriented toward family preservation, whereas staff working in the field for a shorter time period or rating the shared vision among staff higher are more likely to be oriented toward child safety. Evidence has demonstrated that caseworkers' perspectives influence disposition decision making, and that child and family outcomes, such as maltreatment recurrence or out-of-home placement, are not solely determined by family and case characteristics. The potential utility of developing a better understanding of staff orientation has implications for organizational culture, compliance with policy mandates, workforce development, and most importantly, outcomes for child welfare-involved families.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Child welfare decision making

While regulations and policies guide child welfare practice, subjective judgments also influence caseworkers' decision making, and these decisions can impact the trajectory of a family reported to child protective services (CPS) for child maltreatment. Further, as with staff in other social services fields, caseworkers serve as "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1983; Prottas, 1979); they have some degree of latitude to interpret and apply agency directives in a manner that best aligns with their world views. To date, we know little about whether and to what extent staff characteristics, experiences, perceptions of their work environment, and/or personal and professional beliefs systematically influence individuals' case decision making and ultimately, the outcomes for families served (Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). As a starting point in a series of inquiries on this matter, this formative study of child welfare staff explores how a range of caseworker perceptions and characteristics are associated with the degree to which caseworkers express a proclivity or orientation across the spectrum of

child safety versus family preservation beliefs as measured by an instrument reflecting the continuum of these beliefs (Dalgleish, 2010).

A common theme in describing the dynamics of the role of child protection systems in society is the concept of a continually swinging pendulum of values that reflect current public and professional perceptions of what works best (Myers, 2004), with vacillations between emphasizing family preservation or child safety. Policy research makes it clear that evidence or information is only one factor in decision making; ideology and interests also play a part (Weiss, 1983). An important question for the field is whether and how the perceived tension between children's safety and family preservation impacts the actual behavior of decision makers. This study examines the influences of worker characteristics and organizational environment on the beliefs of workers concerning child safety or family preservation within four child welfare jurisdictions.

1.2. Decision-making ecology

Understanding influences on the range of attitudes and subjective beliefs that may affect decision making in child welfare is one of the core elements in a body of research identified with the Decision-Making Ecology (DME; Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Baumann, Fluke, Dalgleish, & Kern, 2014; Baumann, Fluke, & Kern, 1997; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010). Perhaps best perceived as an extension or elaboration of Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human

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Ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), DME, as reflected in Fig. 1, considers the influence of case (family), organizational (agency), decision maker (caseworker), and external (law, policy or demographic) factors on case decisions, the relationship between these decisions and subsequent outcomes, and, in turn, the impact of outcomes on the factors. In part, this dynamic is possible because many child welfare decisions are made with uncertainty (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), that is, the inability of the decision maker to calculate in an objective way what the results and consequences of the decision are likely to be. The theory posits that variation in case, organizational, decision maker, and external factors can result in different decisions being made about the same cases. While not the focus of this study, by extension, it suggests that systematic differences in these factors may produce aggregate differences in the outcomes profile of agencies. The model also accounts for the dynamic nature of systems and the reciprocal relationship between outcomes and the factors affecting them.

