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Advancing the Field of Decision-Making and Judgment in Child Welfare and Protection

A Look Back and Forward

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In this final chapter, we present a summary of what appears to be established in the field of child welfare decision-making, and we raise some questions that still need to be answered. We also outline a series of research directions that could help in the further development of this field.

HOW HAS OUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DECISION-MAKING IN CHILD WELFARE EVOLVED?

An important feature of child welfare systems observed at the jurisdictional level (countries, states, provinces, counties, local authorities, etc.) is variability in the rates at which children and families experience no involvement to deeper involvement in the system. This funneling of families and children (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011) characterizes the child welfare system, but, from a decision-making perspective, this variability can be viewed at least in part as a reflection of differences in case-level decision-making. For example, from the 2017 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) data

across US states, the average proportion of decisions to accept a child maltreatment referral is 0.42 (US Department of Health and Human Services [USHHS], 2019). However, the range of variability is from 0.16 to 0.98, encompassing nearly the entire set of possible values.

While not every decision point is as variable as intake, we are not aware of any studied child welfare decision point where variability has not been found across jurisdictions and sub-jurisdictions. These include key decisions to substantiate, to provide more services, to remove a child to out-of-home care, to reunify with the family of origin, to make a child available for adoption, and other similar decisions along the child welfare continuum.

What is more, variability in decision-making has been observed at not only the jurisdictional level, but also at the level of child welfare offices, supervisors, and individual workers. Of course it could be argued that this variability is to be expected given human involvement in the process and because of the differences in the ways that systems operate, but ideally one would like to be able to say that children and families who enter the child welfare system are being treated the same.

The variability in child welfare decisions rates across almost all conceivable units of analysis, whether jurisdictions or individual caseworkers, can be viewed as the manifestation of decision-making behavior in the child protection systems. Reasons for variability fit within the context of the theoretical frameworks we discuss in the chapter on theory (Chapter 1), particularly the Judgments and Decision Processes in Context (JUDPiC) and Decision-Making Ecology/General Assessment and Decision-Making (DME/GADM) models. As these theories assert, there are many underlying reasons for variability in decision-making. It is important and challenging to identify systematic causes for variability in decisions. Some of these causes for variability may be important and necessary because they reflect the particular context in which the decision is made. In fact, a lack of variability across different contexts may be a source of concern. For instance, if good foster families are scarce in one area and more available in another, we would expect that practitioners in these two regions would vary in their responses even when they face similar cases. Similarly, we expect practitioners to have a different risk assessment for children who would stay with their families if they operate in contexts that have very different access to family support services. The scientific exploration of sources of systematic variability may thus help inform when variability is the appropriate response to differences in context, when it may be due to lack of systematic use of information by practitioners, or to determine other unwanted sources of variability.

Assessments

Child protection systems have a history of relying on both formal and informal assessments of children and families. The underlying assumption,

supported by research, is that case characteristics and circumstances should be the basis of child protection and child welfare decision-making. Some formal assessment processes are almost always required by policy and are sometimes supported by research. Less formal approaches emerge from “best practice” considerations.

Assessments and decisions in child welfare are recognized as highly complex tasks characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and high-stakes consequences. The information gathered to assist in those decisions is often scarce and ambiguous for a variety of reasons, and it is often used to make predictions for the future well-being of families and children. Errors and mistakes can happen in all stages of the assessment and decision processes. Some can be explained by the difficult circumstances in which professionals make assessments and decisions. Time limits, staff turnover, budgetary constraints, or limited availability of services present challenges at an organizational level. At a personal level, there are limitations in the psychological processes involved in decision-making that may create numerous errors (Kahneman, 2011). Compounding the assessment and decision-making process is a backdrop of public pressure to avoid any errors that may cause harm to children and families.

The chapters in this book have provided ample empirical evidence on the limitations of professional assessments and decisions in child welfare, as well as the challenges of improving professionals’ decision-making skills through training (see, e.g., Chapter 13). The provision of assessments and decisions usually involves a group of professionals in consultation with a manager and external experts, who need to achieve consensus on what is best for the child and the family. There are sets of rules and procedures to be followed, which sometimes are difficult to accomplish (e.g., balancing the safety of children and preserving families). The severe shortcomings of assessment and decisions in child welfare supported by research have led to the development and implementation of assessment instruments such as those involved in risk of future maltreatment, placement, reunification, and the like (Bartelink, Van Yperen, & Ten Berge, 2015). Their implementation has been accompanied by an intense debate related to the restriction and limitation to professional practice that those instruments may promote and the low predictive accuracy and validity of many instruments. Moreover, there is a general lack of research evidence about the scientific and practical utility of these instruments (Baumann, Law, Sheets, Reid, & Graham, 2005).

