

Factors that Affect Decision Making in Child Protection Assessment in Estonia: The Removal of Children from Home

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Abstract

This article is concerned with unresearched area of child welfare—factors that affect decision making in child protection, particularly as it is related to the decision whether or not to remove a child from home. Social work in Estonia has not had a long tradition (21 years of practice), therefore there is a strong need to develop an effective child protection system that responds to adequate satisfaction of children's needs. The author of this article sought to understand how Estonian child protection workers make assessment related decisions in cases where child protection concerns have been identified. Given that child protection workers must exercise a high degree of professional judgment, it was important to understand based on what decisions are made in practice. This article gives an overview of the relevant literature, followed by a description of methods, findings and conclusions. Practice implications and future directions of research are discussed.

Keywords: assessment, child protection, child in need, decision making, Decision Making Ecology Framework, Estonia

1. Introduction

The abuse and neglect of children has been subjected to public, political and professional debate particularly since its “rediscovery” as a social problem in the early 1970s (Otway, 2002). Parton (2009, p. 716) asserts that child welfare systems in the U.S., Australia and various Western countries are overloaded and not coping well with the increased demands of children's needs. The literature consistently supports this notion (Holland, 2004; Barak *et al.*, 2006; Ayón, 2009; Dolan *et al.*, 2009; Stahmer *et al.*, 2009; Bolton & Lennings, 2010; Faller *et al.*, 2010; Mansellet *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, more emphasis is needed to be placed on improving outcomes for abused and neglected children.

Changes in Estonian society have brought forth serious welfare problems concerning children and families, especially higher rates of child neglect and abuse. The number of children left without parental care has increased in recent years in Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2012)—1,732 children without parental care in need of assistance were registered in 2008. In 2009, 2010 and 2011, the number of such children was 2,184, 2,054 and 2573 (this represents 1.0% of the total population of children in 2011). The increasing number of children in need means more cases of assessment and decision making for child protection workers. Despite a wealth of literature on how to make sound decisions to keep children safe, there is a need for more consistent and carefully considered decisions in child protection practice (Peter *et al.*, 2005), particularly in Estonia where social work and child protection are relatively new fields. In order to provide and promote quality assistance and support, it is crucial to learn how child protection workers make assessment related decisions in their daily practice.

2. Literature Review

Child welfare and protection is arguably one of the most complicated and challenging areas of work within the welfare sector involving complex decisions (Cash, 2001; Britner & Mossler, 2002; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006; McPherson & Barnett, 2006; Harnett, 2007; Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Ellett, 2009; Darlington *et al.*, 2010; Festinger & Baker, 2010; Munro, 2010; Rajendran & Chemtob, 2010; Schmied & Walsh, 2010; Fallon *et al.*, 2011; Jent *et al.*, 2011; Keddell, 2011; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011; Boyas *et al.*, 2012; LeBlanc *et al.*, 2012; Sainiet *et al.*, 2012).

One of the challenges in this profession involves decision making, this is the key activity in child protection. The responsibility of the child protection worker is to assess the risk of harm and to identify the right level of intervention to ensure necessary protection and the well-being of children (Hughes *et al.*, 2011; Gabel, 2012; O’Gorman, 2012; Sjøttestad&Tøverud, 2012). This profession involves ethical questions concerning the rights of families, parents and children and the nature of such in relation to the obligation of society to protect and support children in need (Höjer&Forkby, 2011, p. 94). One of the most difficult decisions child protection workers face is whether the child is in need and whether or not to remove a child from the family. In this section of the article, the author will give a short overview about child protection practice in Estonia and analyse the literature published on decision making in child welfare and protection, including decision making ecology.

2.1 Child Welfare and Protection Practice in Estonia

Children across the world are exposed to a variety of risk factors that affect their well-being and development (poor financial situation, lack of social support, and family’s stress etc.). Issues related to well-being of children are growing in frequency and intensity in Estonia (Lai, 2009). The majority of children in need come from families living in unfavourable social conditions such as parental unemployment, poverty, and alcohol abuse (Toros, 2011).

