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Research article

Development of an instrument to understand the child protective services decision-making process, with a focus on placement decisions

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Abstract

When children come to the attention of the child welfare system, they become involved in a decision-making process in which decisions are made that have a significant effect on their future and well-being. The decision to remove children from their families is particularly complex; yet surprisingly little is understood about this decision-making process. This paper presents the results of a study to develop an instrument to explore, at the caseworker level, the context of the removal decision, with the objective of understanding the influence of the individual and organizational factors on this decision, drawing from the Decision Making Ecology as the underlying rationale for obtaining the measures. The instrument was based on the development of decision-making scales used in prior decision-making studies and administered to child protection caseworkers in several states. Analyses included reliability analyses, principal components analyses, and inter-correlations among the resulting scales. For one scale regarding removal decisions, a principal components analysis resulted in the extraction of two components, jointly identified as caseworkers' decision-making orientation, described as (1) an internal reference to decision-making and (2) an external reference to decision-making. Reliability analyses demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency for 9 of the 11 scales. Full details of the reliability analyses, principal components analyses, and inter-correlations among the seven scales are discussed, along with implications for practice and the utility of this instrument to support the understanding of decision-making in child welfare.

Introduction

When children come to the attention of the child welfare system, they become involved in a decision-making process in which decisions are made on their behalf that have a significant effect on their future and well-being. The decision to remove children from their families and place them into out-of-home care is particularly challenging and complex, but others such as reunifying children are equally complex. These and other decision are often made under extremely difficult conditions in an environment characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity. The concepts of risk and safety, and guidelines for decision-making, are often vague and poorly defined, resulting in confusion among child welfare staff (Rycus & Hughes, 2008). Key information about the case may be lacking and decisions must be made within very short time frames given the potential safety concerns facing these children. Decision makers are further challenged by the context of most child welfare agencies, which often is characterized by a lack of resources, high rates of turnover, and unreasonable workload demands. And while the safety concerns present in some families may be apparent, this often is not the case. The result of these intersecting issues is a decision-making environment that is uncertain and vulnerable to error.

The removal decision is further complicated by consideration of the lifelong impacts these decisions may have on children and families. Although removal is necessary in many instances to provide for children's safety, a body of research has documented the deleterious effects that may result from out-of-home placement. Children placed in out-of-home care experience not only significant trauma but also are more likely than other children to experience a number of poor outcomes, including low educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment, economic hardship, unplanned pregnancies, mental health disorders, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2011, Pecora et al., 2005). Although these outcomes may at least partially be attributable to children's experiences of maltreatment prior to removal, the consistent evidence documenting poor outcomes for children who experience out-of-home care calls attention to the seriousness and life-long consequences of this decision.

Yet despite the complexity and consequences of this decision, surprisingly little is understood about this decision-making process (Fluke, Baumann, Dalgleish, & Kern, 2014). While previous research has documented some (primarily case-related) factors that influence this process, there is little consensus on the criteria caseworkers use in arriving at this decision and on which factors are most important in caseworkers' considerations (Lindsey, 2004). What is clear is that decisions regarding the need for removal are inconsistent (Gold et al., 2001, Rossi et al., 1999) and a great deal of the variability in caseworkers' decisions remains unexplained with regard to the removal decision, as well as for other decisions. Thus, the goal of the present study is to continue to develop instrumentation to understand the decision-making process. Specifically it will further explore the context of the removal decision to provide a more thorough understanding of the intersecting factors that influence this decision. This study is part of a larger program of research that seeks to better understand decision-making processes in child welfare systems to promote fairness, accuracy, and improved outcomes among children and families.

Section snippets

Factors that Influence the Decision-Making Process

Although prior research has documented a number of factors that influence the removal decision, a challenge to understanding the decision-making process in child welfare is that some of these factors may not be related to the case itself. This growing body of research has documented that, in addition to case-related factors, both personal factors of the decision-maker and organizational factors influence the removal decision, which may allow for subjectivity and bias to enter this …

The Decision-Making Ecology

While much research has been done to understand the factors involved in decision making, few theories have been presented to explain the decision-making process. The Decision-Making Ecology (DME) integrates knowledge from the decision-making sciences to the field of child welfare, recognizing the unique environment of child welfare agencies (Baumann et al., 2011, Baumann et al., 2014, Baumann et al., 1997, Fluke et al., 2014). The DME examines the decision-making process holistically and …

Methods

The present study involves the development of an instrument for use with child protection caseworkers to measure the influence of individual (caseworker) and organizational factors on key decision points in the child welfare decision-making continuum, drawing from the DME framework as the underlying rationale for obtaining the measures. The instrument was developed for use at the caseworker level to examine individual and organizational factors related to decision-making. However, it is …

Results

Results of these analyses are presented as follows: (1) reliability analyses and frequency distributions of each section of the survey, (2) results of the PC analysis of the *Removal Decisions* scale, and (3) intercorrelations among the resulting scales. …

Discussion

The instrument described herein was developed to provide a more thorough understanding than has previously been available of the factors that influence decision making in child maltreatment investigations and the interrelationships among these factors. It is hoped that this instrument will facilitate future exploration as well as substantive knowledge about this difficult topic. To this end, and building on prior work (English et al., 2002, Fluke et al., 2001, Kern et al., 1997), the instrument …

Acknowledgements

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…However, although in Italy there is not a unified assessment process based on structured instruments, the national guidelines identified the following themes that should be investigated by CPS professionals (CISMAI, 2014): parents' level of cooperation with CPS workers, preliminary information about the parents' history and relationship, parents' personality profiles, quality of the parent-child relationship, and prognostic indicators. In the last few years, CPS workers' decision making, in particular child removal decisions, has been the focus of a growing number of studies (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Grumi, Milani, & Di Blasio, 2017) in order to identify which factors influence workers' evaluations. The Decision Making Ecology model (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011) proposes that case factors, individual factors, organizational factors, and external factors jointly influence workers' decision-making processes and decisions.…

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…with the response options Not, Slightly, Moderately, Very, or Completely Satisfied. Research has shown that child welfare workers' confidence in finding available services in the local community is correlated with their ability to support families, prompting speculation that being able to identify appropriate community resources increases staff confidence in decision making (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). Further research has shown how the perception of available community resources and services affects workers' perceptions of program effectiveness (Williams et al., 2015).…

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