

How students evaluate and decide in child abuse situations, and the need to study criteria for removal and conditions for reunification

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8th International Foster Care Research Conference
17-18 September, Siegen – Germany

The research – 1st part

- What are **the ideas of 200 students in the area of social intervention** on the following issues, analysing a case study?
 - Which is their **perception of maltreatment** behaviours (abuse and/or neglect) at home?
 - How would they **assess the level of risk** of significant harm to the child if she stayed at home?
 - Which **type of intervention** they recommend for the case?

The research – 2nd part

- In the light of new information presented to the students, how would they assess the **risk to the child, after 2 years**, if she returned home?
- Which **type of intervention** they would recommend in this new context?

Framework

- Law 147/99 – Protection of Children and Youngsters at Risk
 - Social responses to be implemented in natural living environment and placement measures, namely **foster care and residential care**.
 - It recognizes the **right of participation of the child** or young person from the age of 12 and, before that age, according to their maturity.
 - It **privileges the household** as the key element of the community.
 - Even when there is the occurrence of situations where the child or young person needs to be separated from her/his biological family, **priority is given to reintegration in her/his family**.

Framework

- In 2013, the State looks after 8.445 children and young people, and only 374 (**4,4%**) were in foster care.
- Further, the proportion of children and youth in foster care has decreased about 88% between 2004 and 2013.
- Therefore, it appears that one of the fundamental rights of the child or youth to live in a family environment has a **trend to extinction**.

Framework

- **Risk assessment and recommendations for intervention** are key moments to children and youth at risk (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010).
- The need for a **considered decision** collides with the **urgency** caused by the danger to child's physical and psychological integrity.
- The situation is complicated when the available information is scarce, ambiguous or nonexistent, and implies a decision in a scenario characterized by **uncertainty** (Casas, 2010; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010).
- It is known that **cultural and educational variables influence the subjective decisions** of childcare system and of the courts of law (Benbenishty et al., 2014).

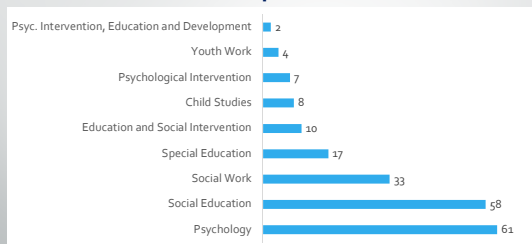
Methodology

- Quantitative strategy with a cross-sectional and factorial design based on vignettes.
- It was demonstrated that judgments made in response to vignettes resemble those made with actual patients or clients, and are more valid than case files or self reports on how such decisions should be made (Taylor, 2006).
- The case "Diana" (Benbenishty et al., 2003; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008) was adapted to the Portuguese context.
- "International study of decision making in child welfare», coordinated by the Haruv Institute, Jerusalem, Israel.
- The data collection method was a questionnaire administered to 200 university students from different regions of Portugal between April and June 2014.

Methodology

	Removal?	Reunification?
1	Mother's agreement (MA)	Diana's agreement (DA)
2		Diana's opposition (DO)
3	Mother's opposition (MO)	Diana's agreement (DA)
4		Diana's opposition (DO)

Participants



Participants

In the last year of their university degree	85	
Master programs	115	
Female		91.5%
< 20 years	6	
20-29 years	131	
30-39 years	36	
> 39	27	
Single		67.5%
Social educators	18	
Social workers	14	
Psychologists	6	
With sons		24%

The case "Diana" – first part

- The Social Security System received a referral from a primary school teacher who was worried about one of the children in her class, Diana.
- **Family:**
 - the mother, Ana, is a 25 year old housewife;
 - the father, David, is 31 years old and is a factory worker, and now he does not have a stable job.
 - six year old Diana, four year old Sara, and two year old Martin.

The case "Diana" – first part

- Their marital relationship has always been tense.
- The family lives in a rented flat in a poor neighbourhood.
- They have great financial problems.
- Diana's mother was born in a problematic family.
- Diana's father is a man who finds it difficult to function within structured frameworks which require discipline.

The case "Diana" – first part

- Diana is quiet in school and doesn't relate much to the other children.
- Diana's cognitive development is behind that of her peers, she often hits other children during breaks, and she had unexplained outbursts of rage.
- The psychologist and classroom assistant in the school tried to form a relationship with her, but she refused to answer their questions.

The case "Diana" – first part

- **The teacher reported that Diana had blue marks on her hands and back.**
- In addition, in the past six months, Diana has come to school with a broken arm and, on another occasion, with a displaced shoulder. Her medical file reveals that at age three she was taken to the hospital emergency room with scalds from boiling water that was spilled on her at home.
- Diana's mother said that she plays with roller skates, and that's how she often gets hurt.

