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Commentary on decision-making and judgments in child maltreatment prevention and response: An overview[☆]

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[☆] *Dedication:* This special issue is a tribute to the pioneering work of Professor Lenard I. Dalglish. We are certain that Len would have submitted something remarkable, but recognize that his body of work contributed in many important ways to this special issue and to the field. We take solace from the notion that much of the progress in this area would not have been possible without his insights, persistence, intellect, and friendship.

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Professional judgments and decisions in alleged cases of child abuse and neglect can be difficult and complex, often based on ambiguous, partial, and contradictory information. These decisions have potentially fateful consequences not only for the child, but also for the entire family. Yet, decision-making in Child Protective Services (CPS) is characterized by low reliability and frequent errors. Examples abound of apparent errors where CPS did not act when it should have, or acted when it should not have. Aside from highly visible errors, other more subtle decision errors can occur that result in overall outcomes that are less than desirable for children and families. To improve decision-making, CPS decision makers at all levels can benefit from taking advantage of the knowledge gains and progress regarding decision-making research. The intent of this issue is to present research that articulates and explains how context and decision-maker behaviors effect CPS decision-making and how such knowledge might lead to improvements in decision-making.

The ideas for this special issue of Child Abuse & Neglect emerged for our team of co-editors from common threads as we found ourselves converging from separate paths over the last few years toward a key problem in child protection: decision-making. This issue of Child Abuse and Neglect is one of many steps that we believe are needed in order to keep

the issue of decision-making an active part of the child protection research agenda, and part of the development of an important sub-field in the broader research being done in the field of child welfare.

Background

Decision-making in child protection is characterized by two apparently contradictory perspectives. The first of these is that child maltreatment is recognized as underreported; that is, the incidence of maltreatment based on both self-report (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & Van IJzendoorn, 2015) and sentinel studies (Euser et al., 2013; Sedlak et al., 2010) exceeds by far the numbers of children known to official sources. The second is that among those cases that are known to child protection authorities, only a fraction are deemed to involve actual maltreatment. Furthermore, even among those who receive a response from the system, few receive any intervention beyond an assessment or investigation. In many instances, children who are reported are screened out by child protection agencies altogether (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Thus, on the one hand, many children unknown to child protection appear to need intervention. On the other hand, many of those known to child protection

are apparently not in need of an intervention, or at the very least, might not be experiencing severe harm or else might exhibit weak signs and symptoms of maltreatment (Drake, 1996). One way of attempting to understand this apparent contradiction is to examine the underlying systems of services designed for intervention (Wulczyn et al., 2010). We would argue that a key aspect of these systems is the organizational context and the case level decision-making that takes place in these circumstances.

Crucial aspects of professionals' process of working with cases of (suspected) child maltreatment are (a) the assessment of risk and the substantiation of abusive practices by parents/caretakers or other people concerned (diagnostic decision-making) and (b) the making of choices on what, if any, actions should be undertaken (intervention decision-making; Dalglish, 2008; Hassan, 2013). Child welfare professionals are responsible for assessing the risk of harm and deciding on the most pertinent level of intervention (e.g., whether to remove a child from home or to reunify the child with the family at the conclusion of a spell in care). These crucial decisions are made under high levels of uncertainty because of insufficient or ambiguous information and time constraints (Munro, 1999, 2008; Wakker, 2010). A current challenge facing child welfare is to *improve* decision-making in order to mitigate false positive and false negative errors and to enhance the optimal matching of needs and services for vulnerable children and their families.

A relevant question in this context is whether and what research on decision-making is available and/or should be developed that can inform and support practitioners in the child health care and welfare/protection field.

Approaches to Research in Decision-Making: Implications for Child Protection

Research on human decision-making covers a very broad area. Consequently, it has attracted different, partly discipline-bounded approaches. Neurology, computer sciences, cognitive psychology, brain sciences, management, medicine, economics, or organizational psychology are only a few of the scientific fields that study judgment and decision-making. These studies utilize a very wide range of research methods, such as naturalistic studies; laboratory tests and experiments; qualitative methods, such as think aloud and protocol analysis (Todhunter, 2015); case file analyses; and computer simulations (for a review, see Benbenishty, 1992).

