

# A routine matter?

Organizing knowledge and decision-making at the frontline of public services

Anne Mette Møller  
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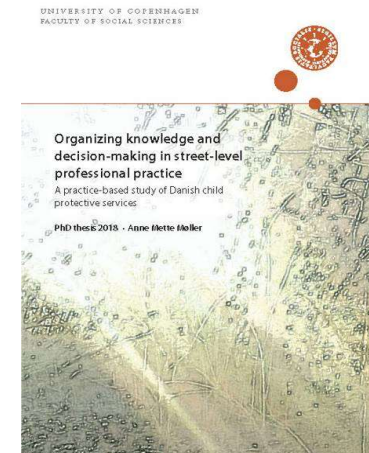
RURU/KP seminar  
School of Management  
University of St. Andrews

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



# About me

- MSc in Sociology, PhD in Political Science (Public Administration)
- PhD thesis (2018):  
*Organizing knowledge and decision-making in street-level professional practice. A practice-based study of Danish child protective services*  
(Available for download on [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net))
- Next: Assistant Professor, Crown Prince Frederik Center for Public Leadership, Aarhus University (1 February 2019)



# Background

- Public professionals = important decision-makers
- Autonomy & discretion based on professional knowledge
- Professional knowledge increasingly questioned... e.g. calls for EBP

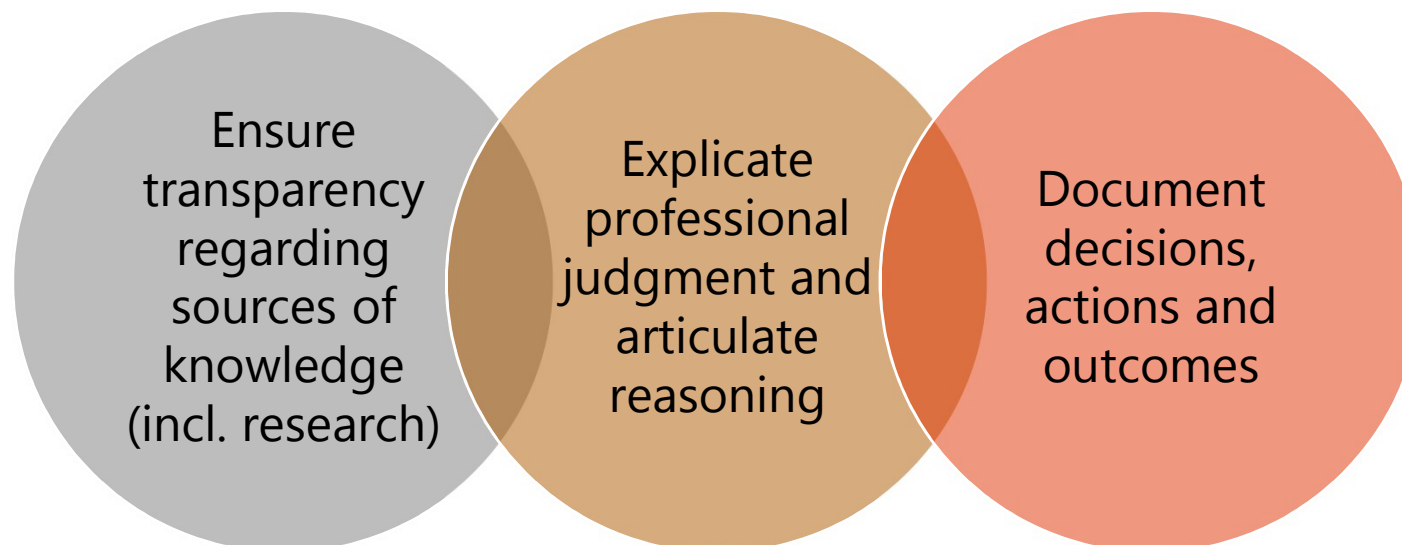




# EBP legacy: “Explicit professionalism”

- Transformation of EBP agenda in Danish child protective services: From evidence-based interventions to “knowledge-based practice”
- New normative standards for professional practice

**Figure 1. Three aspects of explicit professionalism**



# Research question

How is knowledge mobilized to inform professional judgment and decision-making in everyday practice, and how does this relate to current debates in the field (i.e. Danish child protective services)?

