

*VARIABILITY IN DECISION-MAKING AMONG
CHILD PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS: THE
ROLE PLAYED BY THEIR PERSONAL
CHARACTERISTICS*

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ABSTRACT

Variability in decision-making with regard to child protection is gaining traction in social work. This article presents the findings of a quantitative study carried out with child protection professionals in the Basque Country. The goal is to analyse variability in decision-making for child protection based on the personal characteristics of the professionals involved in such cases. Using a vignette methodology, the study explored whether the decision to keep a child with his family or separate him from them is related to socio-demographic and experience-based variables, and also to education and professional experience. Based on the hypothesis that there is variability among professionals when deciding whether to implement a family preservation or separation decision, this study has found significant differences in the decision based on professional experience, the age of professionals and whether or not they are a parent. For other variables, the results indicate that different factors are important, such as the organisational context in which professionals work.

Key words: decision-making, social work, variability, child protection, personal characteristics

INTRODUCTION

As Sara Banks (1997) said, a large part of social work consists of making decisions on how to handle individual cases. Sometimes, we will limit ourselves to supporting the decisions of service users as free, autonomous individuals, but on other occasions we will be faced with protection decisions (Taylor, 2012) where action must be taken to safeguard the user, even against the views of the family or those who have guardianship. In risk decisions (Taylor, 2013) the object of analysis is not focussed on the needs of the service user, but rather on the type of risk he or she suffers, the probability of it occurring and the most appropriate ways to reduce it (Kemshall, Wilkinson and Baker, 2013). Child protection decisions represent the foremost case, where social work professionals are responsible for the safety of minors.

Although literature has traditionally focussed on clarifying what is meant by child vulnerability and identifying the risk factors, in recent decades there has been increased interest in understanding how professional decisions are made and what factors influence them (Molina, 2012). In this respect, one of the issues of greatest concern today is the phenomenon of variability, i.e., how different professional decisions are made in relation to the same case.

Variability can be understood as an extremely complex phenomenon and intrinsic to the decision-making process where there is a meeting of cognitive (Taylor, 2017), emotional, organisational (Lwin, Fluke, Trocméc, Fallona and Mishna, 2018), and legal and ethical (Banks, 1997) aspects. In this regard, we can assume variability to be inevitable. However, as Keddell reminds us (2014, p. 917): “variability represents an ethical problem, as general consistency in decisions in similar cases represents a universalist duty inherent in human rights and duty-based ethics”.

In this context, explanatory models on decision-making have been developed that seek to illustrate the multitude of factors that affect this process: Judgments and Decision Processes in Context (JUDPIC) (Benbenishty and Davidson-Arad, 2012) and the decision-making ecology (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke and Kern, 2011; Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). One of the key factors in both models is the personal characteristics of the professionals, because when they are faced with such major decisions as protection they will not only implement all of their technical, legal and ethical knowledge, they will

also rely on all of their personal and professional experience. Given the inherent complexity of decisions, authors such as Calder warn that the key to effective decision-making is acknowledging the potential for error and having the capacity to rethink judgements and decisions (Calder, 2008).

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND VARIABILITY IN PROFESSIONAL DECISION-MAKING. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

International literature on variability in decision-making among child protection professionals began in the 1980s, and Spain joined this line of study from the year 2000. This review examines the results of research which has analysed variability in decisions among child protection professionals according to their socio-demographic and experiential characteristics, their training/education and professional experience.

Socio-demographic and experiential characteristics

Although most research studies analyse these characteristics on a combined basis and with different methodological designs, in order to better understand their relationship with variability in decision-making, the main findings are presented for each one of them.

Regarding gender, the majority of research has not found significant differences between men and women (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2011; Ashton, 2004; Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012; Pecnick and Brunnberg, 2005) and those found are more related to the evaluation or perception of severity than decisions regarding the resources to be allocated.

For example, in the research undertaken by Snyder and Newberger (1986), Dukes and Kean (1989) and Burnnett (1993), it was found that women perceived situations of maltreatment and abuse more severely than men, and that women tended to implement more intrusive measures than men. In a similar vein to the previous example, Tilden et al. (1994) revealed that women tended to consult with other professionals twice as much as men and were more likely to refer suspected cases to the protection system. In Spain, in the study by Garrido and Grimaldi (2012), no significant gender differences were found, although a tendency for women to evaluate families more unfavourably than men was observed.