Among the many conceptual and methodological choices made in the study of judgment and decision-making, we think that some are most pertinent for the area of child protection.

Normative Versus Descriptive

In normative approaches, the “correct decision” is known to the researchers and is compared with what actually is decided so that errors can be identified. For instance, the long tradition of studying heuristics (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) is based on showing the gap between what is the correct judgment or “gold standard” compared with the judgment actually made by lay persons and professionals, i.e., their biases.

Descriptive studies do not assume a gold standard regarding the correct decision, and they are designed to reveal implicit processes

and mechanisms with explicit transparency so that these processes and mechanisms can be discussed and evaluated, based on professional and public values and knowledge. An example is to identify whether a child's ethnic affiliation has a systematic impact on practitioners' decision whether to remove him/her from home. In child protection, there is little research that can be based on knowing what should be the correct, normative decision, often because no outcome information is available. When such information does exist, it is not clear whether it reflects on the quality of the decision.

Process Versus Outcomes

Research in this area has two different foci. The first is on the processes that lead to the decision, what information is looked for, and how it is processed and combined to reach a final decision (e.g., substantiation, removal of a child from home). The other approach is interested in the statistical relationships between the information available to the decision maker and the final decision. While the latter approach is useful to identify systematic patterns of information use and predicting decisions, it does not provide clear insights as to *how* the decision maker is operating. The focus on process tracing, on the other hand, may help in identifying how decision makers actually think. This may be very useful for training – in understanding how expert child professionals reason, translating this reasoning process into training material, hiring considerations, and tracing decision processes of trainees and novices to identify strengths and weaknesses of their practices.

Naturalistic Versus Controlled

Research methods in this area range from extremely controlled laboratory environments

and use of experimental stimuli such as case vignettes, the analysis of existing information from administrative data systems and case files, retrospective description of decision processes, and naturalistic studies that follow the decision makers in each step of the process. Research on child protection decision-making capitalizes most on the use of vignettes (e.g., Benbenishty et al., 2015; Minkhorst, Witteman, Koopmans, Lohman, & Knorth, 2014; Stokes & Schmidt, 2012; Taylor, 2006) and the analysis of administrative data (e.g., De Kwaadsteniet, Bartelink, Witteman, Ten Berge, & Van Yperen, 2013; Graham et al., 2015; Katz, Hampton, Newberger, Bowles, & Snyder, 1986; Wulczyn, Lery, & Snowden, 2014). While the first type of study allows comparisons across contexts, such as international comparative studies (e.g., López et al., 2013), the analysis of real-life records is more naturalistic. Nevertheless, research in this area has not been successful in conducting studies of real-life situations and in capturing aspects of the case that do not translate well into administrative, or even clinical records, such as visual, smell, and audio cues, time pressures, and physical state of the decision maker.

Recent Developments in Child Protection Decision-Making Research

In recent years, the field of decision-making in child protection seems to have made important conceptual-methodological advances. The first is framing decision-making in child protection as a *temporal process* that includes several decision points which are part of the system of child protection, each of which has a different decision-making context (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011). The second

is the increased interest in how multiple nested *contexts* (i.e., multi-level analysis) impact decision-making behavior observed at the individual case level (Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010).

A Temporal Continuum

One of the elements that we think may somewhat uniquely characterize decision-making in child protection is derived from *Decision-Making Ecology* (DME; Baumann et al., 2011; Baumann, Fluke, Dalglish, & Kern, 2014; Fluke, Baumann, Dalglish, & Kern, 2014). In particular, the idea that decision-making occurs along a *continuum* from CPS intake through placement outcomes as children become embedded or *filtered* through the system. A key idea is that as decision-making consequences across the spectrum of stakeholders are perceived as having greater impact, and as uncertainty (Wakker, 2010) increases, variability in decision maker responses becomes greater. Thus, one of the complexities of studying a system of decision-making means that no single set of general explanations will consistently be more influential across the continuum. That said, an important part of the research agenda is to determine if certain patterns of factors are consistently more common for certain decisions.