# Research design, methods & data

- Interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012)
- Organizational ethnography (Ybema et al. 2009)

## Local child protective agencies

### **Ethnographic fieldwork (shadowing)**

- approx. 150 hours over 14 months

### **29(+) semi-structured interviews**

- managers & frontline professionals

### **Documents and artefacts**

- e.g. strategies, checklists

## Policy arena (organizational field)

### **10 conversational interviews**

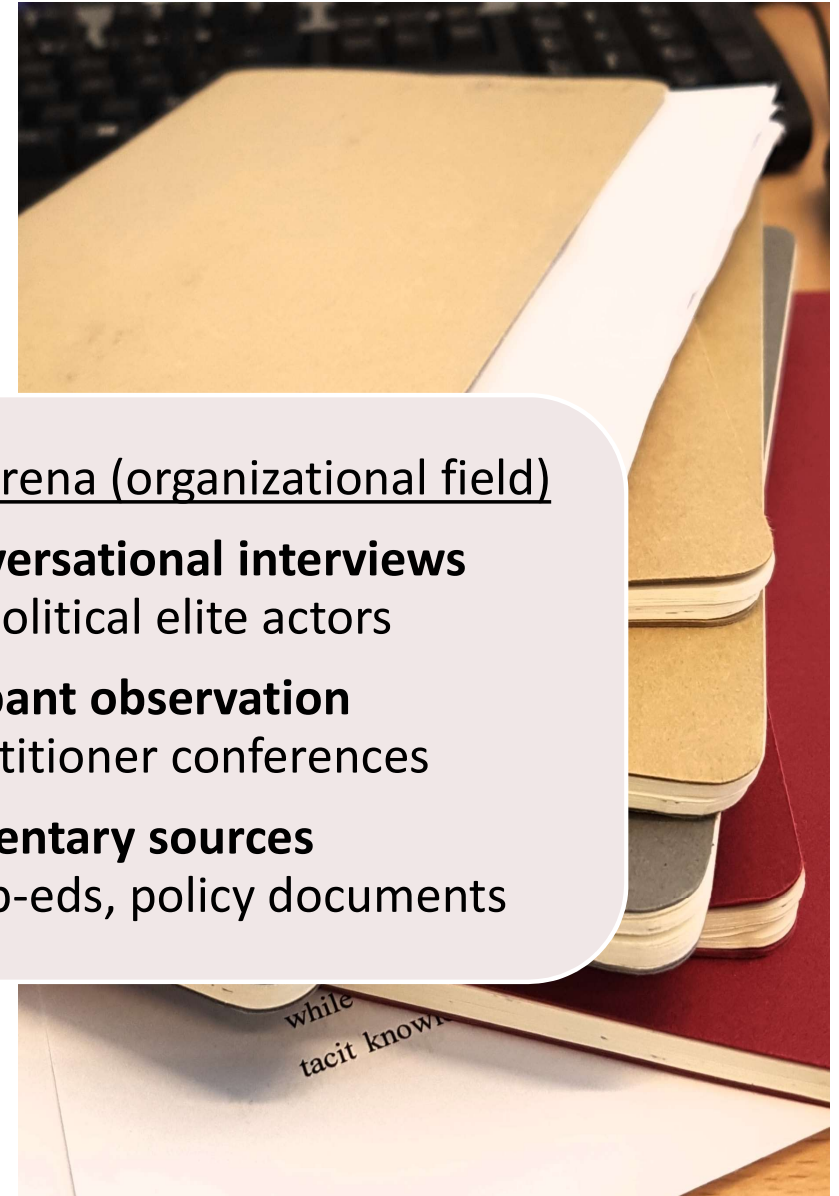
- with political elite actors

### **Participant observation**

- 7 practitioner conferences

### **Documentary sources**

- e.g. op-eds, policy documents



# Theoretical & methodological underpinnings

- Practices as primary building blocks of social reality
  - practices as main unit of analysis
  - actions ("doings and sayings") as main unit of observation

