This chapter draws on a variety of studies conducted using the model of Judgments and Decisions Processes in Context (JUDPiC; Benbenishty & Davidson-Arad, 2012) to compare judgments and decisions in cases of alleged maltreatment made by decision-makers in five countries: Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. The chapter begins with a brief overview of research on intercountry comparisons in the field of child protection decision-making. Next, we describe the JUDPiC model and present in some detail the first international comparison study conducted with this underlying model (Benbenishty et al., 2015). We offer next the subsequent developments of this research project.
Lessons Learned from International Studies

in the different countries involved. In the final section, we discuss some implications for child protection policy and practice and future research.

INTERCOUNTRY COMPARISONS IN THE FIELD OF CHILD PROTECTION DECISION-MAKING

Differences in child protection systems are tied to policy and administrative and judicial structures which determine how and when it is necessary to intervene in a family to protect a child (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). These structures within the system are intimately connected to the social, economic, religious, and other wider contexts in which systems are situated. Consequently, child protection systems are not only different across contexts but are also subjected to constant change and adaptation as these contexts evolve (Wulczyn et al., 2010).

Child protection professionals are tasked with translating those structures into their daily practice through their assessments and decisions for children at risk. Deciding which families are going to be drawn into the child protection system, when a child should be placed out of home, or when a reunification is needed are some of the most difficult decisions facing professionals. Child protection professionals rely on different assessment tools and (implicit or explicit) decision-making frameworks depending on their country child welfare system and regimes, among other factors. Thus, child protection decision-making is expected to vary between countries while remaining relatively similar within a country (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2017b).

The study of intercountry variability of child protection decision-making has become an emerging research theme in the past decade. The most comprehensive set of studies comparing child welfare decision-making in different countries is being carried out by Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, and Skivenes. These researchers have carried out studies that compared aspects of child welfare decision-making in different countries that have different child welfare systems.

An early international vignette study focused on risk assessments made by child welfare workers in England, Norway, and California (Križ & Skivenes, 2013). Although certain issues were consistently considered important by workers across the three countries (e.g., mother cooperation, family isolation, and poverty), the authors reported systematic differences in levels of risk assessment and in the domains that these workers felt influenced their assessments (e.g., neglect, attachment, needs and history of child protection services). The authors interpreted the differences in risk assessment patterns as referring to differences in the child welfare regimes and the structure of services in the three countries studied.

More recently, the group of Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, and Skivenes have completed several international comparative studies of social work and legal decision-making
in child protection in four countries (England, Finland, Norway, and the United States, represented by California). The authors examined how child protection workers involve children in decision-making regarding involuntary child removal (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2015). Based on a survey of 772 professionals responding to a hypothetical vignette, they found that child protection workers in all the participating countries were more likely to talk with older children, to provide and gather information, and to include them in the process when 11 compared to 5 years of age. The authors did not find consistent differences in the level of children’s involvement in care order decision-making between the different regimes (family service and child protection) included in the study.

Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, and Skivenes (2017a) have explored as well the relation between parents’ involvement in care order decision-making in cases of potential child removal and the child welfare orientation (family service and child protection) of the four countries studied. The findings, based on responses to a vignette of 768 child protection workers, do not show a consistent pattern of difference regarding parental involvement that align with the type of child welfare system in which the professional works.

The same group of authors has conducted a study examining child friendliness in judicial decision-making in child protection cases of the four legal systems (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2018). The findings, based on an online survey of 1,479 judicial decision-makers, show that the responses of these professionals are strongly influenced by their own country context, with important variations across countries. For instance, the judges from California were more positive about their courts being child friendly, while English judges perceived that their courts were not that responsive to the needs of children and that neither the environment nor language were child friendly.

Importantly, this group of authors has recognized that the similarities and differences between professionals in different countries found in their recent studies do not seem to align with the child welfare system orientations of the countries studied. This could suggest the need to reconsider whether the traditional classification of child welfare orientations developed by Gilbert and associates (2011) is at present useful in understanding variations between professionals in different countries. Furthermore, given that there are known variations among professionals within countries, there is a clear need for a more nuanced approach to understanding variations among child welfare professionals.

Another approach was evident in a set of studies that compared decisions made by Israeli and Canadian child welfare practitioners (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Osmo & Benbenishty, 2004). This group tried to understand better not only the differences in decisions, but also the rationales provided by practitioners from the two countries. The authors presented the same case vignettes to professionals in both countries so
that similarities and differences could be identified. These comparisons provided important insights about professionals in these countries. For instance, Israeli practitioners were more influenced in their judgments and decisions by information on the mother’s cooperativeness compared with their Canadian colleagues. These studies led eventually to the development of the JUDPiC model (Figure 6.1) that tried to systematize the factors that might impact judgment processes, including the contexts in which these decisions are being made.

