



Dimensions for argument and variability in child protection decision-making

A. Mosteiro, U. Beloki, E. Sobremonte & A. Rodríguez

To cite this article: A. Mosteiro, U. Beloki, E. Sobremonte & A. Rodríguez (2018) Dimensions for argument and variability in child protection decision-making, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 32:2, 169-187, DOI: [10.1080/02650533.2018.1439459](https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1439459)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1439459>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3746



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 5 View citing articles [↗](#)

Dimensions for argument and variability in child protection decision-making

A. Mosteiro , U. Beloki , E. Sobremonte  and A. Rodríguez 

Department of Social Work and Sociology, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse the arguments presented by 181 professionals in the child protection system of the Basque Country (Spain) to justify their decisions regarding the implementation of measures related to family preservation or separation. The implementation of a case vignette demonstrated variability in professional decision-making, with 62% of professionals choosing family preservation and 38% opting for family separation. A series of argument categories which can be used by most professionals when making decisions are extracted from analysis of the content. However, in spite of using similar types of arguments, the professionals differed in the importance they attributed to such criteria and their interpretations. Differences in decision thresholds were directly related to professionals' beliefs regarding the benefits of the interventions analysed. To reduce this variability, reflecting on these beliefs and analysing the effectiveness of interventions in child protection to incorporate evidence of professional judgement are recommended. The present study, on the one hand, identifies the argument categories used to justify decisions and, on the other, analyses the existing variability when interpreting these categories.

KEYWORDS

Argumentation; decision-making; judgement thresholds; child protection

Introduction

Research on judgement and decision-making in social interventions has focused primarily on 'protection' decisions (Taylor, 2012), that is, decisions in which professionals are ultimately responsible for the safety of people who do not have the legal capacity to decide, as occurs with child protection. Decision outcomes that have led to an increased interest in the literature concern family separation, certainly one of the most complex decisions faced by professionals because of the potential consequences such a decision may have in the lives of a minor and his or her family.

Child protection judgements and decisions are characterised by risk and uncertainty (Stokes & Schmidt, 2012). Their central objective is to assess the likelihood of an event or damage occurring or of the potential consequences of the professional intervention itself.

CONTACT U. Beloki  usue.beloki@deusto.es

For this reason, such decisions have also been referred to as ‘risk’ decisions (Taylor, 2013) because their object of analysis does not relate as much to the needs of the people affected as to the type and level of risk the people suffer. Additionally, because neither calculating the results in the long run nor estimating the consequences of the interventions with certainty is possible, we are faced with decisions laden with uncertainty (Reddy, 1996; Taylor, 2013).

Most literature on child protection decision-making has focused on understanding the phenomenon of variability, particularly analysing the differences that may exist among professionals when they are issuing their judgements and making decisions relating to the same case and on identifying the factors that can explain such variability. This variability not only relates to the validity and reliability of decisions (Lindsey, 1992a, 1992b; Ruscio, 1998) but can also be understood to be an ethical problem because ‘general consistency in decisions in similar cases represents a universal duty inherent to human rights and to the ethics of duty’ (Keddell, 2014, p. 917).

Although many disciplines aspire to achieve greater homogeneity in both judgements and decisions, in practice, this goal may be merely utopian because variability is inherent in any decision-making process and cannot be ignored. In fact, the old approach supported by normative theories that presented decision-making as a purely rational process by which the pros and cons of a situation are estimated has given way to new approaches related to descriptive theories that accept the limitations of human rationality and, therefore, the deviations from rational choice parameters (Baron, 2004; Goldstein, 2004).

Simply put, the decision-making process comprises three phases: judgement, decision threshold and choice of course of action. In all phases, complex cognitive, perceptual, emotional and behavioural factors converge to explain why people make different decisions or judgements in the same situation. The first phase, judgement, refers to the interpretation of a situation based on available information or evidence (Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011) with the goal of giving meaning to what is occurring (Kemshall, Wilkinson, & Baker, 2013) so that eventually, the available and most appropriate alternatives to address this situation can be assessed.

In child protection, judgement is at its most critical point during the risk of vulnerability assessment stage. In this phase, it is necessary to interpret the combined multitude of factors related to the situation to arrive at an understanding of the situation. However, faced with this task, professionals do not use formal reasoning processing but, quite the opposite, use simple processing rules called heuristics to reach conclusions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Although in practice these mental shortcuts can become extremely successful strategies to assess situations, heuristics have been identified as sources of error among child protection professionals (Munro, 1999). In any case, in practice, the use of heuristics addresses the impossibility of processing all available information on a case. In this respect, new models of understanding professional decisions, like the “Psycho-Social Rationality Model” which accepts the use of heuristics when issuing professional judgements, are being proposed (Taylor, 2017).

For a judgement to evolve into an actionable decision, the decision threshold must be exceeded (Baumann et al., 2011; Dalglish, 1988). This threshold can be defined as a subjective or objective measure of sensitivity to a stimulus (Swets, 1962) or as a ‘standard or personal criteri[on] on which we value our judgement on the case’ (Dalglish, 2003, p. 90). Therefore, a person will exceed the decision threshold when he or she perceives the presence or absence of a stimulus of a particular intensity. In child protection, decision thresholds can be equated with the vulnerability risk levels established in the legal and technical sphere,

based on the presence or absence of vulnerability indicators. Their intensity can be mild, moderate, or severe. In this case, to be able to enforce a family separation, the professional must exceed a high threshold related to cases of serious vulnerability risk.