According to the Republic of Estonia Child Protection Act (1992), a child is in need of immediate assistance if the child is in a situation which endangers his or her life or health (physical, mental or emotional well-being, including abuse and neglect). The local authority has a duty to respond to children in need, including undertaking assessments and making (removal) decisions (The Social Welfare Act, 1995). If leaving a child in his or her family endangers the health or life of the child, a rural municipality government or city government may separate the child from the family before a court ruling is made (The Family Law Act, 2009). A court shall restore a parent’s right of custody if it is established that the grounds for suspension have ceased to exist. Court decisions are generally based on the assessment conducted by the child protection worker. Therefore, these decisions have important implications on the well-being of children and their families, underscoring the importance of accurate assessments and decision making concerning children’s well-being.

Although, child protection workers are required to undertake assessments with cases involving child protection concerns and make decisions, there is not much knowledge available concerning decision making factors. Soet *et al.* (2009) conducted a study on child maltreatment in Estonia and their findings indicate the lack of regulations, guides and concreteness in child protection work. Child protection workers referred to inconsistency in laws that result in vagueness regarding decision making.

Decision-making tools, particularly risk-assessment tools, have been developed and implemented by governments around the world to assist workers in identifying families at higher risk of maltreating their children, perhaps most notably in the field of child protection (Munro, 2004; Schwartz *et al.*, 2004; Wells *et al.*, 2004; Baumann *et al.*, 2005; Shlonsky& Wagner, 2005; Gillingham, 2006; Fitch, 2007; Littlechild, 2008; Schwalbe, 2008; Sullivan *et al.*, 2008; Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Fallon *et al.*, 2011; Coohy *et al.*, 2012). In Estonia, no instruments have been developed or adapted to provide guidance to assessment decisions.

2.2 Decision Making in Child Protection: Decision Making Ecology Framework

The decision making process takes place in a complex social and legal environment of definitions, norms, expectations, and values (Ashton, 1999, p. 539-540). Child protection workers are making decisions about safety and/or the removal of the children from their parents daily. These are important and difficult decisions, which might have profound consequences on the lives and well-being of children and their families (Darlington *et al.*, 2010; Neven, 2010; Shdaimah, 2010; Arruabarrena& De Paúl, 2012; Barratt, 2012; Nouwen *et al.*, 2012). Decision making is influenced by many different actors and traditions and is subject to a range of legislative measures (Höjer&Forkby, 2011). Theoretical approach to the study is guided by the Decision Making Ecology Framework.

Fluke with colleagues (2010) describe Decision Making Ecology Framework that explains the process of decision making using the knowledge acquired from the decision making science. According to a multi-level model, factors affecting decision making are divided into four types such as case, individual, organizational, and external factors related to the decision maker (see also Baumann *et al.*, 2011).

The literature findings are consistent with the Fluke et al. (2010) decision making model. Arad (2001) found three parental variables that contributed to the workers' decisions—the parents relationship with the child, substance abuse on the part of at least one of the parents, and cooperation (especially the father's). Lack of family social support has been also found to be a factor in making decisions about the well-being of the child (Cash, 2001). Several researchers have suggested that characteristics of workers (age, marital status) and their perceptions of their clients (prejudices, problem-focused approach) affect decision makers' judgments (DePanfilis&Scannapieco, 1994; Arruabarrena& De Paúl, 2012). Further, findings indicate that experience (Britner&Mossler, 2002; Davidson-Arad *et al.*, 2003), education and level of training (Baird & Wagner, 2000; Gold *et al.*, 2001; Jentet *et al.*, 2011) plays a role in the decision making process. Organizational factors are linked with job stress (Boyas, Wind, & Kang, 2012), the availability of resources (DePanfilis&Scannapieco, 1994), time constraints (Rzepnicki& Johnson, 2005), and high caseloads (Barak *et al.*, 2006; Dolan *et al.*, 2009; Stahmeret *et al.*, 2009; Bolton &Lennings, 2010).