The Importance of Context

Much prior research has focused on how case characteristics and decision makers' attributes are associated with judgments and decisions in child protection (Britner & Mossler, 2002; Chor, McClelland, Weiner, Jordan, & Lyons, 2013; Knorth, 1998). Two more recent models move one step further to suggest that these case and professional characteristics should

be seen within the *context* in which they take place. That is, the impact that a certain child characteristic, such as ethnicity, has on a decision depends on the context in which the worker and the child are embedded. For instance, using DME, researchers have shown that the organizational context (e.g., how risk and poverty interact) may influence how a decision maker perceives the child's ethnicity (Detlaff et al., 2011). Similarly, Benbenishty et al. (2015) propose the Judgments and Decision Processes in Context (JUDPIC) model, which describes the ways in which multiple contexts (e.g., organization, culture, country child welfare system) may impact the decision-making process. An international comparative study was conducted with this model in mind and showed that both worker-level and country-level factors influenced judgment and recommendations.

Purpose and Organization of This Special Issue

Decision-Making Network

This special issue was inspired by the close collaboration among the editors in research projects and scientific meetings which occurred over an extended time. Four main events helped to shape this special issue. First, in early September 2012 at the meeting convened by the European Scientific Association on Residential and Family care for children and adolescents (EUSARF) in Glasgow, Scotland, two symposia on decision-making – organized by the editors of this issue and reflecting methodologically distinct but theoretically convergent perspectives – focused on understanding decision-making in child protection. Subsequently, in the fall of 2013, two

members of our editorial team, Mónica López and Erik Knorth, convened a special meeting at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, where child protection decision-making was the sole topic and where it became clear that more thoughtful and perhaps rapid progress could be made through a broader international collaboration. The discussion continued during the following months and crystalized at a third event, the *Seminar on Decision-Making in Child Welfare from an International Perspective* organized by the Haruv Institute in Israel in March 2014, chaired by Rami Benbenishty. Following this seminar, a call was organized for a special issue on “Decision-Making in Child Maltreatment Prevention and Response.” The aim of this issue was to present research focused on how context and decision maker behaviors impact child protection systems’ decision-making and how such knowledge might lead to improvements in decision-making. The call for papers was formally shared at the symposium *Towards a comprehensive view of factors affecting decision-making in child welfare*, coordinated by the four editors of this issue in the 13th EUSARF conference at Copenhagen, Denmark, in September 2014.

Our review of the scientific literature in child welfare, child abuse and neglect, and child protection indicates that relatively little has been published on decision-making in this area. We are also concerned that the general knowledge about decision-making and child protection-specific knowledge about decision-making has not influenced practitioners or policy makers.

Overview of the Special Issue

The response to this call was greater than anticipated. After peer review, 12 articles were selected. These articles contain research from

11 countries, exemplify a truly international perspective, and represent a wide range of topics and methodologies.

The majority of the articles in this special issue focus on the identification of factors influencing decision-making and their interactions. Other articles advance our thinking in terms of defining models of decision-making and judgment processes. The rest of the articles provide insight into the connection of decisions to outcomes, the methods for improving professional decision-making, and the involvement of children in decisions. As important as what we have received for this special issue is, it is useful to reflect on the topics that were *not* addressed. No articles were submitted that deal with using feedback for decision makers, new technologies to support decision-making, decision-making in groups, or workforce development tied to decision-making.

There are at least three critical gaps that have characterized prior decision-making literature and that we believe have been well-addressed with this special issue: (a) the lack of theoretical models in the study of decision-making; (b) the role of decision maker attributes; and (c) the weight of context in decisions.