However, although legal and technical criteria limit risk thresholds, not all professionals have identical thresholds or at least not all of them reach their thresholds using the same amount and intensity of evidence. Professionals with high thresholds will require more information and stronger evidence to recommend family separation. Conversely, professionals with lower thresholds will recommend separation because they perceive that the information they possess is sufficient in quantity and intensity. Because decision thresholds are based on perceptions, not all professionals perceive the same level of risk when faced with the same situation (Baumann et al., 2011; Beckett, 2008) or use homogeneous criteria when assessing the decision threshold. Although some consider that 'if in doubt, it is better to separate', others argue that in the same situation, 'it is better to keep the minor with his or her family' (Dalglish, 1988).

Thus, thresholds cannot be understood in a purely rational and technical manner but must be conceived from a naturalistic approach (Platt & Turney, 2014) in which the actual pressure and uncertainty conditions under which professionals make decisions are analysed (Klein, 1999, 2008). In the naturalist decision-making approach, paying attention to both the intuitive thinking that professionals use in practice and the organisational and contextual elements in which such decisions occur is essential. Currently, there is also a strong plea for the introduction of a holistic-rational perspective in which professionals consider the emotional elements elicited when issuing judgements and decisions, which can be quite useful for assessing risk in different situations (Houston, 2015).

The threshold is directly related to the choice of a course of action because exceeding the threshold implies the need for intervention in a particular direction. However, even when two professionals have reached a similar judgement and have perceived the same level of risk, they may opt for different interventions because the final decision also responds to the utility and benefit criteria anticipated as a result of such an intervention. Professionals, therefore, attempt to determine which is the most appropriate, beneficial and useful intervention. In this decision, their values, beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role by predisposing professionals to act in a certain manner (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960), becoming authentic behaviour guides (Rokeach, 1980). Consequently, it is conceivable that if professionals' values, attitudes, and beliefs are not homogeneous, their choices of intervention will not be either.

Research on judgement and decision variability in interventions has focused on the two most complex child protection decisions: risk assessment (Arruabarrena & De Paúl, 2011; Snyder and Newberger, 1986; Sullivan, Leschied, Chiodo, & Hurley, 2008) and the decisions regarding action, particularly actions that relate to the implementation of protective measures (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Molina, 2012; Mosteiro, 2015; Sieracki, 2010). All previous studies concluded that judgements and decisions differ despite referring to the same intervention case.

Additionally, studies have attempted to identify the factors that may contribute to different judgements and decisions among professionals in the same case to understand the phenomenon of variability. According to the decision-making ecology model by Baumann et al. (2011), there are different types of factors that affect professional judgement and decisions: factors related to the case, personal factors and organisational and contextual factors.

Although in an ideal situation it may be perceived that professional judgements are based exclusively on case-specific clinical variables, certainly the interpretation of these variables may differ depending on the personal characteristics of the professional and the organisation or the context in which that judgement is exercised. Despite efforts to develop objective risk assessment tools, research indicates that although these tools are applied, assessment variability remains (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Lyle & Graham, 2000). Therefore, actuarial judgement cannot substitute for clinical judgement. Clinical judgement remains the most widely used procedure in practice when in fact actuarial and clinical judgement should complement one another to ensure adequate professional praxis.

Despite the influence of multiple factors, the interpretation of case factors (Broadley, 2015), particularly of clinical variables primarily related to risk and, to a lesser extent, to protective factors (Wilkins, 2016), is what professionals focus on when assessing or passing clinical judgement. In fact, there is evidence of the relation between certain clinical variables and the implementation of family separation measures. Among the prominent variables are case emergency or urgency (Lindsey, 1991); chronicity (Dalgleish & Drew, 1989; Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999); type of abuse or maltreatment (DeRoma, Bingley, Kessler, & Merino, 2005), particularly cases involving physical (DeRoma, Hansen, Tishelman, & D'Amico, 1997) or sexual abuse (Glisson, Bailey, & Post, 2000); abuse severity; and probability of recurrence (Britner & Mossler, 2002).

With regard to parents, mental health, disability or drug use (Davidson-Arad, 2001; Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997), cooperation with intervention (Brandon et al., 2008; DeRoma, Kessler, McDaniel, & Soto, 2006), motivation for change (Coohey, 2003; Rossi et al., 1999), and the presence or absence of social support networks (Brisebois, Trzcinski, & Marsack, 2015) are the most prominent factors.

In short, when professionals exercise their professional judgements and decide on a course of action, they consider all of these factors but not in the same manner. In fact, professionals recognise the responsibility involved in decision-making, the complexity of the factors to be considered, the different forms of assessing those factors and even the dilemmas that riddle this type of decision (DeLong-Hamilton, Kruse, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016).

Therefore, to better understand the phenomenon of variability in decision-making, it is necessary not only to identify the different assessments and decisions made but also to analyse, from a qualitative perspective, protection professionals' arguments when justifying their decisions regarding an action. We believe that if two professionals render different intervention decisions when addressing the same case, the judgement regarding the situation or the assessment of the intervention alternatives available are not homogeneous. As Helm (2010) reminded us, 'While some relate it to the assessment and prediction of actual and potential risks, others will do it with the assessment of the link between parents and their children, and even with other parental capabilities' (p. 21).

Most research on judgement and decision-making variability has used quantitative methodology that helps identify the factors that affect judgement. The qualitative perspective has been used much less in this field of research. Using this approach, the structure and complexity of professionals' arguments (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Cortez-Monroy, Oneto, Saavedra, & Olgar, 2009), the manner in which professionals balance protective and risk factors (Wilkins, 2016), their perceptions of the factors that influence family separation decisions, (DeRoma et al., 2006) and the relation between arguments and confirmation bias (Spratt et al., 2015), among others, have been analysed. Without a doubt, analysing

judgements and decisions from a qualitative perspective allows an understanding of the perspective of professionals and the variability among them using the meaning attribution the professionals themselves use in their professional practices.