According to the JUDPiC model proposed by Benbenishty and Davidson-Arad (2012), and later expanded by Benbenishty (2019), child protection professionals make their judgments based on case information on the child and the family. The way in which professionals interpret this information is influenced by their own personal attributes as well as by the characteristics of the organizations in which they work. This information search and processing leads to intermediate judgments (e.g., substantiation of allegations, assessments of risk for further maltreatment). These judgments then lead to decisions aimed at protecting children. According to the model, all these case-level considerations are embedded within

![Figure 6.1](image-url)
broader contexts, such as the ecological context of the family, the organizational context of the decision-making agency, and wider contexts relating to the overall characteristics of the service system and the multiple cultural contexts in which these professionals operate. Hence, the links between the available information on the child and family and the judgments made by the professional, and the links between these judgments and the case decisions are moderated by a variety of factors, such as child protection policies, available knowledge and evidence about suitable interventions, existing resources, and values and attitudes about the rights of children and families. The model has recently been revised to include the time dimension (Benbenishty, 2019). Thus, the whole model is seen within “evolving contexts” (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019), emphasizing the dynamic and continuously changing aspects of the context in which child welfare decisions are being made. This can help explain, for instance, how decisions are influenced by major watershed events, such as child fatalities, or by major policy changes.

When this model is applied to comparative studies of judgments and decisions in child welfare and protection it offers a detailed and nuanced lens to predict, identify, and explain similarities and differences between judgments and decisions made in different child welfare systems. Moreover, it draws attention to variations within child welfare systems and over time. For instance, it helps understand why, within the same system, decisions may differ on the basis of the cultural context of the child and the agency or the resources differentially available to child welfare agencies within the same country. It could also help explain how decisions change following events such as the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to a child welfare system or changes in referral pattern after a policy change, such as a new policy forbidding the referral of young children to residential care (Silman, 2014; Zeijlmans, van Yperen, & López, 2020).

AN INTERNATIONAL STUDY OF CHILD PROTECTION DECISION-MAKING

The JUDPiC model was the basis for a large-scale international study comparing judgments and decision-making in cases of alleged maltreatment made by 828 decision-makers in four different countries (Benbenishty et al., 2015). The study employed a detailed vignette (a three-page description of a case) depicting a potential situation of child abuse (for a detailed description, see Benbenishty et al., 2015). Professionals filled out a Personal and Professional Background Questionnaire and the Child Welfare Attitudes Questionnaire. The attitudes questionnaire consists of 50 statements covering six content areas: (1) Against removal from home of children at risk, (2) Favors reunification and optimal duration of alternative care, (3) Favors children's participation in decisions, (4) Favors parents' participation in decisions, (5) Positive assessment of
ability of foster care to promote children’s development and well-being, and (6) Positive assessment of ability of residential care to promote children’s development and well-being. In addition, after reading the case vignette, the participants provided their judgments of whether the allegations of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse were substantiated; their risk assessments of future emotional and physical maltreatment; and their intervention recommendation.

Placement Decisions

In an attempt to assess the impact of parent’s wishes on judgments and decisions, the study presented two versions of the vignette to the professionals: the mother objected strongly to the idea of a placement versus the mother was willing to accept the placement. Surprisingly, mother’s wishes toward the removal of the child did not have any impact on the judgments and decisions of professionals from any of the four countries. Although this is consistent with findings from previous studies (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008), it is still an alarming result. Recent reforms of child protection policy in many countries indicate a shift from seeing parents as simple recipients of welfare benefits to considering them as service users and active agents in the decision-making processes (Biehal, 2019; López, Bouma, Grietens, & Knorth, 2019; Witte, Miehlbradt, van Santen, & Kindler, 2019). This finding could indicate that policy developments promoting parents’ involvement might not be translating into more participatory practices straightaway.

In contrast, a follow-up study carried out in Portugal (Carvalho, Delgado, Benbenishty, Davidson-Arad, & Pinto, 2018) found that intervention recommendations were associated significantly with mother’s wishes: while 61% recommended removal when the mother consented, 45% recommended removal when the mother was against it. This divergent finding suggests that between-country differences may exist even when child welfare systems are quite similar, as is the case with Portugal and Spain. There is a need for more in-depth exploration to understand these differences. One possible explanation is that the Portuguese study was carried out later than the international study, in a period in which there were many efforts made to reform the child protection systems of both Spain and Portugal. Therefore, the context might have changed over time.

