


Decisions in Child Protection—Heuristics, Law and Organisation

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Abstract

With theories of heuristics and decision-making ecology as our analytical lens, we examined social work practitioners' use of heuristics (rules-of-thumb) as a response to real-world situations, emphasising the legal framework and how the work was organised. The data comprised eleven exploratory and follow-up group interviews with thirty-nine social workers and team leaders, observations of 108 decisions in child cases during eighteen meetings, and an analysis of fourteen case files in two Danish municipalities. Open, interpretative coding was used within a systemic approach, using Fish *et al.* (2008). Three heuristic rules guided decisions in all cases: (i) Form and maintain the first impression. (ii) When in doubt or disagreement, wait. (iii) Avoid parents' resistance. Key takeaways are that these heuristics help social workers and managers and are connected to satisficing strategies as a natural response to legal and organisational factors. However, the heuristics can also lead to a lack of transparency, delayed interventions and other kinds of bias. We point out the need for understanding such patterns through an extended research to facilitate better and timely feedback to practitioners on their decisions.

Keywords: bias, child protection, decision-making, heuristics law, organisation

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Introduction

In the course of their daily tasks, social workers in child protection and family services must ensure the best interests of children by foreseeing and acting to resolve various problems early, effectively and legally, in an inclusive and participatory manner, and within budgetary constraints (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016; Taylor, 2017a; Nyathi, 2018; Keddell and Hyslop, 2020). Such judgements and decisions are amongst the most challenging tasks for child welfare workers and managers because they are made in complex contexts. (Spratt *et al.*, 2015a; Munro *et al.*, 2016). The question we pursue in this article is how social workers tackle these demands by using heuristic rules and how the demands are linked to legal and organisational factors. First, we explain our theoretical approach and relevant elements in the Danish context. Next, we specify our method and analytical approach and then present our findings. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our findings and suggest future research and policy directions.

Theoretical approach

Child protection decisions are made under uncertain conditions, and many interdependent factors influence these decisions on several levels through often-competing demands from service users and other professionals (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017; McCafferty and Taylor, 2022). These characteristics render decision-making complex (van de Luitgaarden, 2007; Fish *et al.*, 2008; Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Devine, 2015, 2017; Munro *et al.*, 2016; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016; Kettle, 2017; Taylor, 2017a; Hood, 2018; Taylor and Whittaker, 2018).

This complexity puts pressure on social workers, who must navigate their way through the difficult conditions. Whichever path they choose generates a lot of information, which must be systematised within a short time. Under such conditions, it is evident that they cannot know everything that is relevant to the case and will make mistakes (Sicora, 2017).

Professionals deal with these conditions by relying on their skills or habits and a conception of purpose and knowledge—influenced by colleagues, other professionals and managers—to select a course of action from available options (Simon, 1997). In this study, we see such selection of a path as decision-making. Often, the formal decisions of managers or panels are based on other, often less apparent or smaller decisions made by social workers and management on the road to the final, formal decisions, regarding, for instance, placing a child out-of-home. Such, smaller decisions are often categorised in social work literature as individual professional judgement (Taylor, 2017b). In this study, we saw them as embedded in the decision-making process.

Decisions and decision-making processes have been categorised on a continuum from rational/analytic to intuitive/heuristic (Kahneman, 2011). Rational/analytic decision processes rely on rationality and a probability calculus to make the best decisions. In this process decision-makers raise the expected utility value of their choices by putting time and effort into allowing for alternative actions, reflecting on potential consequences and choosing the option that appears most likely to realise their goals (Shlonsky and Wagner, 2004; Munro, 2008; McCafferty and Taylor, 2022). Intuitive/heuristic decision processes are characterised by emerging quickly, based on pieces of information that the decision-maker is aware of and feels compelled to act upon (Gigerenzer, 2007; Møller, 2021; Sicora *et al.*, 2021). Heuristic decision-making processes thus reduce complexity by following intuitive rules and testing specific cues in the environment. Such rules can be defined as strategies that ignore certain information to speed up decision-making, whilst being more frugal than more complex and time-consuming methods (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier, 2011). Thus, such strategies are based on less information during a process of searching for essential cues, knowing when to stop and test, and knowing when to make a decision. It is a search-and-assess mechanism based on decision-makers' pattern recognition and fast and frugal rules on what is essential (Klein, 1998; Taylor, 2017a; Katsikopoulos *et al.*, 2020).