Methodology

Research objective

This study sought to analyse, using a qualitative methodology, the arguments presented by professionals in the child protection system of the Basque Country (Spain) in their decisions regarding implementation measures for family preservation or separation. The study is based on the hypothesis that there is variability among professionals, not only in their intervention decisions but also in the arguments presented to justify such decisions. Therefore, the study goal was to analyse the arguments of professionals who opted for preservation against those who opted for family separation and to identify prominent key criteria in these arguments. This study has been approved by the University of Deusto Research Ethics Committee.

Research design

This work is part of a broader research project conducted in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country on the determinants of variability in child protection decision-making (Mosteiro, 2015). In this research, a vignette narrating a case of child neglect was shown to 204 professionals (social workers, social educators and psychologists) who were required to complete a questionnaire and decide whether to recommend family separation or preservation measures. The professionals were then required to specify in writing their reasons for making such a decision in an open-ended question. Twenty-three professionals completed the questionnaire but did not justify their decisions; thus, the sample for the present study comprised 181 professionals.

Vignettes are a methodology used to analyse professional judgement and decision-making by examining the potential variability among professionals when deciding on a case and identifying the effects of various case factors (Taylor, 2006). Despite its great utility, this methodology is not exempt from criticism. Even if a vignette describes a real case, it is impossible to incorporate all of the data present in actual practice (Rossi et al., 1999). Therefore, its results refer to what professionals would do in hypothetical situations rather than what they in fact do in their real work (Wolf, 2011).

A vignette designed by Benbenishty et al. (2003), based on a real record that was used in several subsequent investigations (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010; Spratt, Devaney, & Hayes, 2015), was adopted for this study. A single vignette was submitted for evaluation. The collaboration analysis of the mother was removed as a variable in the case because, according to results from previous research, that analysis did not affect professionals' decisions (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008; Spratt et al., 2015). Thus, a single case describing a girl of 6 years of age in a situation of vulnerability whose mother expressed her desire to cooperate with the intervention was presented.

The vignette was part of more comprehensive questionnaire that collected information on personal and professional variables: age, gender, degree, professional experience, and issues related to personal values, attitudes and beliefs regarding the child protection system.

Participants

A total of 181 responses were obtained from child protection professionals in the Basque Country. These professionals worked in various organisations, both public and private. All of the participants had expertise in child protection although at different intervention levels: community care, to address cases of mild and moderate risk; and secondary care, to which cases of serious risk and helplessness are referred.

Entities working in this intervention field were contacted for sample recruitment, and 712 questionnaires were distributed between December 2014 and April 2015, achieving a participation level of 25.4%. Questionnaire completion was conducted on-line, guaranteeing participants' anonymity and data confidentiality.

Analysis techniques

This is a mixed-methods study that analyses the arguments presented by professionals to justify the protective measure applied to the case stated: family preservation or separation. With the support of Atlas-ti 7.0, a summative content analysis was conducted to identify the frequency of words in the text. Subsequently, broader meaning categories were identified to collect the most recurrent arguments. This category identification arises directly from the study data and not from previous theories or frames of reference.

Category identification was conducted by a single researcher. To avoid possible biases when interpreting the information and establishing the categories, the first author conducted an analysis of all the cases and this first analysis was reviewed by the other three authors, ensuring analysis uniformity. After identifying the categories, the information in the professionals' arguments was analysed according to their intervention decision: family preservation or separation. This analysis allows analysing the argument categories of professionals and, conversely, understanding the variability that exists among them when justifying their decisions.

Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: the majority of the participants were women (74%), aged between 30 and 50 years (75%). Thirty-five per cent were social workers, 29% were psychologists, 24% were social educators and 11% had university degrees in other fields. Professional experience was categorised in ranges, and 90% of the respondents had 6 or more years of professional experience in the field of child protection. Finally, 37% worked in community care, 41% in other specialised care, and 22% in residential care services.

With regard to the intervention decision, the data confirmed the existence of variability among professionals in choosing the most appropriate intervention measure for the same case. Whereas 62% opted to keep the child with the family, 38% believed that family separation was more appropriate. Response patterns were similar to patterns identified among Spanish professionals in the comparative research conducted by Benbenishty et al. (2015), in which 53% of Spanish professionals chose family preservation compared with 47% who preferred family separation.

Given the variability identified in the intervention decision, it is not surprising that this variability also appeared in the arguments that professionals used to justify their decisions. To demonstrate this variability, first, the summative content analysis is presented, identifying the key words used in their arguments and establishing the analysis categories, which are referred to as argument categories. In general, the professionals' arguments revolved around the following argument categories: (a) assessment of the situation of vulnerability, including criteria related to maltreatment, unsatisfied needs, abuse or neglect; risk level and the presence of damage; (b) beliefs regarding the virtues of the intervention alternatives; (c) lack of information; (d) collaboration, motivation and capacity for change and damage awareness; (e) case background and previous interventions; (f) parental capabilities; and (g) family network and social support (Table 1).

Of the analysed codes, 43% referred to the assessment of the situation of vulnerability (24.5%) and to the beliefs regarding the risks and benefits of the intervention measure (18.8%) chosen by each professional. Therefore, those criteria became the central criteria on which professionals claimed to base their decisions.