Decisional Context

Our reading of the chapters and the current literature highlighted some new insights. While much of the psychological literature on decision-making focuses to a large extent on human abilities, limitations, and tendencies, the literature

on child welfare decision-making emphasizes more the *context* in which decisions are being made. This is hardly a new phenomenon. The series of comparative studies of decision-making in multiple countries developed by Skivenes and colleagues (see, e.g., Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2016; Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2017) investigated how the characteristics of the child welfare system impact decisions made by practitioners in Europe and the United States. Benbenishty, Osmo, and Gold (2003) attempted to explain differences in the ways practitioners from Canada and Israel rationalized and argued about the different decisions they made about the same cases. Similarly, a large comparative study conducted in four countries showed cross-country variations among professionals who reviewed the same case (Benbenishty et al., 2015); and a comparative study by Witte, Baldwin, and López López (Chapter 12) focused, among other things, on the role of children in child protection decision-making in England, Germany, and the Netherlands.

What seems to be emerging more recently are attempts to both expand and nuance the conceptualization of context. Hence, the DME/GADM and JUDPiC models presented in this book demonstrate an interest in identifying and explicating multiple layers of context: organizational, regional (e.g., differences between counties), and nationally. These new efforts include more aspects of context than previous studies that employed context in more global terms. This work seems promising but quite preliminary. There is a need for more conceptualization of the different types of contexts and how they change over time. Developing these concepts will lead to the next stage in our research. Instead of post hoc interpretations of findings, we need to develop clear hypotheses about how certain characteristics of contexts would impact decisions. This is a necessary step if we want to provide useful suggestions about how we could change contexts so that decisions achieve better outcomes for children and families.

Decision-Makers

INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING

This book presents research addressing different types of decisions that are part of the decision-making continuum (Baumann, Fluke, Dalgleish, & Kern, 2014), including the initial decision of responding to a referral and additional decisions related to the type of services that children and families could be given, such as receiving an out-of-home placement.

The last type of decision, placing a child out-of-home, seems to be studied most frequently in connection to decision-maker characteristics, perhaps as a result of its being (potentially) the most intrusive type of decision in the continuum (Bartelink et al., 2018). In two US studies, female decision-makers seem

to be more inclined to place the child out-of-home (Vanderloo, 2017) or to take custody (Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999) than male colleagues. Several studies presented in this book indicate that a “more pro-removal” attitude of the decision-maker improves the odds of an out-of-home placement decision—be it a placement in family foster care (Chapter 6, Chapter 11) or in residential care (Chapter 7). In the study by Bettencourt-Rodrigues and colleagues (Chapter 7), the removal favoring attitude was associated with a higher level of perceived risk, with positive “behavior beliefs” (the decision-maker expects a positive impact of the placement on the child and the family), with anticipating positive emotions (e.g., relaxation in the family), with perceived approval of the decision by significant others, and with a less positive value attributed to child protection and family preservation. Skills and work experience of decision-makers also seem to play a role. Vanderloo (2017) and Graham et al. (Chapter 5) found indications of a positive association between out-of-home placement decisions and a tenure or senior position of the caseworkers, respectively—with “seniority” as an indirect effect—and a study of Devaney, Hayes, and Spratt (2017) showed the less experienced practitioners to be more inclined to remove a child from the home. In line with this, Fluke et al. (2016) observed those practitioners who were longer employed by child welfare agencies to have a stronger orientation toward family preservation. A final factor that appears to be relevant is the perceived support in the professional environment by the decision-maker: less felt support seems to correlate with higher chances of children’s out-of-home placement (Chapter 4, Chapter 5) or referral of the family to Family Group Conferences (Allan, Harlaar, Hollinshead, Drury, & Merkel-Holguin, 2017). On the other hand, approval by significant others enhances a placement intention, as specifically documented toward residential care (Chapter 7).