It must be taken into consideration that gender evaluation is complex, given that helping professions are highly female-oriented and, therefore, in many cases there is a disproportionate sample, which impedes adequate analysis (Davidson-Arad and Benbenishty, 2010; Pecnick and Brunnberg, 2005).

In terms of age, there are also no consistent results. Among the studies that find significant differences, that of Garrido and Grimaldi (2012) stands out. They found that younger professionals produced more unfavourable assessments than older professionals. Also noteworthy is the study by Dukes and Kean (1989), whose results were the opposite: it was the younger individuals who assessed situations of vulnerability as less severe.

However, other peer-reviewed research does not reveal differences in terms of age, the assessment of situations of vulnerability (Portwood, 1998; Roscoe, 1990) or the selection of protective measures (Burnett, 1993). The Molina study (2012) also did not find significant differences with respect to age regarding these two decisions. In fact, differing tendencies were obtained for different cases. In one of them, older people produced more severe assessments and proposed more intrusive intervention measures. In the other one, older people produced the more moderate assessments. As the author has indicated, the influence of age needs further exploration.

Other variables analysed are those related to marital status, to being a parent, or having experienced traumatic life events. However, none of the studies have found significant differences in terms of these variables, the assessment of situations of vulnerability or the reporting of cases (Ashton, 2004; Dukes and Kean, 1989; Snyder and Newberger, 1986), or when it comes to deciding the type of protection measure (Burnett, 1993). Others have found certain trends in terms of being a parent, such as the one carried out by Fernandes dos Santos (2017) and by Portwood (1998), where individuals with children tended to assess certain parental behaviour as more serious than those without children, or the study by Garrido and Grimaldi (2012), which found the opposite tendency.

Regarding personal experiences of maltreatment experienced by professionals during their childhood, the scarce studies that exist have not found significant differences in terms of this variable (Ashton, 2004; Portwood, 1998).

The studies carried out on the socio-demographic variables do not yield a clear and unequivocal significance within the child protection decision-making chain. Indeed, the multitude of results found even points to opposing conclusions.

Qualifications

Studies on the influence of qualifications have focussed primarily on social work, psychology, social education, health-related professions, and on others such as the police or judiciary. Although not all of them have the same responsibility in the decision, they all participate in some way in the chain of decisions during the intervention, from the importance of reporting a case to the recommendation of an intervention.

Regarding the decision to report cases, Deisz, Doueck, George and Levine (1996) found differences between therapists and professionals from the child protection system in the assessment of the presence of reasonable cause for maltreatment. While therapists tended to focus on the specific behaviour of the parents and advocated notification when there was a suspected potential for harm, child protection workers focussed more on the joint interpretation of the family history and the intentionality of the parental figures, not considering it appropriate to report a case solely based on the existence of a possible potential harm.

In the same way, Tilden et al. (1994) found significant differences between professionals concerning assessment and intervention. Regarding assessment, it was psychology and social work professionals who more frequently affirmed a more common suspicion of the existence of a possible case of maltreatment in comparison to medical and nursing professionals. Nevertheless, with regard to interventions, it was the medical and social work professionals who more commonly considered referring cases to the protection system compared with the rest of the professionals who opted more to consult, observe and discuss it with the individual or family.

Britner and Mossler (2002) found significant differences between judges, prosecutors, social work protection service professionals and mental health professionals. Although the four groups considered the type of maltreatment and the probabilities of recurrence to be important, it was the social work and mental health professionals who considered

previous interventions and cooperation with parents to be more important than the other groups did.

Snyder and Newberger (1986) found significant differences in the hospital environment. Social work and nursing professionals assessed situations more severely than paediatric and psychiatry professionals. Psychology professionals were in the middle. The authors noted that these differences could be due to the differing roles that these professionals played in child protection cases. Both nursing and social work professionals had more direct and intense contact with the minor and with his or her parental figures. On the other hand, psychology professionals carried out more one-off, individual interventions, as well as paediatrics and psychiatry professionals, who also adopted more of a medical and biological rather than a psychosocial approach.