Simon noted that administrative staff do not necessarily optimise, but rather 'satisfice', when conducting their work (Simon, 1997). They stop searching for new information when they perceive from the organisational environment that enough is known to match the information with a decision that is recognised as 'good enough'. Even though social workers' tasks are different from administrative work, their work carries an element of satisficing heuristics influenced by colleagues, managers and routine practice in their department. Heuristic processes are generally acknowledged to be incorporated into decision-making in social work as in other areas of decision-making, for example, the judiciary (Dhimi, 2003; De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015).

According to ecological and psycho-social models of social work, decision-making can be understood only in the situated context (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Taylor, 2021; Fluke *et al.*, 2022). Decisions are made within a systemic environment (Taylor and Whittaker, 2018; McCafferty and Taylor, 2022) in which myriad factors influence decision-making. The 'legal' framework is essential in defining children's and parents' substantial and procedural rights and parents' and authorities' obligations (Preston-Shoot, 2014). The 'organisation'—as defined by budgetary conditions and financing, service demands and supply, local procedures, IT systems, division of competencies and management—also shapes the environment (Lipsky, 1980; Hasenfeld, 2010; Keddell and Hyslop, 2020; Benbenishty and Fluke, 2021). Furthermore, the 'attitudes'

of social workers who make these decisions are also important (López *et al.*, 2015; Bavisar and Winter, 2017) as are ‘case-specific’ factors, in particular, the level of risk for the child and the family’s situation (Damman *et al.*, 2020). This article focuses on the first two elements, that is the legal framework and organisational aspects.

Decisions may turn out to have been skewed or biased, because relevant information and conditions were overlooked. Whilst heuristics in general are efficient, their use does not always lead to correct decisions, even amongst the most experienced practitioners (Munro *et al.*, 2016). In social work and decision theory and research, more attention has been paid to biases than to heuristics (Taylor, 2017a). Furthermore, the focus on biases is seldom linked to specific legal and organisational factors which is why we address this issue.

Core aspects of the Danish legal and organisational context

The legal framework of Denmark’s family services and child protection is the Consolidated Act on Social Services, supplemented by acts, codes and other sources of law. It is up to each municipality to provide support when a child or young person is in need. Family counselling, relief care, mentor support and out-of-home placement are typical interventions, and all based on parental consent, except for the few cases of parental charges, issued when a child or young person is at serious risk due to a lack of parental responsibility. If an assessment indicates a need for alternative care due to obvious and serious risk, and the parents—or the child if age fifteen or older—do not consent, the local Children and Youth Committee can decide to place the child in care. Reforms have led to laws that require registering and assessing cases within specific time frames, as well as expanding control and recourse mechanisms. Thus, decisions to instigate, change or end assessments and interventions have increasingly been recognised as formal legal decisions. Accordingly, parents and children aged twelve years and older have the right to be given information and to provide input about decisions that affect their lives. Decisions must be substantiated and can be redressed. Simultaneously, however, there has been a tendency to let municipalities offer less-intensive and more informal assessment and support in less-serious cases (Ebsen, 2021).

Social workers interpret the law to decide whether a child’s needs fulfil the eligibility criteria for support. To this end, the local family department employs and organises social workers and managers via organisational criteria, such as hierarchy and labour specialisation (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017). Hierarchy defines tasks and competencies. Managers chair meetings and have the power to intervene in work. Labour specialisation is about employers’ definition of teams, including task functions

such as handling referrals, making assessments, drawing up contracts with providers and conducting follow ups. Local administrative structures are defined not by the law but by principles of hierarchy and specialisation embedded in local traditions, economy and political and managerial strategies.

Aim, method, analytical framework and ethics

The study aimed to identify heuristic patterns and understand how organisational and legal system factors affect them. We have examined real-world situations using existing knowledge of heuristics and everyday practice (Helm, 2011; Doherty, 2017; Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). Our method was based on the critical realist approach that observations of the social world is understood by analysing underlying structures that generate events (Pawson, 2013). Thus, in our search for—observable— heuristic patterns of practices we tried to confirm or disprove the influence of underlying organisational and legal structures.