Another decision that has been connected to individual characteristics of the decision-maker is the one of substantiating child maltreatment. Research shows that the choice for a decision-maker to *un*substantiate seems associated with his or her being more experienced in the child welfare and protection field, showing a higher level of (self-assessed) skills, and having supporting relationships with colleagues and vice versa (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2003; English, Brummel, Graham, & Coghlan, 2002). Not feeling overworked and the perception of resources available to clients also correlate with *un*substantiation decisions (Fluke et al., 2001). Two other factors that seem to contribute to the decision to substantiate suspected child maltreatment are an advanced degree of the decision-maker in social/behavioral sciences (Chapter 8) and an attitude relatively favoring the option of removal of a child from the home in case of an unsafe family situation (Chapter 6). The last variable was found in three of the four European countries in the study concerned (Israel, Netherlands, Spain; not in Northern Ireland).

If we look at risk assessment, a more risky family situation for the child seems to be perceived by practitioners who feel more stressed by parents' confrontational behavior (LeBlanc, Regehr, Shlonsky, & Bogo, 2012); have lower levels of case skills; show more of an "external reference orientation," referring to the impact a decision might have on the child's and families' feelings (Chapter 5); and demonstrate a "more pro-removal" attitude (Chapter 6).

The decision to reunify the child and the family after a time in care has perhaps received less attention in research. However, this is precisely the focus of Chapter 9, where the authors suggest that there may be certain biases based in race and ethnicity that are operating in connection with other factors in reunification decision-making.

(MANAGING) TEAM DECISION-MAKING

Team decision-making in child protection and child welfare remains an understudied topic. O'Sullivan (2011, pp. 65–68) elaborated on potential pros of team decision-making compared with individual decision-making, such as (1) sharing of information regarding clients, (2) the development of a fuller picture on the case, (3) sharing commitment to an action plan, and (4) the implementation of actions combining together to form a coherent and integrated intervention. The underlying assumption is that if a team meeting is well prepared, the communication between the team members is sufficiently open, the group climate is supportive, differences of opinion are managed constructively, and chairing the meeting is performed with great competence (O'Sullivan, 2011, pp. 77–78), then the process will improve upon the decisions made by individuals. That said, for the most part, this notion regarding team decision-making remains a compelling hypothesis in the child protection and child welfare arena as the evidence to support it is lacking and there are recognized threats to the validity of these claims.

One of the most frequently investigated phenomena in this context is group conformity: the pressure to conform to a particular view or choice. It can take the form of *apparent consensus*, which means that, on the surface, it appears that all team members do agree, "but in reality some or all are superficially conforming to a dominant view that they do not actually hold or that they find it convenient to acquiesce with" (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 78). One way the phenomenon shows up is called the *Abilene paradox* (Harvey, 1974); it involves a common breakdown of group communication in which each member mistakenly believes that his or her own preferences are counter to the group's and, therefore, objections are not raised. (The name of the phenomenon comes from an anecdote that Harvey [1974] uses to elucidate the paradox: the trip of a family to Abilene, which no-one in the family actually wants to visit.)

Another manifestation of group conformity is known as *groupthink* (see also Chapter 13): group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints and by isolating themselves from outside influences (Janis, 1982). In contrast with the Abilene paradox, groupthink individuals are not acting contrary to their conscious wishes and generally feel good about the decisions a group has reached (Sims, 1994). The risk of the occurrence of biases like these seems to be associated with decisions that are important or novel and are promoted by time pressure and high levels of uncertainty (Jones & Roelofsma, 2010).

An important factor in avoiding variants of conscious or unconscious group conformity is the *leadership style* of the person who chairs the team meeting: “The chair of a meeting plays a crucial role in facilitating stakeholders to work together in a constructive and vigilant way” (O’Sullivan, 2011, p. 71). This was clearly demonstrated in one of the few recent empirical studies in the child welfare field on team decision-making that we could find. In a study by Nouwen, Decuyper, and Put (2012) in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, two different child welfare and protection agencies were observed. The teams substantially differed in the amount of *structural discussion space* (SDS) for team members to talk about each case. The leadership style also differed. In team A (with the highest SDS), the chair practiced an *empowering* style, described as encouraging team members to speak up and to critique proposed decisions and plans. In team B (with the lowest SDS), the chair practiced a *directive leadership* style, corresponding with a higher level of autocratic leadership, which is about making decisions without consulting team members or without taking their opinions into account (cf. Burke et al., 2006). Some of the (other) characteristics on which team A in a positive sense differed from team B were functional leadership, trust, alignment, constructive conflict, team reflexivity, efficiency, and viability (Nouwen et al., 2012, p. 2107). Although not exactly the same, the two leadership styles come close to what was discovered by Falconer and Shardlow (2018) in their comparison of child protection decision-making system orientations in England and Finland. In England, the dominant approach was called *supervised judgment*, described as a hierarchical, top-down form of decision-making. In Finland, the most practiced approach was called *supported judgment*, described as a more horizontal and shared decision-making format (see also Taylor & Whittaker, 2018).