Garrido and Grimaldi (2012) found differences in assessments between professionals with different qualifications even when using the same assessment scale. Psychology professionals and then social work professionals were the ones who carried out the most positive assessments of the families; the least favourable were made by social education professionals. Also in this case, the authors argued that the differences could be due to the professional role and the type of training of each group. It is customary in psychology to assess the person individually, paying less attention to the environment, and in both social work and social education it is more common to also assess social factors that surround the family. In addition, the fact that social education professionals carried out less favourable assessments could be explained by their role within the protection system which makes it possible to directly see the negative consequences of parental behaviour in minors.

With regard to recommendations for intervention, analysing the differences between police officers and social work professionals, Mandel, Lehman and Yuille (1995) found that the police tended more to recommend the removal of the child than social work professionals did. Britner and Mossler (2002) also found differences between professionals in the judiciary, prosecution, social work and mental health systems in the implementation of protection measures. Thus, while the judiciary opted more for the implementation of separation measures, social work and mental health professionals advocated more for family interventions. Everything points to the fact that the variables

of closeness and the care relationship specific to each professional profile and the organisation where they work may explain these differences (Kedell and Hyslop, 2018).

Yet other studies have not found significant differences between professionals in social work, psychology and social education when it comes to assessing the level of severity (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2011). Likewise, in the research by Molina (2010), the differences found appeared to be due more to the workplace than the qualifications.

Regarding differences according to postgraduate studies, Jent et al. (2011) found that professionals with a higher level of education confirmed a case of physical abuse to a greater extent than those with a lower level of education. In addition, Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur and Zhai (2006) found that children attended by professionals with postgraduate education had shorter stays in the protection system. Conversely, Regehr, LeBlanc, Shlonsky and Bogo (2010) did not find differences in risk assessments based on undergraduate or postgraduate education.

Professional experience

Years of professional experience favour the development of complex skills and competencies that help to deal with practical situations (Ericsson and Charness, 1994). What is more, professional experience appears to be the basis for the development of certain intuitive thoughts that allow the right decisions to be made quickly and appropriate to the contextual conditions (Klein, 1999). It also offers the opportunity to develop practical knowledge that may help to explain the differences in decision-making (Cash, 2001).

According to Drury-Hudson (1999), individuals with more experience appear to integrate theoretical and empirical knowledge better than inexperienced individuals. In particular, they have a better, greater management of knowledge related to the assessment of risk, legal and organisational procedures and the use of theories and empirical evidence (Whittaker, 2018). Other studies indicate that expert individuals interpret the variables involved in the case in a different manner (Britner and Mossler, 2002) and also that they feel more confident when it comes to assessing and intervening in child vulnerability situations (Parada, Barnoff and Coleman, 2007).

Other studies have found that people with greater professional experience carry out more favourable case appraisals than those who are less experienced (Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012) or students (Mandel, Lehman and Yuille, 1995). Furthermore, the greater their experience, individuals tend to recommend and implement fewer family separations (Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Wozner and Gabriel, 2003; Davidson-Arad and Benbenishty, 2016; Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012), and place more trust in family preservation services (Schuerman, Rossi and Budde, 1999; Sieracki, 2010).

In one of the most recent publications on this issue, focussing on social work Devaney, Hayes and Spratt (2017) have found differences between experienced professionals, novices and students, with the group of novices being those who behave in a different manner to the experienced individuals or the students. Faced with the same case, the novices took more intrusive measures than the rest of the groups. The authors have suggested that a linear progression in the general process of professional training does not exist, but rather that there is a transition period between training and expert practice where there is a high level of uncertainty, which may explain why the group of novices make different decisions. The most relevant result for the authors is that both the students and experienced professionals appear to act and think in a similar way. One explanation may be that individuals who are studying are not subject to the responsibility of the consequences of their decisions and those that have experience have the practical wisdom that makes them better able to anticipate the courses of action of their decisions.