In the case of the professionals who chose to preserve families, the assessment of the situation of vulnerability lost its weightiness by the apparent need to gather more information or verify the assessment, its seriousness or its scope. Because of this, lack of information became the first criterion used, and assessment was relegated to the 5th position. In the case of professionals who opted for family separation, the assessment of vulnerability maintained its strength; for these professionals, vulnerability was a proven fact that justified child removal. Beliefs regarding the pros and cons of the intervention measures played a central role in the arguments of all professionals, regardless of the decision made, but differed in the meaning attributed to those measures. The same was true for the argument category regarding damage awareness, collaboration and motivation for change on the part of the mother.

The other argument categories, case background, parental capacity, family network and social support, were tangential criteria that served in general terms to support the forecast of success for the measure chosen, whether it was preservation or separation.

Therefore, variability among arguments was not based on the criteria used but on the criteria's weight in decision-making and on interpretation. Decisions were based on similar

Table 1. Argument categories for preservation and separation decisions.

Professionals' criteria	Total sample			Professionals who preserve			Professionals who separate		
	Position	Freq.	%	Position	Freq.	%	Position	Freq.	%
Assessment of vulnerability	1	82	24.5	5	51	25.1	1	53	40.2
Beliefs on the benefit of protective measures	2	63	18.8	2	42	20.7	2	21	15.9
Lack of information	3	61	18.2	1	37	18.2	6	10	12.9
Damage awareness, motivation and capacity to change, collaboration	4	54	16.1	3	34	16.7	3	17	11.4
Case background	5	45	13.4	4	29	14.3	5	11	8.3
Parental capabilities	6	19	5.7	7	6	3.0	4	15	7.6
Social support	7	11	3.3	6	4	2.0	7	5	3.8
Argument total		335	100.0		203	100.0		132	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

argument criteria; however, the criteria did not have identical strength of evidence or decision threshold and were not interpreted in the same manner because a single criterion was valued differently by professionals who chose to keep the child with her family and those who chose to remove the child. The arguments proposed by the two groups represented both sides of the same coin.

Argument category 1. Assessment of vulnerability

The arguments relating to risk assessment in child protection composed the central category upon which the decisions were based. The results of the analysis indicated that although the professionals consulted believed that the situation was serious because of the presence of various risk indicators of vulnerability (maltreatment, neglect, emotional harm, abandonment, etc.), their decisions regarding the protective measure varied. The arguments presented indicated that their choices were related to their perception of the urgency of the situation. Whereas those professionals who chose to keep the child with his or her family believed that the risk, although high, was not imminent, those who opted for removal argued that the situation was alarming and that child removal could not be postponed. Both groups also offered different arguments regarding ‘fact’ assessment. The professionals who favoured family preservation did not regard the facts presented as proven evidence; conversely, those professionals who decided to remove the child believed that there was sufficient evidence to adopt such a measure (Table 2).

Argument category 2. Beliefs regarding the benefits of protective measures

The second category revolved around the beliefs regarding child protection measures, specifically, their consequences in terms of benefit or harm to the child. Among the arguments offered by professionals who chose separation was the belief that in a situation of high severity, child removal best guarantees the safety and biopsychosocial well-being of the minor and thus takes preference. The professionals added as justification that removal is an urgent measure to prevent further exposure to abuse or negligence by the family and even greater damage. Conversely, professionals who chose preservation relied on the assumption that they must try to keep children with their families because the psychological and social consequences for the child and the family could be ‘devastating’ instead of remedial. Among the negative consequences, professionals mentioned the blame and stigma that the child

Table 2. Argument category 1. Assessment of vulnerability.

Arguments	
Preservation	Removal
‘Although there are indicators that point to a serious risk, there does not seem to be an imminent risk to the child’	‘Diana is in a very serious situation of vulnerability, indicators are truly alarming (very serious physical and emotional abuse, abandonment, rejection...)’
‘I believe that removal is not justified at this time, the girl’s life is not at risk’	‘I think it is a clear situation of abandonment. If not removed from this situation on time and placed in a protective context with adequate treatment, this child is in serious danger’
‘Serious neglect (physical abuse) has not been proven.’	‘Given the amount of evidence of repeated physical and emotional abuse by one, or perhaps both, parents, I would suggest family separation’

Source: Own elaboration.

may suffer and the risk of transference of maltreatment to siblings. In any case, whenever doubts appeared regarding a decision, the influence of the beliefs regarding the benefits or harm of the protective measures became apparent (Table 3).

Argument category 3. Lack of information

This argument category is based on the need for deeper knowledge of the global situation to render a decision. Specifically, professionals noted the need to intervene in the family to more accurately assess the scope of child abuse, the emotional damage, the situation of the siblings, the relational dynamics and family bonds, parental response and ability to collaborate with professionals, parental awareness of the harmful situation and, ultimately, their understanding of the real possibilities to promote change to reverse the situation. Although for some professionals research is compatible with maintaining the child in the home for a limited time, for other professionals, it is not. The latter perceive this decision to be a lesser evil that helps to more accurately assess the level of damage to the minor and simultaneously protect the child (Table 4).

Argument category 4. Damage awareness, capacity and motivation for change and collaboration

This argument category gathers the arguments that primarily relate to the willingness of the mother to work with professionals, her motivation to change and her awareness of inflicted harm. However, in this case, the degree of the mother's involvement was perceived differently by the professionals who chose to preserve or to separate. Although professionals who chose family preservation positively valued the so-called collaboration of the mother and her awareness of the harm caused, the professionals who chose to separate perceived an absence or weakness of such awareness, a lack of motivation and no commitment to real change. Those professionals argued that the mother's collaboration was nothing more than an attempt to prevent her child from being removed from the home. In addition, these professionals supported this idea by saying that in the past, family collaboration was missing (Table 5).