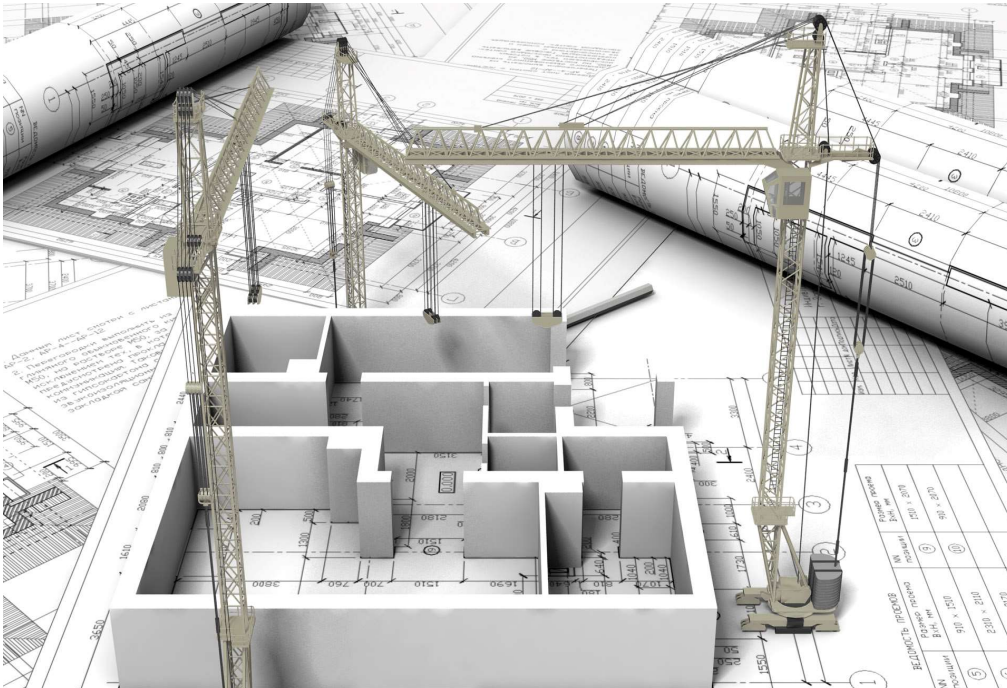
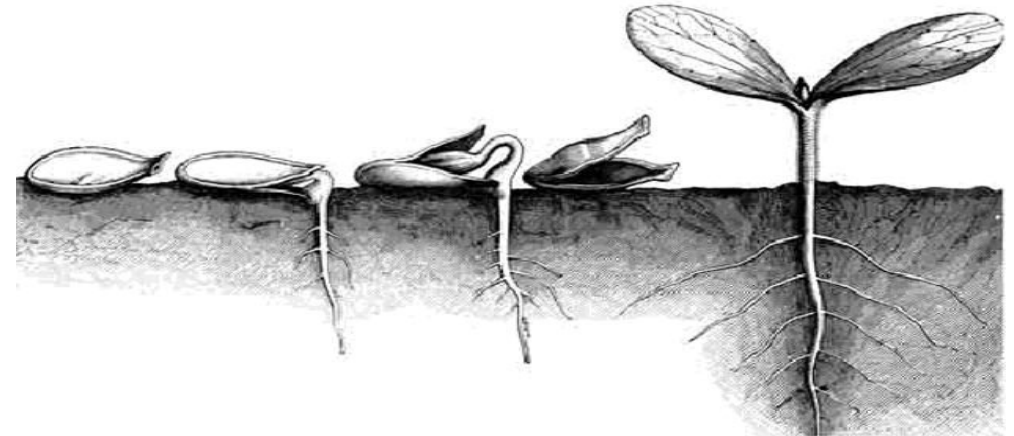
(Feldman & Orlikowski 2011, Schatzki 2002)
- Organizations as they happen: the carrying out of an organization's constituent practices (routines) in real time

(Feldman & Pentland 2003, Schatzki 2005)
- Practice-based knowing, CoPs as reservoirs of knowledge

(Brown & Duguid 1991, 2000, Cook & Brown 1999, Gherardi 2001, Lave and Wenger 1991)



# Two metaphors for knowledge





# Findings



# Overview of findings

1. Decision-making as direction-making
2. Collective uses of discretion
3. Deliberative organizational routines
4. Mobilizing knowledge in everyday practice
5. Practicing explicit professionalism

# 1. Decision-making as direction-making

## Conditions:

- Increasingly detailed regulation – but still high level of discretion
- Multi-faceted uncertainty – problem, process, solution
- Co-produced services – outcome depends on client engagement

## Consequences:

- Interventions as entryways (timely vs. targeted interventions)
- Continuous adjustment → “direction-making”



## 2. Collective uses of discretion

- Everyday practice characterized by ongoing discussion of cases
- Decision-making processes highly social & collective
- Collective case discussions serve several functions:
  - Illuminating cases (bringing participants' knowledge into play)
  - Sharing responsibility (alleviate "burden of discretion")
  - Providing emotional support (physical and mental health)
  - Filtering idiosyncratic judgments (gut-feeling or just feeling?)