Our analysis is based on observations, semi-structured group interviews and analysis of case files (Creswell, 2009). Due to the study's explorative and descriptive aspect, it was important to define the patterns we found as accurately as possible. As such, the study addressed the need for a more detailed examination of decision-making processes (Flyvbjerg, 2009; Kettle, 2017). Collaboration with practitioners was crucial and ensured from the beginning, and throughout the study, findings, methods, aims and ethics were discussed.

We went beyond understanding the eligibility criteria of the legal framework to examine the process involved in practically applying these criteria (Platt and Turney, 2014). We did not aim to establish or discuss decision-making models (Taylor, 2021) nor test how well heuristics perform compared with other strategy selection theories or their ability to predict outcomes (Marewski *et al.*, 2010).

Analytically, we wanted to conduct a 'person-in-situation analysis that focussed on the social workers' world, inspired by the ecological model (Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). Our approach was systemic (Fish *et al.*, 2008), inspired by an initial literature search (Magnussen and Svendsen, 2018). Researchers' logs ('practice analysis memos') and discussions with participants guided the analysis. The approach involved abductive reasoning, working through open and focussed coding, and subsequently moving back and forth between inductive and deductive reasoning, but ultimately towards hypothesis formation (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). We wanted to make thick descriptions (Geertz, 1971). The themes that emerged inductively from the practice analysis memos were categorised deductively using decision-making theory to trace connections to the legal framework and organisational factors. Findings from the different data strands were compared through triangulation, and the coding

process stopped when saturation was reached. The data and conclusions were discussed with collaborating authorities and participants.

Six explorative group interviews were conducted about the organisation of decision-making in the two departments. Subsequently, 108 case discussions were observed in eighteen decision meetings (eighty-six hours) over three months in the two departments. The observations entailed partial participation in the natural environment and were primarily descriptive to cover manifest and latent decision-making patterns (Spradley, 1979). The observations followed local meeting schedules. The interviewed persons were delimited to participants in the observed meetings. The observations were recorded and transcribed, then used to select comprehensive case files from fourteen cases (seven in each municipality) for closer examination (843 record pages and 3.692 appendices). Selections were based on the department's choice between placement and home-based interventions with parents and children due to unsatisfactory child development or a problematic home situation (Taylor, 2021). We call this inclusion criterion 'tipping point cases', that is, cases in which a department decided to opt for placement of a child in care—or was on the verge of taking such a decision. We chose this criterion to encourage an awareness that triggers for tipping points may derive from various sources (Kettle, 2017). Other terms, such as 'borderline care proceedings cases' or 'edge of care', have also been used to describe crucial decision points, particularly those that cross the line for compulsory action (Doherty, 2017). We use 'tipping point' as a criterion to include cases. Thus, we separate our discussion from the definition of 'threshold' (Platt and Turney, 2014; Sidebotham et al., 2016). In addition, we separate our discussion from social workers' and authorities' attitudes (Biehal et al., 2015).

The fourteen cases varied in content, comprising eight boys and six girls aged four to sixteen. Three boys had parents with backgrounds other than Danish, and five children had psychiatric diagnoses. The total number of referrals was eighty-six, ranging from zero to eighteen per case, and varied in their seriousness.

A rigorous data registration protocol and contracts with the municipalities regulated the study. In Denmark, no central approval procedure exists for this type of project. All data were collected according to the protocol, contracts, Danish data legislation, European data regulation (GDPR) and institutional regulation of University College of Copenhagen. Explicit consent was obtained from all management and practitioners before any interviews, observations and audio recordings. The consent process aimed to carefully clarify that the participants did not need to participate as a condition of their employment, that they could withdraw at any time: and that their responses would be anonymised. All personal data were removed during the project.

The National Board of Social Services funded the study.