Table 3. Argument category 2. Beliefs regarding the benefits of protective measures.

Arguments	
Preservation	Removal
'I think that the child needs to be and grow with her family and that one should work with the parents'	'To separate in order to protect Diana's emotional well-being. In addition to removing Diana, I would suggest removing all the children from the family home'
'I think that it (not separating) would be less damaging to the family'	'Removal as an urgent measure to ensure safety'
'Family separation (...) is not a restorative measure, and being removed from her family environment could be more devastating'	'Being able to live with other adults with different records in a stable and protective environment can restore confidence in adults and a positive self-image'
'Even in doubt, I am initially inclined to raise a family preservation measure'	'When in doubt, I protect minors through family separation'

Source: Own elaboration.



Table 4. Argument category 3. Lack of information.

Arguments	Removal
<p>Preservation</p> <p>Family preservation would allow us to assess the functioning of the mother, as well as the ability of the family to admit, collaborate and recognise the damage caused to the daughter</p> <p>'I would implement a preservation measure that includes an initial assessment of the family situation during a short period, 3 months, to further existing information on both the eldest daughter and the younger siblings and to assess parental capabilities and family permeability to intervention'</p>	<p>Temporary separation from her family will help assessing the emotional damage suffered by the girl in a protected environment (family or residential placement). Although the separation itself already entails damage on the girl, it could be considered as a 'lesser evil'</p> <p>'During the separation, I would refer this case to the Educational Intervention Program and seek to undertake a comprehensive assessment on the actual family situation, the degree of vulnerability of the three minors, and the interest and motivation to change on the part of the parents, etc.'</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Argument category 4. Damage awareness, capacity and motivation for change and collaboration.

Arguments	Preservation	Removal
	<p>'Given that there is willingness to help on the part of the mother, I would exhaust all possibilities to correct vulnerability indicators with the help of a family intervention'</p>	<p>'The desire of the mother to collaborate and improve things resembles more of a quick response to the fact that the child will be removed from the house than possible awareness of the situation'</p>
	<p>'The mother is in a collaborative disposition with regard to the approaches that may be proposed by the social services, and this is a good starting point to raise and implement concrete measures in the family environment'</p>	<p>'The absence of collaboration of the father and the mother's pseudocolaboration do not constitute real motivation to change'</p>
	<p>'Although the girl's emotional damage is significant in my view, it seems that the mother is aware of such harm and in appearance is open to a possible intervention to further understand and work on what is happening'</p>	<p>'There is no awareness of the problem or assumption of responsibility on the part of parents; they do not accept professional help'</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Argument category 5. Case background

Case antecedents also played an important role in the arguments although in different manners depending on whether the professionals opted to preserve or separate the family. In the case of the professionals who chose to preserve, the argument pivoted on the non-existence of prior interventions that would provide an opportunity to introduce elements leading to changes in the situation. The premise on which this argument was built was that the family had no contact with professionals who could guide the family dynamics to reduce or eliminate the risk of remaining unprotected. Thus, these professionals suggested giving the family an opportunity. Conversely, those professionals who opted for separation perceived the past as an accrual of situations of vulnerability; thus, the elapsed time caused chronification, becoming stable and permanent (Table 6).

Argument category 6. Parental capabilities

With regard to parental capabilities, professionals who chose separation concluded that parental skills were extremely deficient and could seriously compromise the welfare of the child. Conversely, the professionals who opted for preservation perceived the possibility of improvement by various interventions, despite the existence of these deficits. Therefore, the two perspectives differed to a large extent. Whereas those professionals in favour of removal believed that the consequences of parental inability would lead to serious harm for the child and did not foresee the possibility of change in the short term, those in favour of preservation believed in the possibility of change in parental capabilities because the professionals trusted in the efficacy of adequate interventions and resources (Table 7).

Argument category 7. Social support

Social support is a common argument category for professionals who preserve families and professionals who choose to separate. However, the assessment of such support and the times in which social support is in play decisive roles in favour of preservation or separation. For professionals who suggested separation, the case displayed clear signs of a lack of such a support network, constituting another element of hardship. Professionals recommending family preservation viewed support differently. Those professionals believed that there were sources of support, and even if there were none, it was possible to work towards achieving a definite improvement in this area (Table 8).

Discussion

The main limitation of the study is related to the use of the vignette, which, does not, in any case, reliably reflect all the real conditions of professional practice. Results may also be limited due to the researchers' interpretation of the qualitative data, knowing that biases can exist in the codification process. However, this research method is considered to be one of the most appropriate to analyse 'judgement thresholds' for decision-making in social work.

The analysis of the arguments advanced by child protective professionals in the Basque Country to justify their decisions indicated that all of the professionals based their choices on the same argument categories: (a) assessment of the situation of vulnerability, including

Table 6. Argument category 5. Case background.

Arguments	Removal
<p>Preservation</p> <p>'It seems that so far, no family intervention measures have been taken. I believe that it is necessary to implement such measures before making a decision involving Diana's separation from her family</p>	<p>'Diana's situation of vulnerability has been maintained for a long time; the first alarm signal appeared when she was three, and they have not ceased. In spite of the fact that the mother expresses that she would do whatever is necessary for the good of the family, she has not made changes during this time nor is clear what happens in the home'</p>
<p>'In the past, there has never been an educational intervention to help parents improve'</p>	<p>'I believe that the family functioning has become chronic and making changes in the family system will take time'</p>
<p>'The fact that so far no therapeutic or educational intervention has been attempted ...'</p>	<p>'It is anticipated that these deficits are of serious nature and chronic evolution, with a very complex treatment and little room for improvement in the short and medium term'</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 7. Argument category 6. Parental capabilities.