It is crucial to systematically and comprehensively examine and assess the systems that influence children's development and well-being (Epps & Jackson, 2000; Colton *et al.*, 2001; Miller &Bentovim, 2003). In order to increase the quality and consistency in decision making, it is first necessary to focus on how child protection workers actually make assessment related decisions in their practice. This would mean an appreciation of understanding the process rather than simply describing consequences (see Hearn *et al.*, 2004, p. 35). In the current article, the aim is to understand the factors that affect decision making in child protection with cases related to the decision whether or not to remove a child from home.

3. Method

This article draws on a small-scale study, documenting and developing an understanding of the factors that affect child protection worker's decision making related to the removal of children from home. The findings represent part of a wider study into child protection workers' assessments practices of children in need. The topic covered in this article is an emerging area of research in Estonia with previous research in the area being limited.

3.1 Sample

Consistent with the purposive sampling method, a total of twenty female child protection workers working with child protection cases in local governments from different regions in Estonia (Northern, Central, North Eastern, Western and Southern Estonia) were interviewed. The sample presented in the current article was identified from the preliminary study, conducted in 2006 (Lai, 2009). In the preliminary study, a self-administered questionnaire was carried out in Estonia among child protection workers working in local governments, aimed to obtain an overall picture of the situation of children and families in need in Estonia and to describe the context of the child protection assessment. In total, 202 copies of the survey were distributed to the child protection workers, from which 143 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 72%.

The sampling criteria aimed to capture the diversity of phenomenon within a sample, therefore including child protection workers from different locations (rural and city area), with different work experience and occupational position (child protection workers and social workers with child protection tasks), and child protection workers with and without social work education. The Social Welfare Act (1995) clearly stipulates that positions of child protection workers shall be established in the social and health departments of counties and, as necessary, in rural municipality governments and city governments for the provision of assistance and support to children in need and their families. In practice, most urban areas have separate child protection workers besides the social workers, and most rural areas have a social worker working with all the client groups, including children and families (child protection task).

Participants were selected from the sample list (coded from R1 to R143) of the preliminary study. Child protection workers who matched the sampling criteria for interviewing were contacted. In total, twenty-seven child protection workers were contacted by phone, seven of them refused to participate in the study. At the time of the consent, an appropriate time for the interview was set.

All participants conduct assessment activities related to children in need and make decisions. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 61 years, with a mean age of 44.10 (SD=10.208). The length of working experience ranged from 1 to 19 years, with a mean of 10.95 years (SD=5.615).

The number of children in a region per one worker ranged from 168 to 2800, with a mean of 1256.50 children (SD=904,652), and the number of “active” cases at the time of the interview ranged from 0 to 38 cases, with a mean of 11.53 cases (SD=10.1000). Thirteen participants had completed social work studies and seven participants had not studied the social work profession. Participants without social work education had studied such professions as veterinarian, pedagogy, health protection, medicine, and domestic studies. Two child protection workers had not acquired higher education.

3.2 Interview Design and Data Collection

The participants were approached to provide their reflections on their experiences related to the decision making factors in the assessment of cases with identified child protection concern. Data were collected from May through June 2011 from 20 local governments throughout Estonia.

Demographic information was collected from all participants including age, education, professional discipline, and estimation of exposure to child protection cases in the area, active cases for the assessment of child well-being. Interviews were conducted with the respondents using an interview framework that was developed prior to the interviews (constructed following a thorough literature search). The interview was designed to understand the assessment process, approaches, including principles through related questions but also through case reflection (a recent case in the participant’s assessment practice), support needed for the assessment, and how decisions were reached as to provide safe and secure environment for the child. Interviews had a semi-structured character meaning that just general themes were focused on in discussions. All data from the interviews will not be used in the present context; the findings reported in this article relate solely to the decisions whether or not to remove a child from home.