Results

Upon analysing the empirical data, three general heuristics emerged in all cases, but other more case-specific heuristics also appeared. In this article, we discuss only the three general heuristics:

1. Form and maintain the first impression.
2. When in doubt or disagreement, wait.
3. Avoid parents' resistance.

Heuristic 1: Form and maintain the first impression

When a child is referred to a family department, social workers try to get an impression of whether there may be reasons to intervene and, if so, how to do so. One of the most common cues is whether the home situation is disorganised and in need of structure through counselling:

We believe that the family needs support to make their everyday life clear and structured so that some regular routines are created that facilitate everyday life and make it less hectic. (Start of case file)

In this case, which concerned a young boy aged fourteen, the initial screening and the following assessment led to a decision to establish family counselling with parental consent in the home, which was described as dysfunctional in the records. In addition, to support the family over the next three years, the family counsellor offered the department deeper insights into the family. During this period, the department received new referrals about the boy's sexual actions towards siblings and held statutory child interviews. However, this did not lead to revisions in the initial intervention decision.

Another example of maintaining the first impression was a case of a ten-year-old boy, the oldest of four children in a family with a cultural background other than Danish. The boy had reported that his mother treated him violently, and it was decided to deal with the acute risk by moving the boy and his father to a hotel for a short period. After that, the family received family counselling at home once again. Like the previous case, the first impression of a dysfunctional family that only needed counselling was 'stuck' in later casework, even though there had been incidents of violence in this case. Furthermore, the cultural differences led to a more cautious approach to intervention.

In a third case, the first impression and subsequent assessment and interventions focussed on a mother's alcohol abuse, her son's smelling of smoke and urine, his absence from school and his problematic relationship with his mother. In the case file eighteen months after the first impression, it was written:

As seen from the file, [the boy's] mother contacted the department Friday... The mother (seemed) drunk during the conversation and said she could not care for [the boy]. There will be a Rescue Service report over the weekend. They found the mother very drunk, her home in a very unsanitary condition, and herself with a broken foot. I (believe) that the mother is not able to care for [the boy].

During the eighteen months, a social worker tried to persuade the mother to deal with her problems, and attempts were made to aid the family. The boy's difficulties were obvious, but he remained home and referrals increased. The Rescue Service's report led to a temporary placement in care to illustrate how input from external authorities can lead to a revision of the first impression and intervention. However, the initial cues continued to inform subsequent decisions when the boy from a placement, returned home with a safety plan.

The heuristic of composing and maintaining the first impression was found in all fourteen cases. The impression of unstructured family life and the decisions to offer family counselling were maintained, even when parents cancelled meetings, more referrals came in and the department obtained new information. During the interviews, some social workers recognised that they tended to stick to the history and the first impressions of the family, particularly that of mothers:

For me, it is about when I'm lining up the history in a case. Then I go back. I think that can also say something about what that child has been in, even if the mother is somewhere else now. It says something about what that child brings along, so I think it makes sense to look at whether the mother has previously been abusive because the boy might have seen her (being) abusive. (Group interview of statutory workers)

However, they also said that the impression was 'nuanced' during team meetings, but this was rarely reflected in records or observations. Instead, the initial impressions and decisions to offer counselling were upheld at team meetings, except for acute situations in which information on blatant neglect or abuse—as in referrals from Rescue Services, police or psychiatric acute care providers—led to a shift, often temporary, towards out-of-home placement (Dickens, 2007; Doherty, 2017).

The general heuristic pattern of weighting initial assessments heavily (Hastie and Dawes, 2010) has been described as similar to the 'primacy effect', in which the first example of a particular case is more likely to be recalled. Also, it is connected to 'anchoring' or 'fixed' thinking (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016), adjustment bias (Spratt *et al.*, 2015b; Taylor, 2017a) and confirmation bias (Munro *et al.*, 2016). This pattern has been found to be difficult to control, as decision-makers are largely unaware of their influence (De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015).

We found this heuristic linked to legal requirements for registration and assessment of initial information. It was also linked to the perceived

informal character of processual decisions. Voluntary counselling complies with legal demands for parental cooperation and supports the department's judgement of parental resources and attitudes in a low-friction manner. The department avoids formal hearings with parties and redress of decisions. Social workers can argue that they obtained valuable information on the child and simultaneously ensure that case handling complies with legal obligations to provide consent and documentation. Even though the law requires child interviews, they do not lead to changes in impressions and decisions, mainly when the child is younger than fifteen.