Arguments	
Preservation	Removal
'I see possibilities for parental training, so I would exhaust all the resources in that direction'	'Her parents' parental capabilities are seriously affected . . . This deficiency of empathic abilities, associated with high impulsivity, allows hypothesising that the child may suffer, at some point, severe maltreatment on the part of her mother and father'
'Due to the age of the girls and the possible training of the mother in her parenting role, I prefer to attempt an interdisciplinary family intervention in the home'	'In these times, parents are not able to carry out parental roles appropriately'

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 8. Argument category 7. Social support.

Arguments	
Preservation	Removal
'There is also an extended family as well as school implication'	'Lack of family support in extended family'
'It is argued that if the family has support at various levels, it is possible that relations between the different members of the family improve'	'They lack a healthy and stable social network that favours social relations that help to ensure leisure and recreational spaces for the children. Parents are isolated from the neighbourhood'

Source: Own elaboration.

criteria related to maltreatment, unsatisfied needs, abuse or neglect; risk level and the presence of damage; (b) belief in the benefits of intervention; (c) lack of information; (d) collaboration, motivation and capacity for change and awareness of inflicted harm; (e) case background and previous interventions; (f) parental capabilities; and (g) family network and social support. In fact, previous literature regarding child protection decisions demonstrated the direct relations of these criteria to family separation decisions.

The contribution of this analysis, therefore, lies not in the mere identification of criteria or argument categories, but in the understanding of how those criteria are used, perceived and interpreted by professionals when they must justify a decision. In this sense, the results demonstrate a remarkable variability that reflects the various thresholds in decision-making.

The argument category with greater weight relates first to the assessment of the situation of vulnerability, the type of maltreatment, neglect or abuse, its severity or the awareness of harm. That category also relates to the beliefs regarding the pros and cons of the intervention measures chosen by each professional. However, the analysis of the arguments in decision-making allows us to understand the differences among perspectives.

The professionals who opted for preserving families evidenced a decreased assessment of vulnerability and a need for further information or evidence. These professionals recognised that they did not have sufficient information to make a decision or that the situation of vulnerability remained undemonstrated. These professionals argued that family intervention would enable a better assessment of the situation to make a more informed decision. Without doubt, these professionals had a high decision threshold; the information presented in the vignette was not sufficiently strong to justify a decision to act. Conversely, the professionals who enforced family separation claimed that the situation of maltreatment, neglect or abuse was demonstrated, was serious and posed clear harm to the girl.

The evidence reached the intensity required to implement this protective measure without the need for further information on the case.

Beliefs regarding the benefits of alternative interventions weighed heavily on both groups but were used differently. Among the professionals who tended towards preserving the family, there were constant allusions to the opportunity offered by family preservation and the harm that may result from a family separation. Conversely, among professionals who chose to separate, the arguments related to the safety of the minor and to the risk entailed by keeping her with her mother because the suffering and harm that family preservation may cause were prominent. The differences observed in these beliefs harken back to decision thresholds and become true heuristic factors that sustained each professional's judgement and decision with respect to the protection measures to be applied. As Dalglish (1988) stated, people not only differ in their sensitivity to the strength of the evidence but can also use different criteria to exceed the threshold: some professionals are intolerant of intrusive interventions and argue that if in doubt, it is best to keep the child with the family whereas others are intolerant of inadequate interventions, arguing that if in doubt, separation is better. Therefore, although decision thresholds are social constructs, such thresholds are also personal and serve as a basis for any professional decision.

With regard to the interpretation of the other variables, a reasoning similar to the one previously stated can be observed because the criteria are perceived and interpreted in different manners by the two types of professionals. With regard to collaboration, motivation and capacity for change, professionals who chose preservation trusted the mother's word when she claimed that she wanted to collaborate, despite their opinion that such willingness had not previously been evident, most likely because of the absence of prior professional interventions. However, professionals who favoured separation regarded the mother's motivation and capacity for change to be non-existent and assessed the current situation to be the result of a family history of chronic vulnerability.

The last two variables, parental skills and social support, despite being the least used argument categories, demonstrated extremely high variability, which may even become worrisome in the case of social support. Faced with identical data, some professionals argued that the network of support was adequate, whereas others deemed the support to be completely inadequate, with neither side in fact explaining the reasoning behind such arguments. We believe that the information provided in the vignette on the family and social network was quite ambiguous, which led to conflicting interpretations arising from the negative or positive perceptions of the case in general.

Therefore, variability among arguments lies not so much in the criteria used by child protection professionals, which have a considerable degree of agreement, but on their weight in the decision-making and on their interpretation. Argument variability in the present study can primarily be explained by three factors: the different perceptions of the facts, the diversity in the judgements of the situation and the different decision thresholds. All of these factors were coloured by professionals' beliefs regarding the virtues of the measures to be taken, which outlined coping mechanisms that conveyed hope for improvement and despair, the possibility and impossibility of change, and uncertainties and certainties.

Conclusion

Although eliminating the variability inherent in the process of decision-making is an unattainable goal, one should not impede efforts to reduce that variability. To do this, professionals need not only be aware of their different manners of perceiving and interpreting reality but also must be able to reflect on the role of their beliefs regarding the benefits of interventions in their judgements and decisions.

