

Last resort or time for respite? Professionals’ account-making on locked institutional care for youth

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Locked institutional care is often described as an example of a “total institution” (Goffman) where the environment is characterized by a depersonalization process. The risk of negative outcome when youth are placed in institutional care is also well known, and whether treatment is actually provided at these institutions have been questioned. Despite these concerns, institutional care for youth has a long history in social work and seem resistant to change. Locked institutional care can however be described as a last alternative, a “last resort” (Emerson), when social workers need to place a young person in out-of-home care and no other options seem possible. Yet knowing the limits of institutional care, how do professionals’ account for different kinds of decisions when youth are placed in institutional care? In this article we focus on account-making by professionals in the social services and by staff in institutional care when youth are placed in state institutional care in Sweden. The article mainly departs from a re-analysis of group interviews with social workers from four municipalities and staff in four institutional care settings, supplemented by two web-based surveys to the same professional groups. These professionals are both involved in decisions concerning the youth. Staff make ‘micro-decisions’ concerning the daily care while social workers’ have the administrative power to make more ‘authoritative decisions. Account-making for decisions on institutional care can thus be seen as a complex process. The analysis shows how the professional’s argumentations on decisions relate to their different organizational circumstances and professional considerations.