Generally, it can be argued that it is not self-evident that team decision-making generates “better” decisions compared with individually taken decisions, and the implementation and promotion of such processes do not appear to have been informed through the generation of empirical evidence. A pivotal concern seems to be team conditions, including the style of management or

leadership. This area, team decision-making, remains among the most important gaps in child welfare decision-making research.

Connecting Decisions to Outcomes

Among the most challenging aspect of child protection and child welfare decision-making research is associating decisions with the actual outcomes of those decisions. To some extent this challenge ties back to the fundamental proposition that most child welfare decision-making occurs under uncertainty as opposed to risk. A key definition of this condition is that it is not possible to develop a verifiable probability of an outcome based on the decision-making circumstances. For example, the decision to remove a child could ensure that a child is safe, but, for some children, the consequence of the placement on eventual functioning, well-being, and even safety is unknown. The ultimate outcomes for a child depend on events and situations that may arise during the period of the placement that could not have been predicted at the time of the decision-making process given current knowledge.

Some decisions along the decision-making continuum may prove more appropriate to address from the perspective of evaluating outcomes; for instance, the decision to respond to a child maltreatment allegation referral (Mansell, Ota, Erasmus, & Marks, 2011). Other decisions may prove possible to explore from an outcomes perspective, but our ability to formulate valid studies may exceed our capacity to develop adequate research designs that are also ethical.

PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVING ACCURACY IN DECISION-MAKING: THE PROMISE OF CHANGING TECHNOLOGY

The advent of new technology in recent decades holds many promises directed to efforts to improve decision-making in child welfare and protection. Information systems and extensive databases are now an integral part of many child welfare agencies. These local databases can now begin to serve as a laboratory with which to model decision-making. With current technologies, what was once possible only on a state level is now feasible for counties and local agencies. This progress is especially important when we consider the growing understanding that local contexts do make a difference and that lessons learned in one context may not be necessarily applicable to others.

Related technological advances are the enhanced ability to connect and merge multiple databases. As evident in several recent projects, it is possible now to create large-scale databases that include information from multiple

sources, such as physical and mental health, child welfare involvement, and police and judicial data. This is important to better understand the characteristics of children and their families and how they are associated with decisions. Furthermore, as this trend toward linkable data continues, it will be possible to connect databases that reflect long-term outcomes for children who were in care. By merging databases that contain information on issues such as adult employment, welfare dependence, criminal involvement, and education, it is possible to provide feedback on the outcomes of decisions and help inform future decision-makers. Such information includes better understanding of the complex relationships between children and family characteristics, decisions, interventions, life events (such a death of a parent), and long-term (adult) outcomes of decisions made on behalf of children.

Other technological developments are the various aspects of artificial intelligence, such as machine learning, and the enhanced capacities to explore large and complex datasets (Big Data). These new techniques can help produce algorithms for predicting outcomes that may be more effective when compared with traditional statistical approaches (Chapter 2).

This latest development, while promising to support decision-making, exemplifies some of the potential pitfalls of reliance on technology. As databases become larger and more complex and the new analytic technologies harder to follow intuitively, there is a concern that practitioners will be presented with recommendations for decisions with no rationale except that this is what came out of machine learning.

This challenge is yet another reflection of the tension between taking the fullest advantage of emerging technologies and their ethical implications. While the ability to collect vast amounts of data from numerous sources and create a very detailed and long-term picture on each child and family promises to enhance our ability to make decisions in the best interests of children, they should also raise concern and debate. Our ethical discussions need to be updated to include both the great new promises of the emerging technologies as well as their perils. Clearly, the child welfare field cannot overlook the great potential of technology to improve our decisions. It is also clear, however, that the safeguards against infringing on children's (and families') rights to privacy and confidentiality need to be updated given the extensive and long-term nature of the data collection, processing capacities, and, especially, application of the new technologies.

MOVING THE RESEARCH FORWARD

In the various chapters of this book, the authors have formulated numerous questions that will need to be answered by future research. Some of the most important research directions and problems to address in this field are summarized here.