In addition, it is necessary to objectify the criteria of weight in their professional judgements, namely, assessments of situations of vulnerability, beliefs regarding the benefits of the alternatives, and parental collaboration, motivation and capacity for change. With regard to assessing vulnerability, multiple improvements have already occurred, thanks to the various theoretical and empirical developments regarding the consequences of maltreatment, abuse or neglect. Although this progress has been reflected in objective assessment tools, there is nevertheless scant research related to the success and failure of interventions in both family preservation and separation. Thus, greater knowledge regarding the implications of implementing either measure will allow modelling professionals' beliefs regarding such interventions by integrating this theoretical and empirical evidence with their professional judgements. Finally, considering the importance of parental collaboration and the motivation to change is essential to deepening the knowledge of these capabilities to establish objective criteria to assess their presence or absence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

A. Mosteiro holds a PhD in Sociology. She is currently lecturer at the University of Deusto. She is a member of Deusto Social Values research team. Her research interests are professional decision-making, child protection and social work practice.

U. Beloki holds a PhD in Civil Law. She is currently lecturer and director of the Department of Social Work and Sociology at the University of Deusto. She is a member of Deusto Social Values research team. Her research interests are decision-making, child protection, adult protection and social work practice.

E. Sobremonte holds a PhD in Sociology. She is currently lecturer at the University of Deusto and director of the Master in Intervention and Family Mediation. She is a member of Deusto Social Values research team. Her research interests are professional decision-making, child protection, health and well-being and social work practice.

A. Rodríguez holds a PhD in Sociology. She is currently lecturer at the University of Deusto. She is a member of Deusto Social Values research team. Her research interests are decision-making, child protection, social exclusion and social work practice.

ORCID

A. Mosteiro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5908-8997>

U. Beloki  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2634-6432>

E. Sobremonte  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0958-2719>

A. Rodríguez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9651-0272>

References

- Arruabarrena, I., & De Paúl, J. (2011). Valoración de la gravedad de las situaciones de desprotección infantil por los profesionales de protección infantil [Child Protection Services caseworkers' assessment of child maltreatment severity]. *Psicothema*, 23(4), 642–647.
- Baron, J. (2004). Normative models of judgment and decision making. In D. Koehler & N. Harvey (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of judgment and decision making* (pp. 19–36). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Baumann, D., Dalglish, L., Fluke, J., & Kern, H. (2011). *The decision-making ecology*. Washington, DC: American Humane Association.
- Beckett, C. (2008). Risk, uncertainty and thresholds. In M. Calder (Ed.), *Contemporary risk assessment in safeguarding children* (pp. 40–51). Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.
- Benbenishty, R., Davidson-Arad, B., López, M., Devaney, J., Spratt, T., Koopmans, C., ... Hayes, D. (2015). Decision making in child protection: An international comparative study on maltreatment substantiation, risk assessment and intervention recommendations, and the role of professional's child welfare attitudes. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 49, 63–75.
- Benbenishty, R., Osmo, J., & Gold, N. (2003). Rationales provided for risk assessment recommended: A comparison between Canadian and Israeli professionals. *British Journal of Social Work*, 33, 137–155.
- Brandon, M., Belderson, P., Warren, C., Gardner, R., Howe, D., Dodsworth, J., & Black, J. (2008). The preoccupation with thresholds in cases of child death or serious injury through abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse Review*, 17, 313–330.
- Brisebois, K., Trzcinski, E., & Marsack, C. (2015). The relationship between caseworker assessments of clients' social networks and child welfare placement outcomes. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 18(2), 90–105.
- Britner, P., & Mossler, D. (2002). Professionals' decision-making about out-of-home placements following instances of child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 317–332.
- Broadley, K. (2015). Making the decision to remove a child from parental care: Twelve decision-making criteria. *Children Australia*, 41(2), 90–97.
- Coohey, C. (2003). Making judgments about risk in substantiated cases of supervisory neglect. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27, 821–840.
- Cortez-Monroy, F., Oneto, L., Saavedra, I., & Olgar, M. (2009). Argumentación y toma de decisiones en Trabajo Social: desafíos para la formación profesional. *Revista de Trabajo Social*, 76, 53–64.
- Dalglish, L. (1988). Decision making in child abuse cases: Applications of social judgment theory and signal detection theory. In B. Brehmer & C. Joyce (Eds.), *Human judgment: The SJT view* (pp. 317–360). North Holland: Elsevier.
- Dalglish, L. (2003). Risk, need and consequences. In M. Calder & S. Hackett (Eds.), *Assessment in child care: Using and developing frameworks for practice* (pp. 86–99). Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.
- Dalglish, L., & Drew, E. (1989). The relationship of child abuse indicators to the assessment of perceived risk and to the court's decision to separate. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 13, 491–506.
- Davidson-Arad, B. (2001). Parental features and quality of life in the decision to remove children at risk from home. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 47–64.
- Davidson-Arad, B., & Benbenishty, R. (2008). The role of workers' attitudes and parent and child wishes in child protection workers' assessments and recommendation regarding removal and reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 107–121.
- Davidson-Arad, B., & Benbenishty, R. (2010). Contribution of child protection workers' attitudes to their risk assessments and intervention recommendations: A study in Israel. *Health and Social Care*, 18(1), 1–9.
- DeLong-Hamilton, T., Kruse, K., & Bundy-Fazioli, K. (2016). Exploring child welfare workers' experiences with neglect cases: A qualitative study. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 10(1), 21–38.
- DeRoma, V., Bingley, C., Kessler, M., & Merino, C. (2005). Unacceptable risk factors in child maltreatment: Formulations from caseworkers. *International Journal of Behavioral and Consultation Therapy*, 1(2), 114–123.