The case "Diana" – first part

- The social worker visited her home and felt that there was not sufficient attention paid to the children's physical, psychological or emotional needs.
- The children did not get their immunizations on time and Diana arrives at school without the food or materials that are required. She is dressed inappropriately for the season of the year.
- There are hardly any toys at home. The parents don't play with the children and they don't go on family outings.

The case "Diana" – first part

- The mother views Diana as the "*bad girl*"
- The father has outbursts of anger at her, accusing her of being "*retarded and stupid*," and that "*nothing good will come of her*."
- The overall impression is that the emotional relationship between Diana and her parents is very problematic.

First section

- The social worker who conducted the home visits raised the possibility of removing Diana to a foster family.
- **A:** The mother voiced **strong objection (MO)**, stating: "*no way will anyone touch my family and I'm ready to go to court on it*."
- **B:** The mother **did not raise strong objection (MA)**, stating – "*if you think that is better for the family, I am willing to try*".

The case "Diana" – second part

- Following a child protection case conference, **it was decided to place Diana in a foster family**, with the agreement of her parents. Diana was in foster care for two years.
- The assessment was that the stay did her good and enabled her to form a good relationship with her foster parents, who also became attached to her. Her relations with her peers are also good. Her outbursts of anger have been greatly reduced, and she's doing well in school.
- In contrast, there do not seem to have been comparable changes in her family, who refused to accept the treatment that was offered them and consistently ignored Diana and the foster family.
- In the follow-up discussion after two years, it became clear that the mother is vigorously demanding that Diana be returned home and "*is ready to go to court to get her back*."

Second section

- A:** In a number of meetings with Diana the assessment was that she was **not interested in returning (DO)** to her biological family because she felt good in the foster family and did not feel that she had a good connection with her family and that they ignored her.
- B:** In a number of meetings with Diana the assessment was that she **was interested in returning (DA)** to her biological family, despite the fact that she felt good in the foster family.

Medians 1st part

- “Extremely agree” for emotional abuse
- “Agree” for physical abuse
- “Agree” for emotional neglect
- “Agree” for physical neglect
- “Not agree nor disagree” for sexual abuse

Category	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Emotional abuse	1	5	1	1	23
Physical abuse	6	6	6	6	6
Emotional neglect	17	13	13	108	108
Physical neglect	76	84	109	5	102
Sexual abuse	1	38	98	14	14

Medians 1st part

- “High risk” for physical harm
- “Very high risk” for emotional harm

MA vs MO:
The distribution of risk assessment is similar:
Physical ($KS_2 = 0.14, p = 1$)
Emotional ($KS_2 = 0.71, p = 0.7$)

Risk Level	Physical harm	Emotional harm
NO RISK	0	0
LOW RISK	5	2
MODERATE RISK	28	14
HIGH RISK	109	67
VERY HIGH RISK	58	117

Intervention 1st part

- 50% of the students recommended a direct intervention of social workers with additional services.
- 44.5% of the students recommended removal of the child, with or without parents' consent.

MA vs MO:
The distribution of the recommended intervention is similar ($KS_2 = 1.06; p = 0.21$)

Intervention	Mother does not agree	Mother agrees
Place the child with a foster family following the granting of a court order	11	24
Place the child with a foster family on a voluntary basis	33	41
Direct social work intervention with the provision of additional services	57	42
Direct social work intervention without the provision of additional services	2	2
Indirect intervention through other professionals who are already in contact with the child (e.g. ...)	6	3
Avoid intervention	0	0

Statistical analysis

- Distributions of percentages are statistically significant in both scenarios:
 - MO ($\chi^2 = 61.2; p < 0.001$), with advantage of **direct intervention in the social service with the provision of additional services** (= median = mode);
 - MA ($\chi^2 = 83.2, p < 0.001$), where the mode is the same, but the median is the **placement of the child in foster care on a voluntary basis**.
- Initially, foster care is not the majority choice (37%) when the mother does not agree with the withdrawal, but if she accepts, then foster care is the students' preferred option (52 %).

Statistical analysis

- In both cases, physical ($r = 0.373; p < 0.01$) and emotional ($r = 0.371; p < 0.01$) harm, there is a moderate and significant correlation between the perception of risk and a more intrusive intervention.
- Students who assessed the child as more at risk were also inclined to recommend a more intrusive intervention.

Reasons for the selected option

- Results of a content analysis:
 - 24.5% defends the need for systemic action with Diana and her family.
 - 19.7% defends only the work with the family.
 - 22.4% defends the need to provide Diana with a loving family.
 - 12.9% defends giving her confidence and support.
 - 12.2% defends removal of Diana, even if only temporarily, namely for the extended family.

Medians 2nd part

- "High risk" for physical harm
- "High risk" for emotional harm

Comparing with the initial results, there is a significant difference (Wilcoxon test):
 Physical ($Z = -3.04; p < 0.01$)
 Emotional ($Z = -3.92; p < 0.001$)
 The perception of very high risk has decreased after 2 years.