Based on participant’s preference, interviews were held in their office or other locations enabling quiet environment, and all interviews were tape-recorded (total length of 24 hours, 1 minute and 46 seconds) and fully transcribed. All data collection and analysis was carried out personally by the author, travelling to each participant for data collection. All respondents gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were not compensated. In the process of data collection, confidentiality and anonymity of information regarding records and study participants were considered. The interviews were conducted in the Estonian language, also the analysis of the data, and afterwards translated into English language. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Data Analysis

The actual process of transcription started immediately after the first interview. Content analysis was the primary method used to analyse the data. Qualitative content analysis has played an important role in developing an understanding of a phenomenon (Bryman, 2001). The data analysis was informed primarily by Padgett (2008). Analysis of the qualitative data began with the observation to discover the patterns in order to code the data into potential themes of decision making factors. The themes were then reviewed again, and the specifics of each theme further refined. Decision making factors were derived from a theory (Decision Making Ecology Framework) and from the data, using a combination of both in developing categories. According to Padgett (2008, p. 14), most qualitative approaches include some theoretical ideas and concepts in the process of the data analysis, incorporated with the new ones. All coding was undertaken by a single researcher (the author) to ensure consistency.

The findings of the analysis rely on the integrity of the data categories from which they were derived. Use of quotations has been made in the article to illustrate the connections between raw data and the conclusions drawn. Citations by participants presented in this article (presented in text in italic, indicating the number of interviewee from I1 to I20) contain following transcript symbols: two slashes with three dots indicates that some of the text is left out in the citation; underlining indicates emphasis; arrow up indicates shift into higher voice; parenthesis with one dot indicates a brief pause and parenthesis with three dots indicates a longer pause; double oblique indicates explanatory phrases added by the author. The words are written without punctuation and commas, exclamation marks etc. are not used.

4. Findings

Child protection workers were asked to describe a recent child protection case where the situations involved the child protection threshold and explain the reasoning processes they used in those cases.

As this study explores the experiences related to the decision making factors in the assessment, precise numerical representation of responses is not provided. Nevertheless, themes and categories are presented in an order that approximates their relative frequency in the data. Sample responses for each category are presented in Tables 1-3.

4.1 Case Related Factors

Analysis of the data discovered several categories, from which five primary themes were identified: child abuse and neglect, parent related factors, child's age, lack of social support, and unemployment and income (see Table 1).

Table 1. Case related factors: primary themes, categories and examples

Child abuse and neglect (danger)
Physical abuse: <i>".../ well (.) it was physically dangerous to the child"</i> I17
Physical neglect
Nutritional neglect: <i>"if child is without food and drink and is dirty and if the parent hasn't been at home for several days (.) basic things"</i> I3
Inadequate hygiene: <i>".../ there was no nutritious food to support the needs of a growing child /.../"</i> I5
Emotional neglect
Inadequate affection: <i>".../ the emotional attachment between the parent and the child (.) how is the bond /.../"</i> I19; <i>"I assessed the emotional bond (.) /.../"</i> I8
Negative attitudes: <i>".../ if the mother is very negative and she doesn't take the responsibility /.../"</i> I15
Lack of basic care: <i>".../ the mother was not capable to provide care for the child /.../ ↑ then there is not much to think /.../"</i> I3
Parent related factors
Alcohol abuse: <i>".../ due to the alcohol problem /.../ I realized the home was not safe for the children"</i> I6
Lack of cooperation: <i>"↑ well the mother didn't agree with anything (.) ↑ she did not make an effort to cooperate /.../ and then we didn't have anything else to do but to remove the child from the home"</i> I4
Not admitting mistakes: <i>".../ if the parent is not justifying himself (.) if they admit they were weak and did wrong we can work with that /.../ otherwise there is not much outcome expected from there"</i> I14
Family history and functioning: <i>"the first is (...) if there is some history of being in the child protection system (.) the background (.) definitely this this is one of the arguments"</i> I4
Child's age: <i>"the child protection took the decision that we will remove the baby until the home is clean and basic needs for the baby are provided /.../ it is dangerous for the small child /.../ older child can defend himself"</i> I11
Lack of social support: <i>"if there is a close person or a family member or someone from the community /.../ who would support the parent /.../ this way there is no need to remove the child immediately /.../"</i> I19
Unemployment and income: <i>".../ no stable income or there is income but the family doesn't know how to manage financially then then (.) it develops ((the abuse)) (...) how can they manage if there is no money how do they restrain their emotions /.../"</i> I6