- DeRoma, V., Hansen, D., Tishelman, A., & D'Amico, P. (1997). Influence of information related to child physical abuse on professional ratings of adjustment and prognosis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 21, 295–308.
- DeRoma, V., Kessler, M., McDaniel, R., & Soto, C. (2006). Important risk factors in home-removal decisions: Social caseworkers' perceptions. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23(3), 263–277.
- Gillingham, P., & Humphreys, C. (2010). Child protection practitioners and decision-making tools: Observations and reflections from the front line. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(8), 2598–2616.
- Glisson, C., Bailey, J., & Post, J. (2000). Predicting the time children spend in state custody. *Social Service Review*, 74(2), 253–280.
- Gold, N., Benbenishty, R., & Osmo, J. (2001). A comparative study of risk assessment and recommended interventions in Canada and Israel. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 25(5), 607–622.
- Goldstein, W. (2004). Social judgment theory: Applying and expanding functionalism. In D. Koehler & N. Harvey (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of judgment and decision making* (pp. 37–61). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Helm, D. (2010). *Making sense of child and family assessment. How to interpret children's needs*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.
- Houston, S. (2015). Reducing child protection error in social work: Toward a holistic-rational perspective. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 29(4), 379–393.
- Keddell, E. (2014). Current debates on variability in child welfare decision-making: A selected literature review. *Social Sciences*, 3(4), 916–940.
- Kemshall, H., Wilkinson, B., & Baker, K. (2013). *Working with risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Klein, G. (1999). *Sources of power: How people make decisions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Klein, G. (2008). Naturalistic Decision Making. *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 50(3), 456–460.
- Lindsey, D. (1991). Factors affecting the foster care placement decisions: An analysis of national survey data. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 272–281.
- Lindsey, D. (1992a). Adequacy of income and the foster care placement decision: Using an odds ratio approach to examine client variables. *Social Work Research and Abstracts*, 28(3), 29–36.
- Lindsey, D. (1992b). Reliability of foster care placement decision: A review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 2(1), 65–80.
- Lyle, C., & Graham, E. (2000). Looks can be deceiving: Using a risk assessment instrument to evaluate the outcomes of child protection services. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22(1), 935–949.
- Molina, A. (2012). *Toma de decisiones profesionales en el Sistema de Protección Infantil* [Professional decision making in Child Protection System]. Observatorio de la Infancia de Andalucía. Granada: Consejería de Salud y Bienestar.
- Mosteiro, A. (2015). *La toma de decisiones en protección infantil: el caso de la CAPV* [Decision making in Child protection: the case of the Basque Country]. Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto.
- Munro, E. (1999). Common errors of reasoning in child protection work. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(8), 745–758.
- Platt, D., & Turney, D. (2014). Making threshold decisions in child protection: A conceptual analysis. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, 1472–1490.
- Reddy, S. (1996). Claims to expert knowledge and the supervision of democracy: The triumph of risk over uncertainty. *Economy and Society*, 25(2), 222–254.
- Rokeach, M. (1980). *Beliefs, attitudes and values: A theory of organization and change* (7th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rosenberg, M., & Hovland, C. (1960). Cognitive, affective and behavioral components of attitudes. In C. Hovland & M. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Attitude organization and change* (pp. 1–14). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rossi, P., Schurman, J., & Budde, S. (1999). Understanding decisions about child maltreatment. *Evaluating Review*, 23(6), 579–598.
- Ruscio, J. (1998). Information integration in child welfare cases: An introduction to statistical decision-making. *Child Welfare*, 75(2), 139–160.

- Sieracki, J. (2010). *In whose best interest? Using an experimental vignette to assess factors influencing placement decision in child welfare*. Chicago, IL: Loyola University.
- Snyder, J., & Newberger, E. (1986). Consensus and differences among hospital professionals in evaluating child maltreatment. *Violence and victims, 1*(2), 125–139.
- Spratt, T., Devaney, J., & Hayes, D. (2015). In and out of home care decisions: The influence of confirmation bias in developing decision supportive reasoning. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 49*, 76–85.
- Stokes, J., & Schmidt, G. (2012). Child protection decision making: A factorial analysis using case vignettes. *Social Work, 57*(1), 83–90.
- Sullivan, C., Leschied, A., Chiodo, D., & Hurley, D. (2008). Perception of risk among child protection workers. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*, 699–704.
- Swets, J. (1962). Decision processes in perception. *Psychological Review, 68*(5), 301–340.
- Taylor, B. (2006). Factorial surveys using vignettes to study professional judgement. *British Journal of Social work, 36*(7), 1187–1207.
- Taylor, B. (2012). Models for professional judgement in social work. *European Journal of Social Work, 15*(4), 546–562.
- Taylor, B. (2013). *Professional decision making and risk in social work*. London: Sage.
- Taylor, B. (2017). Heuristics in Professional Judgment: A psycho-social rationality model. *British Journal of Social Work, 47*(4), 1043–1060.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science, 185*, 1124–1131.
- Wilkins, D. (2016). Balancing risk and protective factors: How do social workers and social work manager analyse referrals that may indicate children are at risk of significant harm? *British Journal of Social Work, 45*, 395–411.
- Wolf, S. (2011). *Personal motivation and child protection decision-making: The role of regulatory focus*. Columbia, SC: Columbia University.
- Zuravin, S., & DePanfilis, D. (1997). Factors affecting foster care placement of children receiving child protective services. *Social Work Research, 21*(1), 34–44.