The research body developed in the area of child welfare decision-making throughout the past few years compels the need to explore not only the impact of case factors in the decision-making processes, but also the personal factors of the decision-maker as well as the contextual factors, both organizational and external ones. While the study of the influence of professionals' personal attributes in decision-making processes and outcomes has received ample attention, research findings suggest a limited impact in decisions. Recently, some authors have pointed to limitations in the way we have traditionally studied these factors, proposing that a number of context factors (organizational and from the broader context) may work as mediators of professionals' personal attributes on decisions made (see Graham et al., in Chapter 5). Thus, the relationship between factors at different levels seems much more complex than considered in early research, and we can expect in the coming years a renewed interest in exploring the personal factors of the decision-maker through more sophisticated models that consider the context within which decisions are made. More specifically, an incipient research interest is noted for how the impact of decision-maker characteristics may differ depending on the context in which they are inserted (e.g., different child welfare regimes). Moreover, other decision-maker factors tied to workforce concerns such as secondary trauma, adverse work experiences, stress, and burnout and their impacts in the ways that professionals make decisions are receiving increasing attention.

One of the enduring research themes identified has to do with the decision-making processes that lead to disparities in child welfare and protection. A number of studies conducted during the past decade have been devoted to explore the overrepresentation of certain groups of children and families in the child welfare system and to understand the factors at the case and organizational levels that could produce disparities in decision-making processes (Fluke et al., 2011). For instance, in the study of King et al. (2017) in the Canadian context, black families were 33% more likely compared to white families to receive a child protection intervention following an investigation. In a study conducted in Texas by Dettlaff et al. (2011), suspected maltreatment at the beginning of an investigation was more often substantiated at case closure when child protection reports concerned black children compared to white children. In New Zealand, Keddell and Hyslop (2019) found that social workers judge the vignette about an indigenous Māori family as being at higher risk for future child maltreatment or harm compared to an identical description of a Pākehā (i.e., white) family.

Exploring the decision-making context has been one of the great advances in our field during the past decade. The context of the decisions has been defined by aligned theoretical models (see JUDPiC and DME models in Chapter 1) that have been applied not only to child welfare organizations, but also to broader contexts such as culture and country.

At the organizational level, a number of systematic methods and aids have rapidly expanded in child welfare agencies all around the world to improve decision-making. In their chapter, Bartelink and colleagues present and discuss what is known about four of them: critical thinking, team decision-making, systematic feedback, and shared decision-making. However, the evidence about these techniques is still very scarce, and, in coming years, we can expect rigorous assessments that will allow us to know the real value of this new wave of decision-making aids.

While the decisions to place children out-of-home have received most of the attention in research, more recently we have seen how the range of decisions along the decision-making continuum have been analyzed. That said, continuing to extend the research to other types of assessments, including maltreatment severity assessment and other decisions, will be an important advance for the field.

Finally, a rising research field receiving increasing attention has to do with the participation of children and parents in child protection decision-making. Policy developments in many countries have established the need of children to participate in accordance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Children's participation in decision-making processes offers an opportunity for improved child protection systems since it has been linked to a range of positive effects for children and the success of child protection interventions (see Witte et al., in Chapter 12). More research is needed to develop our knowledge base on the barriers and facilitators of children's participation in decision-making.

Quantitative Approaches

Given the importance of decision-making in child protection and child welfare, we are encouraged to see from the chapters in this book that more attention is being paid to the subject from a research standpoint. While it is still common to find a focus on case-level assessment rather than decisional context, that, too, has begun to shift. Despite improvements in our knowledge, we consider the state of research in this area underdeveloped. It is also important as an applied field to consider how this knowledge can and should be translated for implementation.

From a methodological perspective, Chapter 3 by Gautschi and Benbenishty provides a good grounding in the methods used to study decision-making. We tend to agree with the authors that one approach to advancing the methods overall is to develop designs to combine them. For example, given that vignette methods provide good experimental control, can they be combined with

the actual decisions made by participants? In other words, are responses on vignettes actually reflected in behavior? If so, in what way?

Many of the chapters in this book base their knowledge claims on quantitative designs and methods. Predominately, these are based on correlational studies applying large-scale datasets (Fallon et al., Chapter 10; Font et al., Chapter 8; Graham et al., Chapter 5; Stepura et al., Chapter 2; and Wittenstrom et al., Chapter 9), while others rely on vignette methods (López López and Benbenishty, Chapter 6; Bettencourt-Rodrigues et al., Chapter 7). These studies offer refinements of models that include important cues about the leverage points for developing interventions. In some cases these may have implications for national or provincial policy (e.g., Fallon et al., Chapter 10), are related to workforce concerns (e.g., Graham et al., Chapter 5; Bettencourt-Rodrigues et al., Chapter 7), or are associated with racial bias (Wittenstrom et al., Chapter 9).