*"There are no caseworkers who sit on their own and reject something that would require professional judgment."*

Coordinator, Agency A

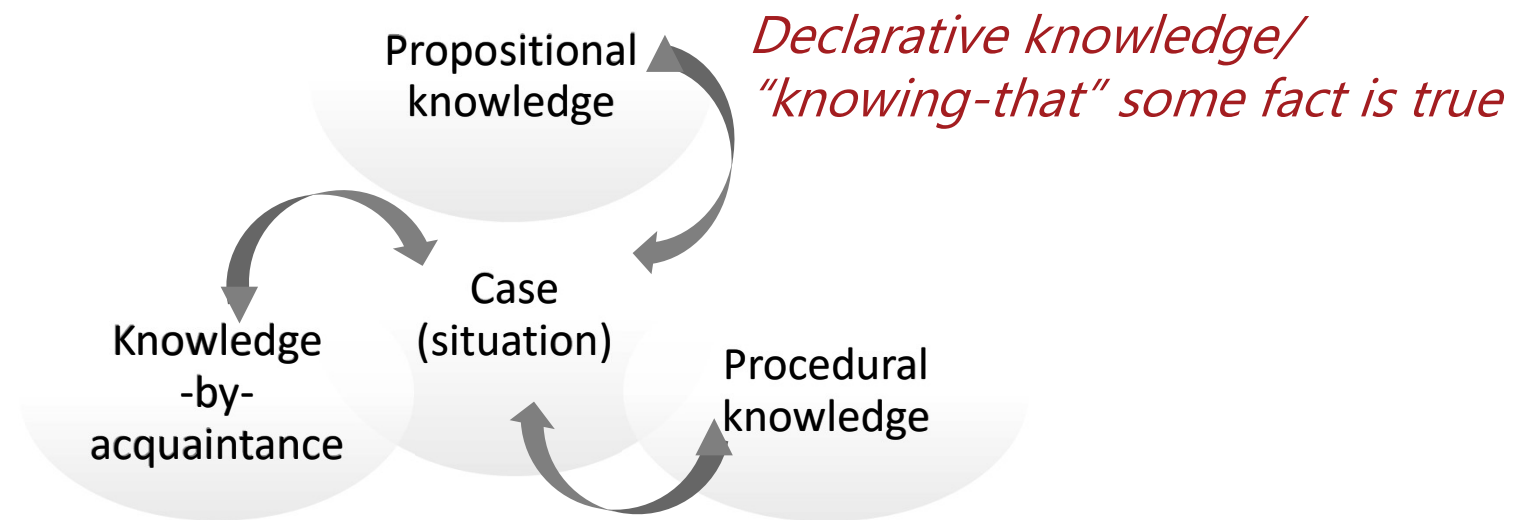
### 3. Deliberative organizational routines

- Discussions underpinned by *deliberative organizational routines*
  - More or less structured venues for mobilizing and discussing knowledge among professionals - “purposeful deliberations”
  - Main organizational “knowledge infrastructure”
  - Direction-making not confined to formal decision-making routines!

Deliberative routine	Participants
<b>“Daily rounds”/checking in</b>	Coordinator and professionals (ad hoc)
<b>Individual case reviews</b>	Coordinator and individual professionals
<b>Regular case discussion meetings</b>	Coordinator, team members, sometimes other professionals (internal or external)
<b>Ad hoc case discussion meetings</b>	Professionals involved in the case, coordinator and/or service manager
<b>Formal decision-making meetings</b>	Varies between the three agencies