As reported in table, child physical abuse was mentioned as one of the main reasons for participants to separate the child from the family, either temporally or applying the court decision to limit or deprive parental rights for the child's custody. Other categories influencing the decision making, either determining the child in danger or deciding the separation of the child from the family, are related to physical and emotional neglect. The child was considered in danger (basis for the removal) if the child was young and parent related endangering factors were present, e.g., lack of collaboration and lack of readiness to confess guilt were considered as signals of risk and harm to the child. Several participants underscored the importance of supportive social networks and community resources for support and help, otherwise provision of care and safety was questioned, which brought up the question of the removal of the child.

4.2 Individual Factors

Participants reflected on a number of categories related to the individual factors in decision making in their assessment practices, five themes emerged from the analysis: bureaucratic approach, practice wisdom, intuition, professional training, and burning out (see Table 2).

Table 2. Individual factors: primary themes, categories and examples

Bureaucratic approach: “/.../ and then you have to control them ((parents)) /.../ you have to be very careful with the family while you blame then /.../” I1; “I go and control them (.)” I3; “/.../ the first thing I would ask is what is the deal /.../” I14
Practice wisdom: “/.../ this is the experience and wisdom that you base your decisions on” I15
Intuition: “this is how I make decisions (.) I rely on it ((intuition))” I18; “(.) everyone uses their inner feeling if they have to make the decision about the removal of the child /.../” I19
Professional training: analysis indicated that child protection workers without social work education tended to remove the child without comprehensive assessment and without well-considered arguments, e.g.: “/.../ we invite the parent here /.../ if they don’t answer the phone or if they don’t come you will remove the child /.../” I13
Burning out: “I don’t want to work here anymore as I am tired (.) /.../ I am trying to meet less clients /.../ the easiest is to remove the child (.) less hassle for me” I3

Several participants indicated to individual factors as having the greatest impact on decision making about the assessment and intervention, especially personal values and approaches to assessment—values about parental ability to change, the assessment’s purpose, and the worker’s personal role in relation to child protection and decision making. Participants’ responses demonstrated that most of the participants rely on practice wisdom in their considerations, and several child protection workers listened to their inner feeling to a lesser or greater extent. One protection worker spoke about negative sides of relying on intuition—mistakes. She also indicated to professional growth that gives the specialist the confidence to make decisions. In other words, professional social work training gives the skills and knowledge to conduct comprehensive assessments, which is the basis for making decisions on whether or not the child is in need of protection (incl. removal from the home) and support. Burning out was considered to affect the ability to conduct comprehensive assessments, which was negative factor in decision making about the removal of the child from home—without promotion of the child’s well-being in order to strengthen the protective factors and provide support and assistance accordingly.

4.3 Organizational Factors

Organizational factors produced four themes that are summarized in Table 3: high workload, isolation, availability of resources, and economizing.

