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**The Causes of Uncertainty- Child Protection Decision-making under increased organizational complexity**

**Background and purpose**

Uncertainty and changeability often characterize the cases that come to the attention of social services and are also something that social workers to some degrees are trained to deal with. However, while the organizational complexity affecting the decision-making process is described to increase, scholars in organization studies argue that as pressures increase and resources decrease in human service organizations, as is many welfare organizations today, a common reaction or strategy by the organization is to try to tame and control all the uncertainties, to make costs and work effort increasingly predictable. This article aims to illustrate common causes for uncertainty during child welfare investigations, as described by social workers, and to discuss how these can be understood and managed by social workers.

**Methods**

The article is based on the research project *Social workers’ considerations before placements of children in foster care or at an institution,* which is ongoing between 2022-2024 on behalf of Lund university and Borås university in Sweden. The qualitative material collected consists of 39 interviews (with social workers who conduct child protection investigations, foste care secretaries and supervisors), 21 observations (at case meetings and case supervision) and 18 investigation documents (Looking After Children- investigations). Analytically, a “backwards” strategy, inspired by Howard Becker's (2008) have been applied, starting from empirical data with findings and asking the question: “What is this a case of?”. After that the empirical data have been analyzed informed by literature and theory in an abductive approach (Hammersly 2022).

**Findings**

The social workers in the present study describe causes for uncertainty at micro (related to the child and family’s relations, reactions and life circumstances), meso (organizational categorization, policies, staff turnover and budget matters), and macro (availability and competition dynamics for foster care providers) levels. In each case a unique combination of these causes are considered in concrete.

**Conclusions and implications:**

While social workers are trained to handle and make decisions under uncertainty in relation to micro causes related to child and family circumstances, they are less prepared to handle uncertainty in relation to organizational and macrolevel causes, where complexity is increasing

**References**

Becker, Howard S (2008). *Tricks of the trade.* University of Chicago Press.

Hammersley, M. (2022). Emergent design. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*, 55-68.