

The Doing of ‘Unaccompanied Minors’: A Franco-German Comparison of Age Assessment and Decision-Making in Child Protection Services

Summary

This sociological study focuses on the age assessment of unaccompanied minors. By adopting a comparative approach, the research investigates the dynamics of interaction, the selection criteria, as well as the working practices and routines in two youth welfare offices, in France and in Germany. The ethnographic fieldwork within these administrations has shown that a clear distinction between minority and majority is often difficult to establish since the social workers are confronted with an uncertain environment: lack of information, approximate decisions, and strategic communication - giving them substantial discretion in the execution of their work. Decision-making processes are thus permeable to external factors (mainly political in nature) and to the intimate convictions of the social workers, revealing the conflicting relationship between migration control and child protection - and the resulting paradoxical injunctions. In this work context, social workers develop practices and justifications that highlight differences between France and Germany. Furthermore, considering the young migrants' trajectories and experiences in the research design provided an intersubjective perspective which enriched the classical street-level bureaucracy research approach. Against this backdrop, the study conceives age assessment as a process of negotiation and co-construction, embedded within institutional, political, and legal structures, in which not only the social workers, but also the interpreters and the young migrants themselves participate in an active and creative manner. Thus, the research waves together ethnographic field research of face-to-face encounters, semi-structured interviews, the analysis of official and institutional statistics, as well as expert interviews.