When child welfare attitudes were explored among professionals across the four countries, the study found similarities and differences that seem to reflect both shared influences and between-countries variations. The smallest differences in professionals’ attitudes between the four countries were with regard to the attitudes against removal of children from home. This seems to reflect the current shared ideology regarding the importance of family preservation and the prevention of removal, if possible (AI et al., 2012). The only country that deviated significantly from this approach was Spain.
Another case in point of both intercountry similarities and differences is the finding that, in three of the participating countries, attitudes toward foster care were much more positive than those toward residential care. This trend is very much along the current emphasis on children’s rights (UNICEF, 2014), the superiority of family settings over residential care (e.g., Dozier et al., 2014), and the continued efforts to dismantle residential facilities in Europe, including massive closures of institutions in former Soviet Union countries, such as Romania (Nelson, Fox, & Zeanah, 2014). Within this global trend, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands stand out as more extreme cases, as negative attitudes regarding residential settings are fueled by media exposure to cruelties committed in residential settings in these countries (López et al., 2019).

In contrast to these attitudes shared by three of the countries, Israeli practitioners viewed residential care more favorably than other professionals and slightly more favorably than foster care. Hence, although Israeli practitioners are familiar with the literature on attachment and the importance of family settings (as indicated in this study by their reluctance to remove children from home), they had a positive view of residential care. This can be explained based on the historical context of the development of child welfare services in Israel that were influenced by the critical role that residential settings played in the Jewish tradition in providing a home for children during and following the Holocaust and in serving as a socializing context in the Zionist ideology that promoted collectivist settings (Dolev, Ben Rabi, & Zemach-Marom, 2009).

Spain presents another unique combination of attitudes to these placement alternatives. Attitudes toward residential care are not as negative as those of practitioners from Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, and, at the same time, their attitudes toward foster care are the most positive. This may reflect the recent developments in child protection in Spain that historically relied more on residential care. There is a gradual change in professional ideology, and intensive work has been carried out to convince professionals of the superiority of family-based interventions over residential placements. Moreover, program evaluations conducted in Spain have revealed a very positive picture of family foster care, with high placement stability (Del Valle, López, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2009; López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013) and a lower rate of placement breakdown (López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2011). This positive portrait may have influenced the attitudes of professionals to accept family foster care as a good alternative.

Substantiation and Risk Assessment Decisions

When the substantiation and risk assessment judgments made by the practitioners were assessed, several patterns emerged. First, although there
were some intercountry differences (Dutch professionals tended to substantiate alleged maltreatment significantly less than Israeli and Northern Ireland professionals), the within-country differences were quite substantial, indicating that being part of the same system (and judging the same case) does not guarantee agreement. Furthermore, personal attitudes of practitioners explained some of these variations in substantiation and risk assessment.

This study examined whether there were differences between practitioners from the participating countries in their recommendations with regard to intervention recommendations. Although we presented virtually the same vignette to all practitioners in the study (the manipulation did not have any impact), there was considerable variation in the interventions they recommended based on this case file. For instance, the number of practitioners in Spain who recommended removal (52%) was more than double the proportion in Israel (25%).

The lowest levels of removal recommendations by Israeli practitioners is consistent with previous studies (Benbenishty, Segev, Surkis, & Elias, 2002; Gold et al., 2001), and it could be explained by the ideological and professional stance in Israel that prioritizes that families be kept together, as well as by the current public criticism toward the intrusive response of child protection agencies in the lives of families. In contrast, Spanish practitioners present a much weaker stand against removal attitude and a low support for reunification and short optimal duration of placement. These findings could be associated with the prioritizing of residential care as the default child protection intervention in the Spanish system and the scarcity of family support programs aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect in families at risk.

Interestingly, the Carvalho et al. (2018) study mentioned earlier indicated that the pattern of attitudes in Portugal was more similar to the child welfare attitudes in Spain compared with the other countries. The Spanish and Portuguese systems share much in common, such as the prevalence of residential care and the late introduction of family support and family foster care programs. It seems that these similarities are also evident in the structure of child welfare attitudes among their practitioners. This may be an indication of how the child welfare system is translated into “on the ground decisions”—by internalized attitudes, rather than by mere directives.