Table 3. Organizational factors: primary themes, categories and examples

High workload: “the time limits you /.../ you are intense all the time ehm well too much in that sense ehm I don’t have time for proper assessment” I3; “/.../ and all the time it is one rush (.) /.../ this way decisions are sometimes rushed as well /.../” I12
Isolation: “(...) but you doubt all the time because you do this work alone (.) there is no support from anyone /.../ then you make a decision and stress about it” I2
Availability of resources: “/.../ if I don’t have anything to offer for the families ((services)) (.) I remove the child to a safe place (.) and then I wait and observe /.../” I14
Economizing: “actually it is like this that in order to get the child to the state care you have to apply the initial legal protection ↑or limit the custody rights of parents (.) you separate the child from parents (.) as you have to keep financial costs to minimal” I3

According to child protection workers, the high number of cases was related to insufficient time, which limits the quality of work with clients as well as incomplete assessment practices. High workload was related to insufficient time, which limits the quality work with clients and also incomplete assessment practices, leaving some children in need without the right assessment decision and necessary service provision.

Although the principle of child protection in Estonia is to support the parent and strengthen the family in order to keep the child in the family, lack of services resulted in removal of the child in several cases. The high caseload combined with isolation may result in stress and burning out of the worker and poor quality assessments. Burn-out indicated to the removal of the child without first trying to support the family. Finally, a small number of participants suggested that the principle of economizing affect decision making related to provision of necessary services in some cases.

4.4 External Factors

The external factors include one category: social pressure. Participant's role is to provide and promote safety and permanency for children in need and to make decisions accordingly, however these decisions are stressful for child protection workers, as one of the quotes reflect: *".../ the society expects us to act fast in the case of a child protection concern /.../"* I16. Societal pressure was referred to several times. Thus, on the one hand, child protection workers are pressured to protect children and, on the other hand, they are seen as "punishers" in the society.

5. Discussion

Participants' responses demonstrate the complexity of the process of decision making—decisions whether or not to remove a child from home are based on different factors. Germain and Gitterman (1980, p. 18) discuss that through the assessment process, the child protection worker seeks an understanding of the child and the family, which enables to make well-considered decisions and to respond more effectively according to the needs of the child and the family. Findings are in accordance with the Fluke et al. (2010) decision making model, decision making is particularly affected by individual and organizational factors, also case related factors. Gardner (2005, p. 151) also suggests that the outcomes of an assessment rely both on the skills of the assessor and on the organizational environment in which it is undertaken.

A crucial aspect in decision making is the value base of the professionals and perceptions of their clients to affect decision making (Coulshed&Orme, 2006, p. 18). Analysis of child protection cases indicate that more than half of the participants had adopted bureaucratic approach in their assessment, focusing on deficiencies and risk rather than strengths and needs of the child. Focusing on deficits increases the self-defence and guilt feeling for the parents, which might be an obstacle for engaging in a trustful relationship. The lack of cooperation may lead to insufficient assessment, including decision-making. Lonne, Parton, Thomson and Harries (2009, p. 102) indicate that the child protection system needs directly to attend to the needs of children, to build capacities of families and communities, to focus on early intervention and prevention, and not to focus on parental incompetence, failure. Deficit-based approach is less empowering and therefore fewer changes for the best interest of the child takes place. Nevertheless, some examples of strengths-based approaches to assessment practice exist among participants in the current study.

Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008) argue that decisions are usually made on the basis of incomplete information about the child's current situation, which might lead to negative consequences for the child (continuation of abuse or separation of the child from the family without assessing all the protective factors for the child to stay in the family while having supportive services etc.). In the absence of objective truth or information, subjective judgment is applied. In child protection practice, many specialists rely on their intuitive processes (see English & Pecora, 1994; Munro, 1999; Bell & Mellor, 2009) and practice wisdom (Lunenberga&Korthagen, 2009). Current study reports similar findings—in the absence of information and evidence, participants discussed their decision making being largely dependent on the professional experience of the participant combined with the inner feeling of the person. Gobet and Chassy (2008, p. 134) indicate intuitive decisions as being useless for addressing the issue and at worst dangerous. Although nowadays, evidence-based practice is promoted, still partially intuition is irreplaceable. According to Buchanan and his colleagues (1998, p. 336), already in 1960s there was knowledge that decisions are made by decision makers, not by a model. The decision maker stands in the centre of the decision making process and specialist's subjective judgment is applied in every assessment. Circumstances for decision making in child protection are typically stressful and full of uncertainties (Jud et al., 2011, p. 2027), intensified by organizational factors. High workload, insufficient resources and isolation are the main categories emerged from the data analysis, which increases the probability for the distorted assessment; this in turn may lead to harmful decisions rather than well-being.