Lastly, there are studies that do not find significant differences according to professional experience, the assessment of the severity level of the cases (Arruabarrena and Paul, 2011; Gold, Benbenishty and Osmo, 2001) or the choice of protection measure (Sullivan, Whitehead, Leschied, Chiodo and Hurley, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

This work forms part of a study carried out in the Basque Country on the determining factors in variability in decision-making in child protection (Mosteiro, 2015). In this study, a vignette designed by Benbenishty, Osmo and Gold (2003) was presented to social work, social education and psychology professionals. The vignette described a case of child vulnerability regarding which it had to be decided whether to adopt a separation or family preservation measure. This vignette has also been used in various studies (Davidson-Arad and Benbenishty, 2008, 2010; Benbenishty et al., 2015; Mosteiro, 2015; Mosteiro, Beloqui, Sobremonde and Rodríguez, 2018; Spratt, Devaney and Hayes, 2015).

The vignette methodology is frequently used for the analysis of judgement and decision-making in social work (Taylor, 2006). Despite its usefulness, it is not exempt from criticism because, although it describes a real case, it is impossible to incorporate all of the data that exists in actual practice (Rossi, Schuerman and Budde, 1999) and its results refer to what individuals would do in hypothetical situations, rather than what they do in their actual work context (Wolf, 2011).

The participants were 204 child protection professionals from the Basque Country belonging to different public and private organisations that operate at different levels of intervention. Estimating a population universe of 712 professionals, the N sample corresponding to a 95% level of confidence, with an estimated error rate of 5%, would be 250. Given that the number of questionnaires received was 204, 82% of the sample was attained, which would guarantee a confidence level of 91%. The information was compiled between December 2014 and April 2015. The survey was completed online, guaranteeing participant anonymity and data confidentiality.

For the analysis, a quantitative analysis strategy was proposed using the XLSTAT software tool. The chi-square technique has been used to examine if there were significant differences between professionals who opted for a preservation or separation measure according to their personal characteristics: age, gender, marital status, qualifications, professional experience, stressful life experiences and personal experiences of maltreatment.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: 70.6% are women, between the ages of 30 and 50 (74%). 32% are social work professionals; 33% are psychology professionals; 25% are social education professionals, and 8% have university qualifications other than those previously listed. With regard to professional experience, categorised in ranges, 90% have six or more years of professional experience in child protection. Lastly, 39% work in primary care, another 39% in secondary care, and 22% in residential care services.

RESULTS

Firstly, the results confirm the existence of variability between professionals when it comes to choosing the most appropriate intervention measure faced with the same case. While 62.25% opt to keep the minor with his family, 37.75% consider it more appropriate to envisage a family separation measure. The response trends are similar to those found in the comparative research carried out by Benbenishty et al. (2015) in Spain where 53% of professionals opted for family preservation, compared to 47% who preferred to consider a family separation.

Secondly, the results of the frequency analysis and from the application of the chi-square presented below, have allowed us to learn whether the differences in the decision-making are statistically significant depending on the following personal characteristics: 1) age, gender, marital status; 2) being a parent, having suffered stressful life experiences or experience of maltreatment; 3) training and professional experience.

Age, marital status and gender

Would younger and older professionals, married individuals and those who are not married make the same decision? And what about men and women?

As can be seen in Table 1, there are no significant differences in terms of any of the demographic characteristics analysed, except for the youngest group of professionals, between 22 and 30 years old, who have opted more for the implementation of family separation.

Table 1. Differences in decision-making by age, gender and marital status

AGE	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
22-30	11	42**	15	58**	26	100
31-50	98	64	54	36	152	100
OVER 50	18	69	8	31	26	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
p-value of 0.072>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
** Significance by box (Fisher Test)						
GENDER	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
MEN	34	57	26	43	60	100
WOMEN	93	65	77	35	144	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.288>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
MARITAL STATUS	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
NOT MARRIED OR WITHOUT A PARTNER	37	56	29	44	66	100
MARRIED OR WITH A STABLE PARTNER	90	65	48	35	138	100
TOTAL	127	62	76	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.207>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						

Source: prepared by the authors

Indeed, it is the only group in which more than 50% opt for this type of intervention, specifically 58%. In the rest of the age groups, even though there are no significant differences, it is observed that the greater the age of the person, the more he opts to keep the minor with his family. Almost 70% of professionals over 50 make the same decision, demonstrating a more consistent response pattern than younger individuals, who have a more variable response pattern.