As was the case with judgments, there were considerable variations between professionals within each country. Here again, personal child welfare attitudes explained some of this intracountry variations. Thus, for instance, while 22.2% of the practitioners with a strong “pro-removal” attitude recommended removal of the child even without parental consent, only 8.9% of the practitioners who were against removal recommended such removal.
CONTINUATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECISION-MAKING PROJECT

In the Netherlands, the project members have conducted further explorations of their country data in order to understand the role of reasoning, work experience, and attitudes in child protection decision-making (Bartelink et al., 2018). The Dutch team has conducted further analyses in a sample of 214 professionals and 381 students in order to investigate the rationales provided for an out-of-home placement decision and whether these rationales predict the decision, in addition to the decision-makers’ risk assessment, work experience, and attitudes toward placement. The findings revealed that the mean number of rationales given by each respondent was low overall. The content of the reasoning was somehow superficial and missed core elements, such as references to the child’s development or child abuse signs. Safety assessment and attitude toward placement predicted the placement decision: the higher the assessment of safety risk and the more positive respondents were about the out-of-home placement, the more likely it was that they would recommend placing the child in foster care.

Reasoning of the decision-makers was also studied by the team from Northern Ireland (Spratt, Devaney, & Hayes, 2015). One of the main contributions of Spratt and colleagues (2015) is the documentation of “confirmation bias” in the reasoning strategies of those social workers making decisions of removal and reunification. Their findings suggest that social workers are prone to selectively interpret the case information either positively or negatively to support their a priori assumptions about the case.

Seen together, these studies on reasoning suggest an important avenue for comparative research. They indicate that practitioners may differ not only in how they process available information, such as the information provided in the vignette or culled from case files. Their different professional perspectives may also influence what they look for and see in cases. There is a clear need for qualitative lens to supplement quantitative comparisons.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE FIELD OF INTERCOUNTRY COMPARISONS IN CHILD PROTECTION DECISION-MAKING

The series of international comparative studies presented in this chapter demonstrates the impact of the country context in child protection decision-making. Practitioners from the five countries studied diverged significantly in their maltreatment substantiation, risk assessments, and recommended interventions.
Furthermore, these studies indicated that one of the factors that can help explain within-country variations are the practitioners’ child welfare attitudes. It seems therefore that the JUDPiC could be a valuable model to identify and understand similarities and differences between judgments and decisions made in different child welfare systems, as well as between practitioners within the same system.

From a theoretical point of view, we think the JUDPiC model needs to be developed further to help predict and improve decision processes, rather than just explain current findings. This theoretical additional work will need to expand much beyond the decision-making literature. It seems that there will be a need to integrate concepts and models from fields such as ecological, systems, and organizational theories that take into account the nestedness of the many contexts in which child welfare decision-makers are functioning. The theory work will be stronger if it takes into account that child welfare decision-making is a process that involves many players, some present in the room, such as the practitioner and the child-family, while others, such as the supervisor, the judge, and even the media, are “mentally present” in the mind of the practitioner. This more advanced theoretical work will help direct research in the future.

Given this state of theory, the comparative studies presented here were exploratory in nature and did not present many specific hypotheses. The JUDPiC model, however, provides opportunities to generate new directional hypotheses that could be tested with more sophisticated research methods to further expand our knowledge base on decision-making in child protection. For instance, a longitudinal approach could be useful to study the less-explored dimension of the impact of time (Benbenishty, 2019). Researchers can propose detailed hypotheses about how decisions in the child welfare system of a country would change gradually with the introduction of major policy changes, as is currently occurring in the Portuguese child protection system. Another set of hypotheses could address the role of resources on decision-makers. Hence, one could hypothesize that the relative abundance of a specific resource (e.g., residential care facilities or home preservation programs) in a country context would impact decision-makers. Moreover, hypotheses could be tested to explain within-country variations based on local variations in access to certain resources. These lines of research could benefit from advances in theory and could also help progress in our theoretical thinking.

From a practice point of view, one important implication of this series of studies is the need to make professionals and policy-makers more conscious and responsive of the impact of workers’ attitudes and country context in judgments and decisions. It is of utmost importance that professionals be made more aware of the ways in which they bring their own values, beliefs, and attitudes into play when making decisions for children and families.
Likewise, understanding how decisions are shaped by the organizational and country cultures in which they operate should be prioritized in training and supervision, as well as be addressed in policy and organizational transformations. These issues have been traditionally neglected in curriculum development, textbooks, and professional training for child protection workers in favor of other subjects (e.g., the assessment of case characteristics in order to make accurate judgments and decisions). This narrow approach is being supplemented currently by research evidence, such as the one presented in this chapter, that illuminates how decision-maker or context characteristics impact decisions.

This research line suggests that there is still much to be learned from international comparisons of child protection decision-making. It can provide an important source of self-reflection and learning, and it might encourage changes in national policies and practices.

REFERENCES