Many authors in our field have lamented the lack of *theoretical developments* that operationalize the decision-making processes in child protection (Baumann et al., 2011). The present issue responds to this need, introducing several articles in which theoretical models are empirically tested: DME in the article by Graham et al., JUDPIC by Benbenishty et al., and the Theory of Planned Behavior in the contribution by Rodrigues and colleagues.

The scarcity of studies focused on the *role of workers’ factors* has been also frequently acknowledged (Davidson-Arad &

Benbenishty, 2008; Munro, 1999; Portwood, 1998; Rolock & Testa, 2005). This special issue helps to fill this gap with several articles addressing worker's psychosocial variables, including work skills and job experiences (Graham et al., 2015; Dettlaff et al., 2015); attitudes, emotions, and experiences (Rodrigues et al., 2015); practitioner's child welfare attitudes (Benbenishty et al., 2015); workers rationales for decisions (Spratt et al., 2015); and education and experience (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015).

Similarly, the *impact of context* – somewhat neglected by researchers in the past – is at the core of several articles in this issue using the two context-sensitive models of DME and JUDPIC. Whereas the applications of DME help illustrate the intersection between cultural and organizational contexts, the international comparative study of Benbenishty et al. illustrates the importance of the country-level context. Similarly, Skivenes et al. focus on the importance of context with a comparative piece on the involvement of children in the decision-making process by professionals in four countries.

Not surprisingly, the majority of articles in this issue focus on decisions regarding child removal. This decision has been the most studied in our field, although it remains not well understood (Lindsey, 2004). Nevertheless, the full continuum of decisions described in this editorial is well represented, including three articles that study the decision to reunify children with their families, two that deal with the decision to substantiate a case of maltreatment, and one that focuses on the investigation decision.

The articles have been organized around four themes.

(a) *Searching for models of decision-making and judgment processes.* This special issue

begins with an article addressing the interaction between the case, caseworker, and organizational factors using the worker as the unit of analysis in the context of the out-of-home placement decision. Graham and colleagues use DME as an organizing framework for the description of their structural model. The findings of this study put the emphasis on the case factors (risk assessment, family income, and proportion of Hispanic families), while worker factors are not found to directly influence the placement decision.

The article by Dettlaff and colleagues presents the development of an instrument to measure the influence of caseworker and organizational factors on the removal decision at the case worker level. Drawing from DME, the instrument proves to have acceptable properties, to be a useful tool in exploring the complexities of the decision-making processes, and may have applicability in evaluating child protection workforces.

Focused on the decision to propose a residential care placement in the context of a parental neglect case, the article by Rodrigues and colleagues tests a socio-psychological model based on the Theory of Planned Behavior model. The findings of their study suggest that the intention to recommend a residential care placement is determined by cognitive, social, affective, value-laden, and experience variables, and the perceived risk.

(b) *Factors influencing decision-making and their interactions.* The next article of this special issue explores the influence of family, caseworker, agency, and county factors in predicting substantiation and removal to out-of-home care. The study by Font and Maguire-Jack demonstrates the importance of family risk factors and agency factors as predictors of substantiation and, conditional on substantiation, of removal of the child to

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out-of-home care. The authors open an interesting debate suggesting that substantiation may not be a clear indication of the occurrence of maltreatment or even the severity of maltreatment risks.

Benbenishty and collaborators offer an international comparison of judgment and decision-making in cases of alleged maltreatment. JUDPIC is used to examine the impact of case characteristics (mother's wish with regard to removal), worker characteristic (practitioner's child welfare attitudes), and context (country protective system) on child protection judgments (e.g., risk) and decision (whether to remove a child from home). The study provides evidence to support the impact of practitioners' attitudes on child protection decision-making and the role of the context of the decision. The study reveals differences among practitioners from four countries responding to the same vignette.

The reasoning strategies used by social workers to support their in- and out-of-home decisions are explored in a qualitative article within this special issue. Spratt and collaborators draw the attention to confirmation bias by providing evidence that rationales used by professionals tend to selectively interpret information to support prior underlying hypotheses.