Caseworkers' decision making is just one component of the DME but a key aspect of child welfare work. Throughout the life of a CPS case, agency staff make innumerable decisions that affect the fate of a family reported to their system. Whether it is deciding to investigate a report of maltreatment, deciding sufficient evidence exists to substantiate an allegation, or deciding to provide services and/or place a child into foster care, these decisions are often far from clear cut and thus subject to personal discretion and interpretation. The General Assessment and Decision Making framework helps illuminate how all these factors come into play (Dalgleish, 1988). The key concept is that the assessment or the understanding of the conditions affecting children and families is distinct from the decision to take action. The former is obtained through observations of conditions, the latter is influenced by the decision maker's willingness for action, i.e., their action threshold. Further, the threshold of the decision maker is influenced by their personal experience and the conditions of the system in which they operate. Thus, especially in the presence of decision making under uncertainty, the theory suggests that decision thresholds are also influenced by factors other than the assessment of case conditions, such as experiences or beliefs possibly including child safety and family preservation orientation.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the DME theory that CPS case outcomes, such as out-of-home placement, are not entirely based on case factors (e.g., parenting behaviors, risk of harm) alone. While in this study we limit our examination to caseworker characteristics, research has established that a gamut of DME factors (reflected in Fig. 1) are influential, including: how agency policy affects the decision to investigate (Downing, Wells, & Fluke, 1990; Wells, Fluke, & Brown, 1995) or substantiate an allegation (Drake, 1996; Flango, 1991; Fluke et al., 2001; Shusterman, Fluke, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2005); how caseworkers' perspectives influence disposition decision making (Fluke et al., 2001); how worker attitudes influence risk assessment and intervention recommendations (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010); the degree to which investigation policies, casework practices and population demographics influence state-level recurrence rates (Hollinshead, 2012); how service availability in the community impacts substantiation or placement decisions (Fluke et al., 2010; Maguire-Jack & Byers, 2014); the role of caseworkers' racial biases on the decision to place a child into foster care (Dettlaff, Baumann, Fluke, Rycraft, & Joyce, 2011; Drake et al., 2011); or, how caseworker characteristics and agency context, in addition to child, family, and community characteristics, impact maltreatment recidivism (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2014). In an analysis of the DME framework, Font and Maguire-Jack (2015) found that agency, caseworker, county, and family characteristics all exerted some level of influence on the probability of substantiation or placement, with agency factors and child and family characteristics displaying the strongest effects.

1.3. Child safety and family preservation continuum

This study extends the empirical basis for DME by examining the extent to which child welfare staff characteristics are associated with an orientation toward child safety or family preservation. Sometimes conceptualized as mutually exclusive orientations to child welfare, the field has long recognized tensions between each philosophy, the shortfalls of focusing on one at the expense of the other, and the challenges staff face that are inherent in administering tasks associated with both goals simultaneously (Jones, LaLiberte, & Piescher, 2015; Lindsey, 1994; Nelson, 1984; Pelton, 1989). Ideology may also play a role in the formation of beliefs and decisions (Weiss, 1983) and reflect varying positions on the rights of children versus the rights of families.

While the intentional maltreatment of children by their parents or caregivers was largely accepted as a private, not public, matter for centuries (Gelles, 1999; Heins, 1984; Loken, 1995; Lynch, 1985; Nelson, 1984), so called "child saving" and orphan train efforts represented the first privately-funded efforts to protect children from intra-familial harm in the United States (Holt, 1992). The creation of formalized state intervention systems in the wake of the Child Abuse and Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA, 1974), expanded the scope of these interventions, but left it to states to define when and how they would respond to child maltreatment allegations. Although
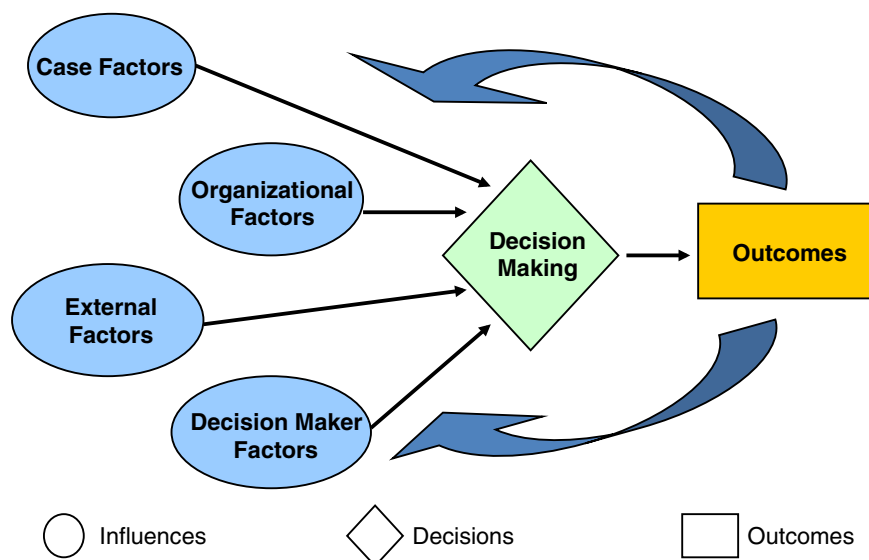
Fig. 1. Decision-making ecology (Baumann et al., 2011).