Furthermore, the heuristic links to how support measures are organised locally. In both municipalities, family treatment is contained in the department, which makes such interventions cheaper than other measures. It also makes them more accessible, thereby making them preferable amongst managers. This preference was a common norm at team meetings. This pattern of satisficing reflected the department hierarchy and social workers' sensitivity to managers' opinions.

The heuristic makes sense in daily practice, but it can lead to a lack of transparency and a risk of overlooking the child's needs, voice and rights, and of not evaluating whether the first impression is correct and whether the first measure is helpful.

Heuristic 2: When in doubt or disagreement, wait

Doubt about a child's situation seems to be correlated with an inclination towards gathering more information and hesitating to act. In the case of a boy, age thirteen, with a twin brother and a traumatised mother with a refugee background, the department, after two and a half years of casework, decided to carry out more psychological examination and assessment:

The department has received an assessment of the children's schoolwork..., which has given rise to more significant concern(s). It is considered essential that the current assessment is supplemented with identifying parental resources and any difficulties in parenting. Psychological examination and parental competence assessment should be carried out in parallel with the child assessment and used as a tool to initiate the proper measures. (Excerpt from case file)

The psychological examination concluded that the mother was reluctant to support the boys properly for cultural reasons, adding that the boys could benefit from placement at a boarding school. However, a family counsellor contradicted these results and suggested local measures instead. The department was left with a lot of information that did not help in reaching a final decision.

A case involving a thirteen-year-old girl started with hospitalisation in a psychiatric ward and referral to the family department, leading to family counselling for three years. The case was followed up regularly, often only

with the mother. The case file indicated that the department drew some conclusions about the case, but was unsure of which direction to take:

The family dynamics are horrible, and the family does not do anything together... [The girl] eats by herself, while the rest of the family sits together, without, however, actually talking to each other, as they are basically always sitting with a phone, iPad or computer. The thesis is that the family dynamics are responsible for the challenges and that [the girl] would profit from getting a parttime foster family nearby and become a part of a well-functioning family... (Excerpt from case file)

The department decided to conduct a child assessment. By this time, nearly four years had elapsed, and social workers remained uncertain about what to do despite a plethora of information.

In some cases, information collection was based on an effort to ‘get anything we can act on’.

Social worker: We had a meeting with mom, where she got the message and yes—I’m just thinking—then it’s always: Can you or can’t I wait? After all, it is a family that has waited a lot because the treatment ... was also a sort of investigation, where I thought we were getting something we could act on, but we haven’t got that... [The provider] has provided an assessment that doesn’t contain anything we can act on—it’s really (worrisome). (Observation notes, team meeting)

In such cases, the department wanted to ensure that if the parents ceased to collaborate, there would be solid documentation to convince the Children and Youth Committee to make a decision to place the child. The manager’s style and attitudes were pivotal here:

It also has a lot to do with who decides. When we present a case to the committee, we need to have investigated everything, said our last manager. Right now, we have a completely different manager, so now we’re not collecting so much information. She wants us to put cases before the committee. (Group interview, social workers)

Heuristic 2 was observed in all cases, particularly where the child and family had a background other than Danish. The heuristic is to postpone action by deciding to gather more information, a pattern generally acknowledged in social work (Munro, 2010, 2005, 2008) so-called ‘treading-water type of cases’ (Doherty, 2017). The heuristic is more likely to occur when the level of perceived risk is high or in cases in which information is uncertain or the case is unfamiliar (Hackett and Taylor, 2014; De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015). It can be connected to anxiety and doubt (Kettle, 2017) and has been described as ‘bolstering’ (Keddell and Hyslop, 2020) and ‘deflection strategies’ (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Platt and Turney, 2014).

The heuristic is related to the legal requirements for documentation to ensure objectivity, substantiation and legal time limits. It makes sense to

gather as much relevant information as possible before deciding what to do. Further, keeping a case open, shows that the department is working on it, and social workers avoid criticism for not doing anything. However, it can be seen as the department's creation of space for itself on behalf of the parents'—and children's—right to support, transparency and to appeal decisions.