While practical suggestions are made in terms of the implications, what is lacking are experimental studies that could help to verify the efficacy of these claims. Is the field of decision-making research at a point where we could address certain key questions about these leverage points? For example, what is the anticipated size of the changes that could be attained by addressing a candidate leverage point, and could an implementation study be designed to determine if the implemented change achieves the anticipated result? Are certain training or staff development approaches that translate decision-maker factors identified in correlational studies actually effective at changing decision-making behavior? For example, would on-the-job training opportunities that systematically expose workers to a diverse group of families reduce disparities in decision-making and what dosage is needed? Would specific decision-making related improvements in the resource base or array of services result in changes in decision-making behavior?

Qualitative Approaches

Next to larger-scale quantitative survey studies a great deal can also be learned from more qualitative approaches in studying practitioners' decision-making in child protection and child welfare. In essence, this type of research can be briefly worded with the saying by Taylor and Bogdan (1998, p. 3): "go to the people," thereby presupposing that the researcher is getting as close as possible to the world and experiences of the people under study (i.e., their deciding on children at risk). This can be done by observing stakeholders (including practitioners, parents, other caretakers, children and young people), by interviewing them, by asking them to react to certain stimuli (case descriptions, pictures, assignments), by studying documents that represent personal experiences

(diaries, reports), etc. Some of these methods and techniques were successfully applied in decision-making situations.

Several qualitative studies have been performed around the structuring and contents of arguments or rationales that (should) underpin or justify an intrusive decision like out-of-home placement of a child. In a recent study by Zeijlmans, López López, Grietens, and Knorth (2019), 20 Dutch matching practitioners in family foster care were interviewed using vignettes and a “think-aloud” methodology to generate an understanding of their reasoning. Two types of vignettes were created: hypothetical children and hypothetical foster families. The interviews were analyzed using a qualitative deductive content analysis focusing on key indicators of three classes of heuristics: recognition, one-reason, and tradeoff heuristics (cf. Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). The results showed that the *recognition heuristic* did not play a decisive role in the matching process; practitioners considered more than one family before making a final decision. The findings for the *one-reason heuristic* revealed conjunctive decision-making rules: families were sometimes rejected based on one negative premise. This reminds us of the “trump card strategy” identified by Backe-Hansen (2003). The analysis of the *tradeoff heuristic* demonstrated that the number of positive premises and the ratio between positive and negative premises predicted the matching decision. However, the total number of premises also predicted the matching decision, which might indicate *confirmation bias* (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Indications for confirmation bias were also found in qualitative studies by Bartelink et al. (2018) and Spratt, Devaney, and Hayes (2015).

A growing body of research has been focused on the role that children and young people play in decisions that impact their lives: Do they *participate* in such decisions, to what degree, and what are the relevant factors that determine the level of participation? Recent qualitative studies were performed in cases of parental divorce (Hemrica & Heyting, 2004), in child protection and child welfare cases (Leeson, 2007; Van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014), and in out-of-home care (Bessell, 2011; Ten Brummelaar, Knorth, Post, Harder, & Kalverboer, 2018). One rather consistent finding is that children’s participation in decision-making is far from a matter of course (see also Chapter 12). A second finding is that the role of the practitioners, especially their attitudes on child participation, is pivotal.

It seems that qualitative research should be considered a valuable approach in exploring and exposing professional strategies of decision-making in child protection and child welfare, including topics such as the ways of justifying and reasoning regarding these “hot” decisions, the use of mental “shortcuts” (heuristics and biases), or the role of stakeholders like children and young people themselves.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the body and range of research found in this book that the interest in child protection and child welfare decision-making is growing. From a practice perspective, decision-making has moved from a focus on assessment to an increased interest in ways that policies, biases, attitudes, and beliefs operate to create the variability in decision-making found throughout the systems of service delivery. Despite this growth in our understanding, we lack a clear sense of the degree to which key factors, aside from case factors, influence decision-making practice. What we also lack are studies of interventions that might help to reduce not only variability but also studies that address the ability of the systems to improve decision-making in a way that will ultimately improve outcomes for children and families.

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