Being a parent, stressful life events and experiences of maltreatment

As can be seen in Table 2, the only variable that shows significant differences is being a parent. While 68% of professionals with children are inclined to keep the minor with his family, only 54% of those without children propose the same measure.

Table 2. Decision based on personal experiences

BEING A PARENT	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
YES	78	68	36	32	114	100
NO	49	54	41	46	90	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.041 < 0.05 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
STRESSFUL LIFE EXPERIENCES	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
YES	107	61	67	39	174	100
NO	20	67	10	33	30	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.589 > 0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF MALTREATMENT, NEGLIGENCE OR CHILD ABUSE	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
YES	11	48	12	52	23	100
NO	116	64	65	36	181	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.130 > 0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						

Source: prepared by the authors

On the other hand, significant differences are not found in the decision based on having suffered stressful life events such as death or bereavement, or based on having personal experiences of maltreatment. It should be noted that, in this latter case, a certain tendency appears to be observed that those who have had these types of experiences opt more for implementing separation measures (52%) than those who have not had them (36%). Therefore, it would be necessary to determine the influence of this variable using larger samples.

Training and professional experience

In this dimension, variables related to years of professional experience are analysed, as well as the graduate or postgraduate qualification or specific training in child protection. Does this decision change according to these characteristics?

Table 3. Decision according to years of professional experience and training

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
1 TO 10	39	51	38	49	77	100
MORE THAN 10	88	69	39	31	127	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.008>0.05 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
QUALIFICATION	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
SOCIAL WORK	46	70	20	30	66	100
PSYCHOLOGY	42	63	25	37	67	100
SOCIAL EDUCATION	26	52	24	48	50	100
OTHERS	13	62	8	38	21	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.284>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						
POSTGRADUATE	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
YES	58	61	37	39	95	100
NO	69	63	40	37	109	100
TOTAL	127	62,25	77	37,75	204	100
*p-value of 0.741>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						

SPECIFIC TRAINING IN PROTECTION	PRESERVE		SEPARATE		TOTAL	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
YES	79	59	54	41	133	100
NO	48	68	23	32	71	100
TOTAL	127	62	77	38	204	100
*p-value of 0.249>0.05 NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (chi-square)						

Source: prepared by the authors

As can be seen in Table 3, significant differences were only found according to professional experience. None were found for the variables relating to training.

The results indicate that greater professional experience results in a higher rate of family preservation being chosen. Specifically, while almost 70% of professionals with more than ten years of experience opt for a family preservation measure, only 51% of less experienced individuals propose the same measure. As was the case with age, the variability of the decisions lowers the greater the professional experience is. Thus, while the decisions made by the most experienced group are more consistent, variability is greater in the case of the less experienced individuals, with an almost 50% split between the two intervention alternatives.

There are also no statistically significant differences found according to qualifications, postgraduate training or specific child protection training. But it is observed that the social work group opts most for a family preservation measure; specifically 70% choose this response option. On the opposite side we find social education, where only 52% of professionals opt to keep a minor with his family.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that there are no statistically significant differences in the studied decision in terms of marital status, gender, having experienced stressful life events, having postgraduate education or specific child protection training. These results are in accordance with other peer-reviewed research which gave similar results (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2011; Ashton, 2004; Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012).

However, in the experience of maltreatment or qualifications, although statistically significant differences are not found, some notable trends are observed. Professionals who state that they have experienced maltreatment are more inclined towards separation. One might think that individuals who have had these types of experiences are influenced by the feelings generated by the memories of their personal experience. Thus, it is possible that, affected by negative feelings such as fear or sadness, they opt more for proposing a family separation measure to guarantee the safety of the minor. These results are in line with those found by Portwood (1998). However, as there are few individuals who state that they have had experiences of this type, it would be necessary to explore this variable with a larger sample.