## 4a. Mobilizing knowledge in everyday practice

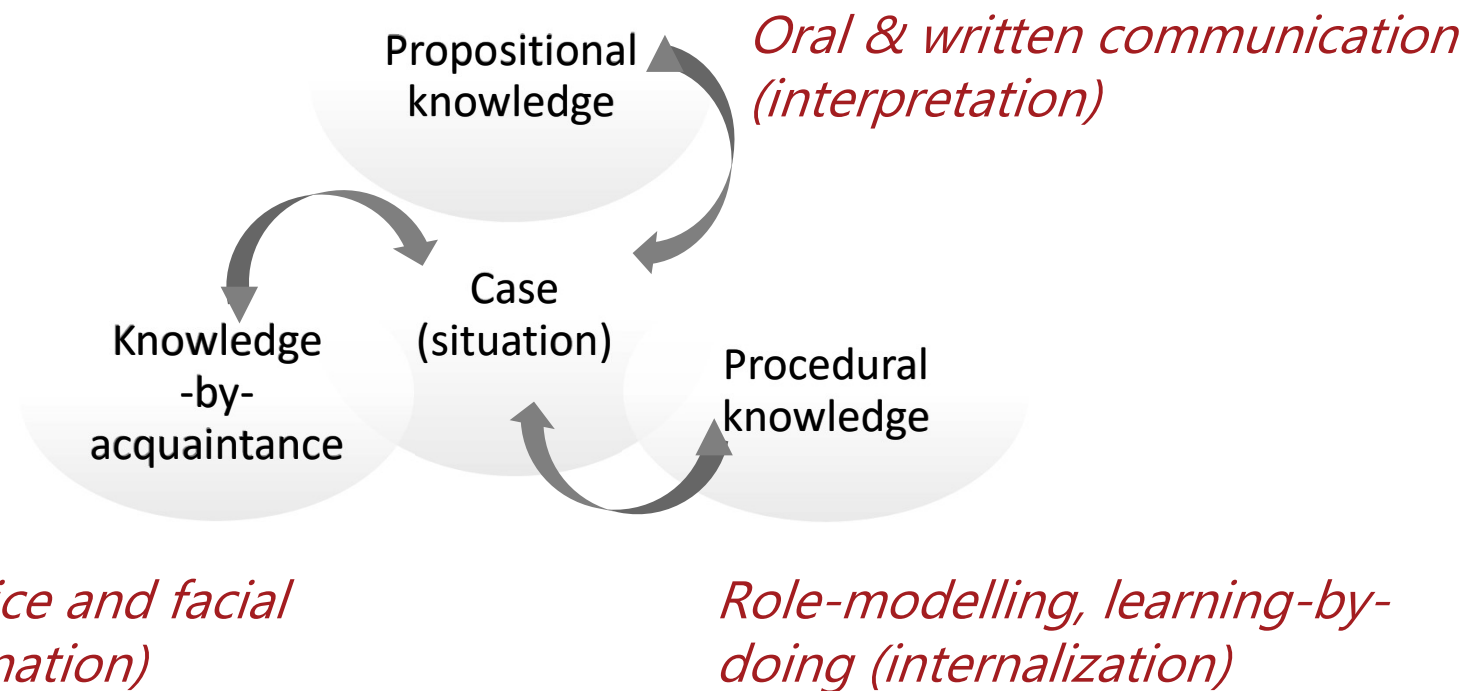
- Three basic forms of knowledge mobilized during deliberations
- All have tacit + explicit dimensions (Tsoukas vs. Nonaka)





## 4b. Modes of knowledge mobilization

- Different forms of knowledge → different modes of mobilization



# Example: Propositional knowledge

- The need for interpretation

Caseworkers' weekly team meeting. A young caseworker needs to make a binding decision regarding the amount of contact between a child in foster care and its biological parents. Several caseworkers offer their opinion on the matter, but do not agree. After a while, the coordinator breaks in:

'This is really about our lack of knowledge. We have studies that tell us that the children need to be shielded in the new attachment [with the foster parents], and others which say that the attachment [with the biological parents] must be strengthened and is crucial to the new attachment. This is why we waver. This gives us some trouble. And the Center for Foster Care has a different opinion.'

(Field notes, September 2016)

# Example: Filtering propositional knowledge

- What do we really know?

As the family therapist talks, the coordinator notes the facts of the case on a big poster, so that they are visible to everyone during the discussion.

Well into her presentation, the family therapist explains that the father suffers from paranoia. The coordinator calmly interrupts her: "Let us not call it paranoia, when it has not been diagnosed", she says. "I will write 'fear of bacteria' instead."

Later, another therapist says that the child in the case is "afraid of the world". The coordinator immediately adds: "And that is your *hypothesis*, because this is not something that she has told you herself."

(Field notes, Agency B)



## Example: Procedural knowledge

- Assisting internalization through role-modelling and articulation

The coordinator and a new caseworker are halfway through an individual case review. They sit in front of the computer screen, the caseworker writes directly in the standardized forms while the coordinator talks her through: *“What he is doing, when he does that [i.e. stops spending the nights at the institution] is that he is actually recalling his consent [to be placed out of home]”*. The coordinator explains that this is important, because the intervention was based on the consent of the young man, and so it cannot be continued against his will. Legally, this means that the intervention must stop. Later, she reminds the caseworker to *“make sure to note that we do not consider the purpose to be fulfilled”*. She explains that this formulation reflects the wording of the law and serves as documentation of the reasoning behind the decision. Hereby, the agency is safeguarded from being accused at a later time of having prematurely terminated an intervention, because the goals stated in the action plan have not yet been fulfilled. The caseworker nods.