Managers' opinions influenced the decision to continue collecting information. During meetings, the search for further information was approved, demonstrating the impact of a hierarchical, management-led meeting structure. Also, it was noted that decisions were pushed upward in the organisation if they involved expensive measures or were expected to be executed without parents' consent.

The most apparent bias was reflected in delays. Parents and children sometimes participated in a series of meetings without any changes in interventions, even though the information about a child's situation indicated that prompt action was needed.

Heuristic 3: Avoid parents' resistance

The most intrusive decision is to move a child without parental consent. Social workers are aware of the serious nature of such a move, as well as the legal rights of parents and their children, and focused on parents' desire to collaborate in all fourteen cases from the first contact. Collaboration is viewed as a good thing for the child almost routinely, and action is perceived as common ground when parents express a willingness to collaborate:

You can also sense it in the child if the parents support the decision: 'Do you feel good where you are now?' ... I think it increases the child's well-being when the parents support it. (Focus group interview—low-level managers)

However, this perception can change along the way when social workers get suspicious as to whether the parents' collaboration is genuine. We call this 'potential resistance' to distinguish it from explicit resistance, for instance, by openly invoking their rights to withdraw consent, seek access to documents, arguments or to submit an appeal. Potential resistance, such as cancelling meetings and appointments, does not seem to lead the worker to seek clarification of parents' attitudes, but rather to try not to provoke the parents into explicitly resisting the measure by blurring or obscuring the—potential—opposition. In the case of a ten-year-old girl living in chaotic conditions, the mother began to cancel or fail to appear at scheduled meetings and to deny alcoholism issues that she had earlier admitted to having. However, these signs did not lead to initiatives to

clarify the situation. Instead, they led to obfuscation of the potential lack of consent:

The mother is contacted by phone and informed that I will now check her and the child to see if the child gets the care she needs. The mother seems to agree with this. (Excerpt from case file)

The worker maintained a sense of collaboration and thus prevented the parents from refusing contact. In another case, a mother wanted to know about the department's plans and reasons:

The mother question(ed) whether the aim of carrying out an additional child assessment is that the municipality wants to place [the girl] outside the home. The social worker explains that as things are now, it is the department's preliminary assessment that placement would be the best for [the girl], but that nothing is certain until the assessment is finished. (Excerpt from case file)

The department's goal was to place the girl outside the home, but the subject was avoided during the conversation. In this way, the worker sought to avoid explicit opposition.

Another strategy was to negotiate services, for instance, compensation for transportation costs or reimbursement of living expenses during contact visits. In one case, a couple of divorced parents refused to have contact visits with their daughter at home, and the father often did not cooperate in establishing contact visits at the institution. The department decided to cover his transportation expenses to facilitate cooperation. In another case, a boy had been placed in care, then returned home and then placed again. The parents expressed an intention to withdraw their consent, which prompted the social worker to offer supplementary education for the boy in the family's language and religion.

Unlike potential resistance, explicit resistance occurred when parents expressed that they did not wish to collaborate, withdrew their consent, and cut off contact. In these circumstances, negotiating was insufficient, and the department had to decide whether intervention without consent was justified or to close the case. If the department found that intervention was necessary, it had to delay the decision until it had obtained adequate further information to justify its action.

In a case, day-care personnel pointed out the significant difficulties a four-year-old girl was having. After a period in which the department was providing support, the worker reported:

The mother is marked by resistance throughout the meeting. She expresses that she does not understand the department's concern for her family and, at the same time, says she does not want to collaborate in any way. She says she does not have time and cannot see the purpose. She does not trust the municipality. The father doesn't say anything. (Excerpt from case file)

A statement was required from the day-care, which found no serious risk. The department closed the case and alerted the day-care institution because some social workers were seriously worried. However, this case and two other closed cases were reopened when new information surfaced a few months later.

The 'Avoid parents' resistance' heuristic was found in all cases. When the social workers were convinced of a child's needs and the parents exhibited signs of potential resistance, the social workers continued the intervention and attempted to re-establish collaboration by turning a blind eye to the opposition by obfuscating communication or negotiating services. When resistance became explicit, the case was closed, or attempts were made to substantiate a placement without consent.