The article by Wittenstrom and collaborators raises interesting methodological challenges in the context of disproportionality of African American children in the care system. Their study explores the effect of race on reunification given the presence or absence of certain case (drugs, infants, single mothers) and organizational characteristics, while maintaining other case, organizational, and external characteristics constant. The findings demonstrate that the extent of racial disparity in reunification decisions varies

greatly depending on a particular combination of case and external factors.

The article by Fallon and colleagues brings to our attention the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare decision-making in Canada. The study reveals and replicates findings that the proportion of cases placed by child welfare agencies is influenced by the proportion of Aboriginal children on the caseload and by organizational features.

(c) *Connecting decisions to outcomes.* Biehal and colleagues contribute an article on factors influencing the decision to reunify. The findings show that the assessed risks to the safety of the child and the evidence of improvement in parental problems are the two most important predictors of decisions about returning children to their families.

In the article by Vanderfaeillie and colleagues, the authors explore the usefulness of a *profile-oriented approach* to support effective foster care placement decision-making. The findings indicate that is possible to group foster children into two clusters related to child, familial, and parenting problems. The authors stress the importance of dynamic decision-making in the assessment of children who are in need of out-of-home care.

(d) *Client participation and improvement.* All of the studies mentioned thus far focus on decisions made by professionals, but the international study of Skivenes and colleagues provides evidence of the variety of practices concerning children's involvement in child welfare decision-making. Based on a survey of 772 workers in four countries, this article makes clear the importance of the child's age when involving him/her in decisions. Child protection workers in all the participating countries were more likely to talk with older children, and to provide and gather

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information, and to include them in the process when eleven compared to 5 years of age.

Finally, whereas all empirical studies in this issue focus on describing existing practices, the goal of the literature review by Bartelink et al. is to identify methods for *improving* professional decision-making in child welfare and child protection. The authors discuss four methods: structured decision-making, risk assessment instruments, shared decision-making, and family group decision-making. They draw the attention to the importance of studying the entire decision-making process and not only partial decisions, and the need to investigate child maltreatment outcomes and not only indicators.

Together, the 12 articles in this special issue represent a unique international contribution to the field of decision-making and judgment processes in child protection systems. This set of articles allows us to reflect on where the field is and where it needs to be. The contributors to this issue have identified through their research a series of knowledge gaps and critical areas where more research will be needed in the coming years. Several articles draw attention to the importance of the relations between factors (mediated effects), rather than individual characteristics having a direct influence on decision-making. Traditionally, we have studied only the case factors influencing decision-making directly, not the role of the decision maker or the context of decisions. The result has been an emphasis on assessment that, while important, may prevent us from considering other equally important aspects of decision-making. We hope this special issue will encourage academicians and practitioners with an interest in this area to share their work and make it accessible to colleagues, students, practitioners, and policy makers.

Next Steps

A *Decision Making Network* for researchers and practitioners was initiated at the EUSARF meeting held in September 2014 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The first meeting was attended by colleagues representing 14 countries in and outside Europe: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. Tentative goals of the network include: (a) creating a common understanding of decision-making in the child welfare/protection system; (b) bridging gaps between the different disciplines (e.g., social/behavioral sciences, health sciences, legal law sciences); (c) seeking possible collaborations on different levels (e.g., European, North American, internationally); and d) formulating an overview of the (history of) decision-making research and practice and sharing this knowledge. This special issue represents a first step toward solidifying ongoing applied research focused on this issue. Thanks in part to the range of innovative contributions, we are even more convinced that decision-making is an important avenue for developing new knowledge aimed at improving our global child protection system and outcomes for children and families.

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As editors of this special issue, we would like to thank the contributors for choosing this journal to share their valuable research with the international community. We are similarly grateful to the excellent reviewers who provided constructive feedback and improved the manuscripts. Finally, we want to express our

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