(Field notes, September 2016).

# Example: Knowledge-by-acquaintance

- Inviting imagination through body language (un/intended)

Case discussion meeting. A family therapist has been encouraged by the coordinator to share a difficult situation. She takes a deep breath and begins to explain: 'It is about (long pause); I think Father is difficult to handle. She continues: 'There is a lot of resistance. They come in, they will not take their jackets off, they sit like this (she slides down in her chair), they will not answer at all when you try to make small talk, one brother hangs over the table (she leans her upper body forward and let it fall over the table, arms over her head), the other ones sits like this (crosses her arms tightly). (Long pause. Red spots have appeared on her neck, her voice is trembling). The last conversation was very uncomfortable, in terms of having Father in the room, I don't know where to begin in order to explain'. She looks up at the coordinator. 'Start anywhere', the coordinator says, 'it doesn't matter'.

(Field notes, May 2016)

# Routines as enabling and constraining

## Agency A: Small 'expert committee'



"When you sit in the meeting, you have perhaps 10-15 pages, you can only read, and then you need to reach a judgment. You have not met the family, you have not met the child, you cannot; all this information sits with the caseworker."  
(Coordinator, Agency A)

- Professional jurisdictions/struggles
- Material arrangements
- Etc.

## Agency B: Caseworkers' team meeting



The coordinator moves to the final item on the agenda: the formal decision-making routine: '(...) from now on it will be the model that you have wished for, where (...) we can make the decision directly following our discussion (...) One can hope that we do not have to send to much written material, when everyone will hear the discussions that we have here.'  
(Field notes, Agency B)



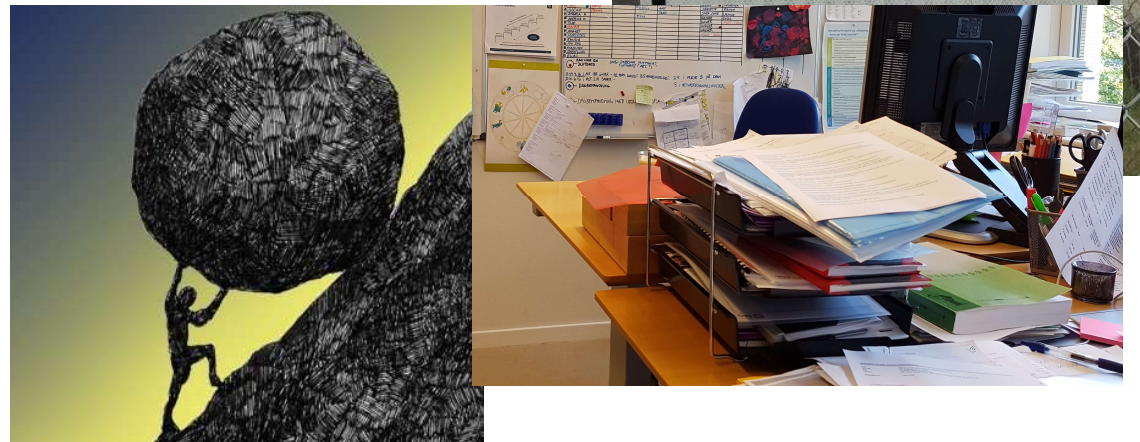
## 5a. Practicing “explicit professionalism”?

- Deliberative routines = venues for mobilizing knowledge
- Coordinators as orchestrators – practicing “explicit professionalism”
- Different routines enable and constrain mobilization of different forms of knowledge

## 5b. Practicing “explicit professionalism”?

Main challenge: fragile communities of practice...

- Many newcomers + increasing complexity of legal framework & process regulation  
→ procedural knowledge dominates deliberations
- High turnover  
→ knowledge-by-acquaintance must be regained
- Mobilization & filtering of propositional knowledge easily neglected...



# Summing up

- If we want to understand how practitioners mobilize knowledge to inform decision-making, we need to look at actual practices
- In the case of child protection, deliberative routines form the main “knowledge infrastructure” that underpins decision-making processes
- Deliberative routines constitute venues for learning – creating and maintaining communities of practice
- Main venues for practicing the ideal of explicit professionalism, which has emerged from the debates around EBP
- These functions of deliberative routines are challenged, as coordinators face a Sisyphean task of building communities of practice over and over

Thank you

[amm@ps.au.dk](mailto:amm@ps.au.dk)