Research indicates that potential collaboration in dealing with a family's situation is based on perceptions of non-compliance (Keddell and Hyslop, 2020), emotions (De Bortoli and Dolan, 2015), attitudes (Davidson-Arad and Benbenishty, 2016) and seeking consensus with families (Nyathi, 2018). Social workers faced with parental hostility can 'freeze', a reaction that hampers their ability to reflect and act clearly (Platt and Turney, 2014). Perhaps paradoxically, reaching a tipping point sometimes can come as a relief for the social worker because it allows for dissipation of anxiety (Kettle, 2017).

The heuristic of avoiding parents' resistance concerns the legal requirement that collaboration with parents must be sought. Intervention requires consent or a documented, obvious, serious risk that cannot be remedied via home support. This indicates a gap between situations where the legal framework requires decisions to be made with consent, and situations where decisions can be made without consent. In practice, the gap leads to obfuscation, negotiation, gathering more information or closing cases, with the child's needs remaining unmet. Even though child interviews took place in many cases, they did not seem to challenge the heuristic. The heuristic to avoid parents' resistance can be understood as satisficing when management and colleagues encouraged decisions that led to a blurring of communication or negotiation of services instead of seeking more information. Such decisions can be connected to local, informal objectives to avoid placement and maintain the budget.

Also, the heuristic created insecurity for families and conflicted with legal rights of consent and transparency requirements. In some cases, a strong focus on collaboration led to decisions on insufficient legal grounds, prolonging the time before relevant support could begin.

Conclusions and perspectives

Our goal was to examine the situated and dynamic character of decision-making, in particular how the environment shapes heuristic rules, cues

and triggers. We identified (at least) three heuristics that helped decision-makers ignore certain types of information and emphasise others. The first heuristic led social workers to form and maintain their first impressions even though cases developed in other directions. It is linked to legal requirements for registration and assessment, the perceived informal character of procedural decisions and the preference for locally based family treatment in the department hierarchy. The second heuristic, postponing action to gather more information, is connected to the legal requirements for documentation and assessment and to the hierarchy in the local organisation that often pushes towards decisions to collect more information which can be made with less effort than intervention decisions. The third heuristic employed parents' potential or explicit resistance as crucial cues in decision-making. Potential resistance led to obfuscation and negotiating with parents, whereas explicit resistance led to gathering more information or closing cases. Both types of resistance were linked to the strict legal criteria and procedures for intervention without consent, and to informal objectives within the local organisation to avoid placement and control the budget.

Heuristics help social workers and managers effectively dispel some of the many varied requirements and uncertainties related to meeting a child's needs. They are connected to satisficing strategies as a natural response to the environment's legal and organisational factors and can delay final decisions. Thus, they can lead to a lack of transparency, insecurity for families and children, and decisions taken on insufficient legal grounds.

Our study confirms the importance of legal and organisational structures for understanding the use of heuristics as pointed out in the ecological framework (Benbenishty and Fluke, 2021). It also points to the need to ensure transparent, timely and learning-oriented feedback to practitioners on their decisions (Munro et al., 2016; Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Kettle, 2017; Taylor, 2017a,b). More research in heuristics through the lens of the satisficing principle is needed. Such knowledge is crucial when implementing legal reforms and new organisational structures in order to ensure actual improvement for children and families and to avoid unconsciously replicating problematic patterns of decision-making.

A limitation of our analysis is that we did not consider the individual attitudes of social workers or characteristics of cases. Some empirical limitations are also evident: Only two municipalities participated, although they share many similarities with other municipalities. Further, we only focused on describing heuristics and did not make comparisons with other decision strategies (Marewski et al., 2010). We could not prescribe different kinds of action (Luan et al., 2011; Helm and Roesch-Marsh, 2017). We followed these cases only over a limited period; and we barely examined case-specific factors to assess professional judgement, evidence-based practice, discretion, risk assessment or use of methods

and tools. Still, following Flyvbjerg in our study of the cases, the in-depth analyses pointed to the three heuristics as being generalisable to most social work practices with children in Denmark and maybe elsewhere (Flyvbjerg, 2009).

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