Regarding qualifications, the trend found between the social work and social education groups stands out. Why does the social work group opt more for preservation and why is the social education group more inclined towards separation? Although the explanation for these results is complex, there are two factors which may explain this trend. On one side, there are the differences in training. Social work training is more systemic and by focussing both on the family and the minor there may be more inclination to opt for family preservation. On the other side, by focussing more on socio-educational intervention with minors, social education training may attempt to counteract the negative family influence by opting for family separation. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the influence of the organisations within which the profession operates. While social education works more in cases of family separation, specifically in residential care, social work is more present in family preservation interventions. Therefore, each professional group may be opting for the alternatives that it deals with better or which it intervenes in the most, valuing them more positively. However, we can only comment on trends, given that as is the case in other national studies there are no significant differences in terms of qualifications (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2011; Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012; Molina, 2010). It is also not possible to make an international comparison because beyond our borders it is mainly via social work that social intervention takes place regarding matters of child protection. Hence, the studies are carried out exclusively with professionals qualified specifically in this field.

Lastly, there are three variables statistically associated with the variability in the decision. We are referring to age and, specifically, to the group of professionals under 30, having children or not and professional experience.

Why are younger individuals more inclined to propose separation measures? We find one of the explanations in both personal and professional experience. In the group of 22 to 30 year olds we find the people who have just entered the world of work after completing their studies and, therefore, one would think that they do not have the same personal or professional experience as older people. Therefore, they may feel more insecure when facing these types of situations of risk and choose separation because they feel it to be a safer option. On the other hand, older individuals have more experience when it comes to assessing the risks and benefits of the alternative interventions and, therefore, are equipped with more practical knowledge about the positive and negative effects of both measures in order to make decisions. In this way, in addition to assessing the safest option, they will take into consideration the possibilities of continuing to work with the parental figures and the potential negative effects of separation measures.

However, the results obtained on age are still inconclusive (Portwood, 1998; Molina, 2012). In our study, significant differences have only been found for the youngest individuals, from 22 to 30 years old. Therefore, not only should these results be viewed with caution, but it should also be considered that age and professional experience may be directly related, in such a way that the first may be considered as a proxy variable of professional experience, i.e., it may be indirectly measuring the effect of practical knowledge.

In the case of those with children, it is observed that they are more inclined to propose a family preservation measure. One might think that they place more importance on maintaining family ties and, therefore, tend to propose the alternative aimed at improving the capacity of the family for parenting and avoiding family separation. These results are different to those found in the peer-reviewed studies in which no significant differences were found (Ashton, 2004; Burnett, 1993; Dukes and Kean, 1989; Garrido and Grimaldi, 2012; Portwood, 1998; Snyder and Newberger, 1986).

The results for professional experience follow the same trend as those found for age. That is, the individuals with less experience and the youngest opt more for proposing a family separation than those who have more experience or are older. Age and professional experience again seem to be directly related. Therefore, the explanation for these results is the same as for age, in other words, the more experience the greater the practical knowledge. The less experience there is, and lacking the aforementioned source of knowledge, individuals may feel more insecure and, guided by the principle of precaution, opt more for the alternative that they consider to be safest: separation. These results are similar to those obtained in other studies carried out internationally (Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Wozner and Gabriel, 2003; Gold, Benbenishty and Osmo, 2001; Schuerman, Rossi and Budde, 1999; Sieracki, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The results found with regard to the differences in decision-making in child protection in terms of the personal characteristics of the professionals highlight the importance of further research along these lines. Taking into account the relationship between the years of professional experience and practical knowledge, new studies are necessary to seek to understand the influence of the latter on the decision-making process. If practical wisdom is based on intuitive thought at an unconscious level (Klein, 1999), it would be necessary for future studies to place the emphasis on clarifying the intuitive judgements on which decision-making is based using qualitative research techniques. It would also be desirable to carry out comparative studies on experienced professionals and novice professionals.

Given the importance of the organisational context in the variability in decision-making, it is vital to carry out multilevel studies that simultaneously take into account personal and organisational characteristics (Lwin et al., 2018).

There are numerous implications of these findings for teaching and professional practice. We firstly wish to highlight the need to heighten training in decision-making as an essential aspect within the methodology of social work intervention and, moreover, emphasise the importance of bringing these results to professional supervision in order to promote a reflective practice which helps us to identify and work on the role played by personal variables in decision-making.

As Calder (2008) has indicated: “a professional expert is not one who does not make mistakes, but rather one who is able to recognise his own fallibility and, therefore, open to rethink his judgements and decisions” (Calder, 2008, p. 64).

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