Several participants claimed to be burned out due to these circumstances (working in isolation, high workload, and lack of resources). Informed decisions enable to respond more effectively according to the needs of the child and family. Intagliata (1992, p. 46) has stated several decades ago that an increasing number of clients can affect not only the amount or frequency of professional's contact with clients, but also the nature and quality of client contact. In this situation, efforts might become primarily reactive rather than proactive—responding to crises rather than the needs of the child. O'Brien (2004) refers that not only client behaviour (case related factors in the context of decision making) is important, but it is important to understand that the social institution provides the context of practice in child protection. Findings indicate that individual and organizational factors influence how case related factors are considered in decision making process. The well-being of the child in need is related to the well-being of child protection worker. First, child protection workers require a supportive system in making well-considered assessments and decisions in the best interest of the child. Second, several authors (Fisher, 1997; Corby, 2006; McPherson & Barnett, 2006) argue that making informed choices requires specialized knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial that professionals have adequate education and training in conducting assessment and making decisions related to children in need and their families.

5.1 Limitations

There are several limitations which apply to this study. One limitation that is similar to those of most qualitative studies is in the qualitative sampling. The findings are exclusive to the particular study contexts and as such there is no intention to seek generalisations. There are also limitations to comparing these findings to similar studies in Estonia as this is the first study that researches decision making factors in child protection cases where the situations involved the child protection threshold. Another limitation is the use of only one case from each participant. More cases and the use of several case vignettes addressing the assessment and the rationale of decisions based on these cases and vignettes would allow making more definite conclusions. Despite these limitations, the study's findings still contribute to the understanding of decision making in child protection and highlights several challenges that have implications for organisations, policy makers and practitioners.

5.2 Implications for Practice and Research

Several practical outcomes should be mentioned. First of all, quality of assessment and decision making can be ensured through training, supervision, and continuing professional development. The findings of this study suggest a greater need to focus on assessment training, including teaching social work students effective and client-friendly assessment approaches, data collection (objective information), self-support techniques, and demonstrating the implications that relevant theories have for practice. Improvements to field education may also help future practitioners to conduct comprehensive assessments and focus on some of the issues most relevant to decision making in child protection. Second, in the absence of clear guidelines for the assessment, child protection workers are left to establish their own criteria for judging as well as ways of assessing these criteria. As discussed in the literature review, to reduce errors in decision making, different assessment tools and guidelines have developed and adopted to guide specialists in recognizing important factors that may present a danger for the child and assist them in making informed decisions. A further challenge is to develop/adopt such a guide in Estonia. This would also lay the foundation for creating a comprehensive assessment system and harmonize assessment practices, which should result in the increased well-being of children and in more adequate satisfaction of children's needs. On the other hand it should not be a tool for making the practice overly proceduralized resulting in less time for direct work with clients. Third, there is little research about decision-making (processes) in the child protection field in Estonia; hence, this research is a starting point for future research to examine intervention decisions in more depth. Subject of support system for child protection workers and clients' perception on decision making in child protection related to assessment is also crucial to study.

6. Conclusions

There was a need to fill the gap between the practice and existing knowledge about factors that affect decision making in child protection related to the removal of children from home. In some cases decisions are difficult to make as specialists' might have doubts if the decisions they are making are right or wrong and how these decisions might affect the people related to it. The findings of this study indicate a challenge to find ways to support well-considered decisions and comprehensive assessment in child protection in Estonia, including promotion of the well-being of practitioner. The findings also imply a need to explore and research this topic further.

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