Risk Level	Time Point	Physical Harm	Emotional Harm
NO RISK	INITIAL	0	0
	AFTER 2 YEARS	0	0
LOW RISK	INITIAL	5	4
	AFTER 2 YEARS	5	4
MODERATE RISK	INITIAL	14	14
	AFTER 2 YEARS	21	21
HIGH RISK	INITIAL	67	67
	AFTER 2 YEARS	34	34
VERY HIGH RISK	INITIAL	117	117
	AFTER 2 YEARS	68	68

Intervention 2nd part

- Only 11.5% recommended that the child should return home.
- 45.5% of the students recommended out of home placement in the first place, and now they are 88.5%.

There is a significant difference on the distribution of types of intervention between the students that recommended reunification and those who defend the continuation of foster care ($KS2 = 2.05; p < 0.001$) in relation with their first decision. After 2 years, there are more students defending foster care.

Intervention Type	Recommend keeping the child with her foster family	Recommend reunifying the child with her biological family
Place the child with a foster family following the granting of a court order	35	0
Place the child with a foster family on a voluntary basis	53	1
Direct social work intervention with the provision of additional services	83	27
Direct social work intervention without the provision of additional services	2	0
Indirect intervention through other professionals who are already in contact with the child (e.g. teacher)	5	0
Avoid intervention	0	0

Statistical Analysis

- DO to reunification increases the students' assessment of
 - risk of physical harm ($Mann-Whitney U = 3634.5, p < 0.001$);
 - risk of emotional harm ($Mann-Whitney U = 3172.5, p < 0.001$);
 - and students' opposition to reunification ($U = 4250, p < 0.01$).
- The students have a higher physical ($KS2 = 1.344, p < 0.1$) and emotional ($KS2 = 2.333, p < 0.001$) risk perception when the child does not want to return to her birth family.

Statistical Analysis

- The students' decision-making is associated with the will of the child to go back home ($\chi^2 = 11.054, p < 0,001$).

Child's Will	Recommend keeping the child with her foster family	Recommend reunifying the child with her biological family
The child doesn't want to return	4	96
The child wants to return	49	81

Reasons for the selected option

- Results of content analysis:
 - 49.3% believe that the child has a stable relationship with the host family.
 - 39.6% advocate the maintenance of a systemic work with the family.
 - 27.8% set out the resistance to change by the biological family.
 - 16% set out a high risk to the child if there is a reunification.
 - 11.1% set out that the child does not want to return to her birth family.

Conclusions

- Students recognize the risk of the child to be suffering significant physical and emotional harm. No student saw no risk and only a minority classifies the risk as low.
- Mostly (55,5%) decided in favour of an intervention with the biological family, avoiding the removal of the child from her life context.
- Also, students who assessed the child as more at risk were also inclined to recommend a more intrusive intervention.
- Students' decision-making was clearly influenced by the mother's behaviour, with a higher percentage of students recommending no withdrawal when the mother does not agree, and a higher percentage of students suggesting the removal of the child when the mother is favour of it.
- The results correspond to findings from other studies (Gold et al., 2001; Regehr et al, 2010), according to which the mother's behaviour is a factor with significant impact on the decisions of professionals.

Conclusions

- Two years after the withdrawal, students still consider the risk of the occurrence of physical and emotional harm is high, which leads the majority to decide to keep the Diana in the foster family even in that part of the group that advocated initially the intervention of social services in the context of life.
- I.e., more conservative and less invasive positions that characterize the initial phase of the process, change up, given the stability of integration in the foster family and the absence of changes in the behaviour of the biological family.
- However, this attitude is influenced by the child's opinion, since there are more students to propose the reunification when the child shows interest in returning.
- When the child does not want to go back home, the students' assessment of the risk of physical and emotional harm, and students' opposition to reunification increases.
- Note that the work with the family is considered as very important throughout all type of interventions.

Conclusions

- This study shows that students have a great diversity in case assessment and decision.
- Students need to improve their professional evaluation criteria and decision-making in order to gain awareness of the weight of their attitudes and others, in the formulation of their judgments and decisions.
- We propose that university curricula should pay special attention to the study of the criteria for withdrawal, the conditions for reunification, the advantages of involving the biological family and the children in the intervention, and must promote learning with case studies and the presentation of testimonials from professionals in the classroom context.

Conclusions

- The ecological approach (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Baumann, Kern, & Fluke, 1997) has shown that decisions in this area are influenced by a diverse set of elements, including the accumulated experience.
- In the case of students, knowledge of the error and learning from the experience contribute to best practice in decision making.
- Study limitations:
 - A single case for evaluation.
 - The possibility that the sample only represents students who wish to express their views.
 - Ideally, it should be important to complement the vignette with other real cases to diversify the collection of data as well as to increase the number of higher education students involved in the study.

Thank you for your attention!

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