

Decision Making in Foster Care

**Studiedag 'Besluitvorming in de
Jeugdhulpverlening'
Vrije Universiteit Brussel**

John Fluke, PhD

JUNE 5, 2025



The Kempe Center

FOR THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT
OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT



University of Colorado
Anschutz Medical Campus

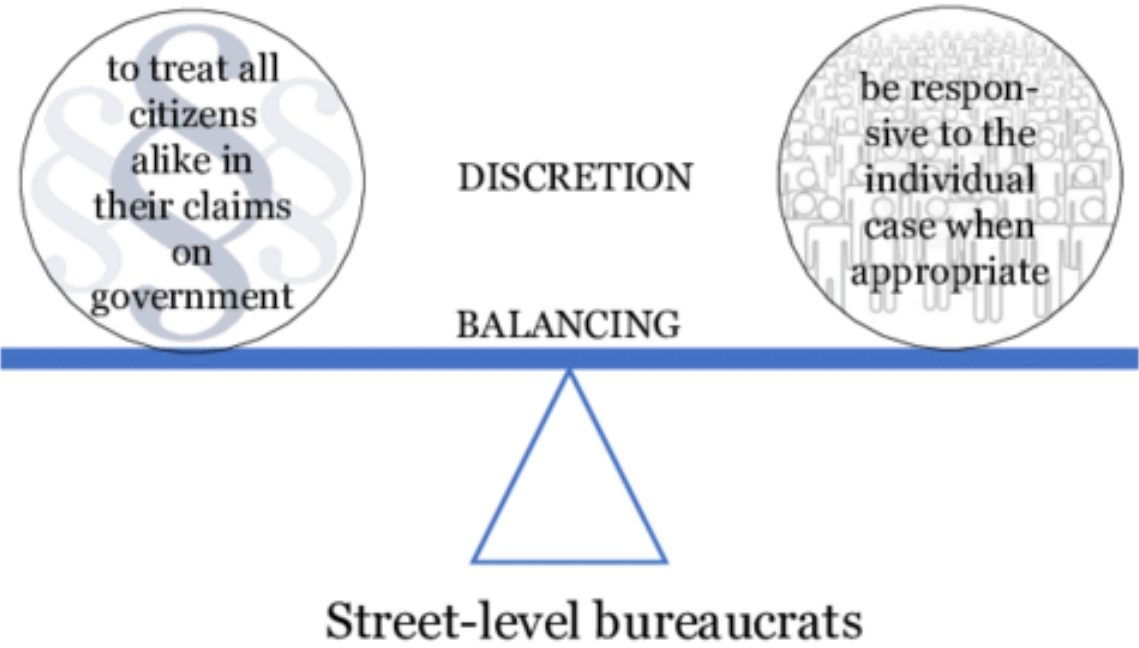


The Kempe
Center



Children's Hospital Colorado

Decision-Making Complexity



The Continuum of Intervention



ASSESSMENT

The diagram illustrates the 'Continuum of Intervention' as a horizontal path. A thick grey vertical bar is positioned in the center. A light yellow horizontal bar is positioned below it. Four red arrows point downwards from the top of the yellow bar to the grey bar. Below the yellow bar, a grey horizontal bar contains the text 'Child protection Decisions/Actions' followed by 'Screening Assessment Placement Reunification'. Below this, a list of two bullet points is shown. The bottom of the slide features a blue background with a yellow horizontal line and a decorative graphic of a person and stars on the right.

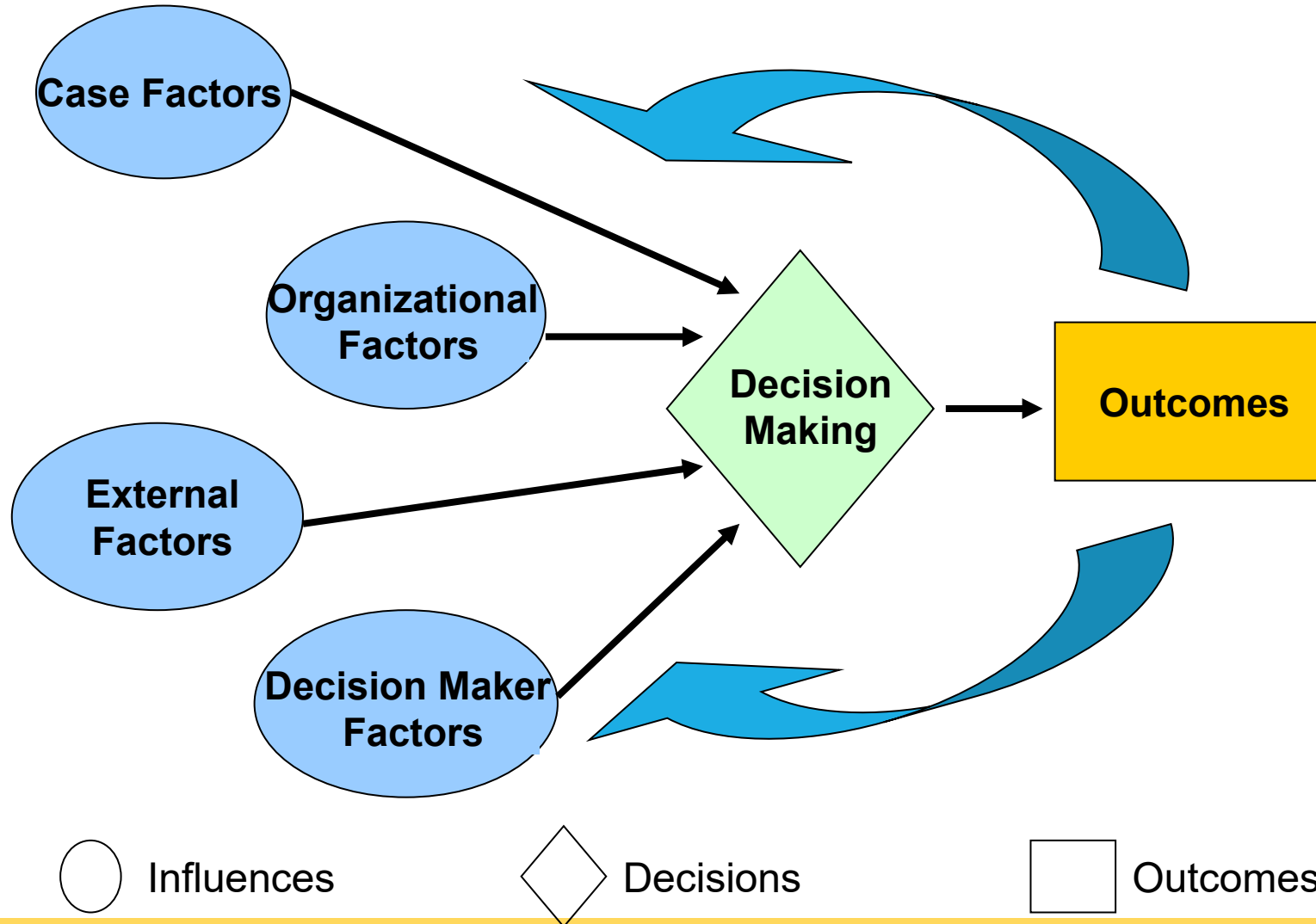
Child protection Screening Assessment Placement Reunification
Decisions/Actions

- Assessments and decisions are made at key points along the child protection continuum
- Each key decision point requires a specific assessment and action

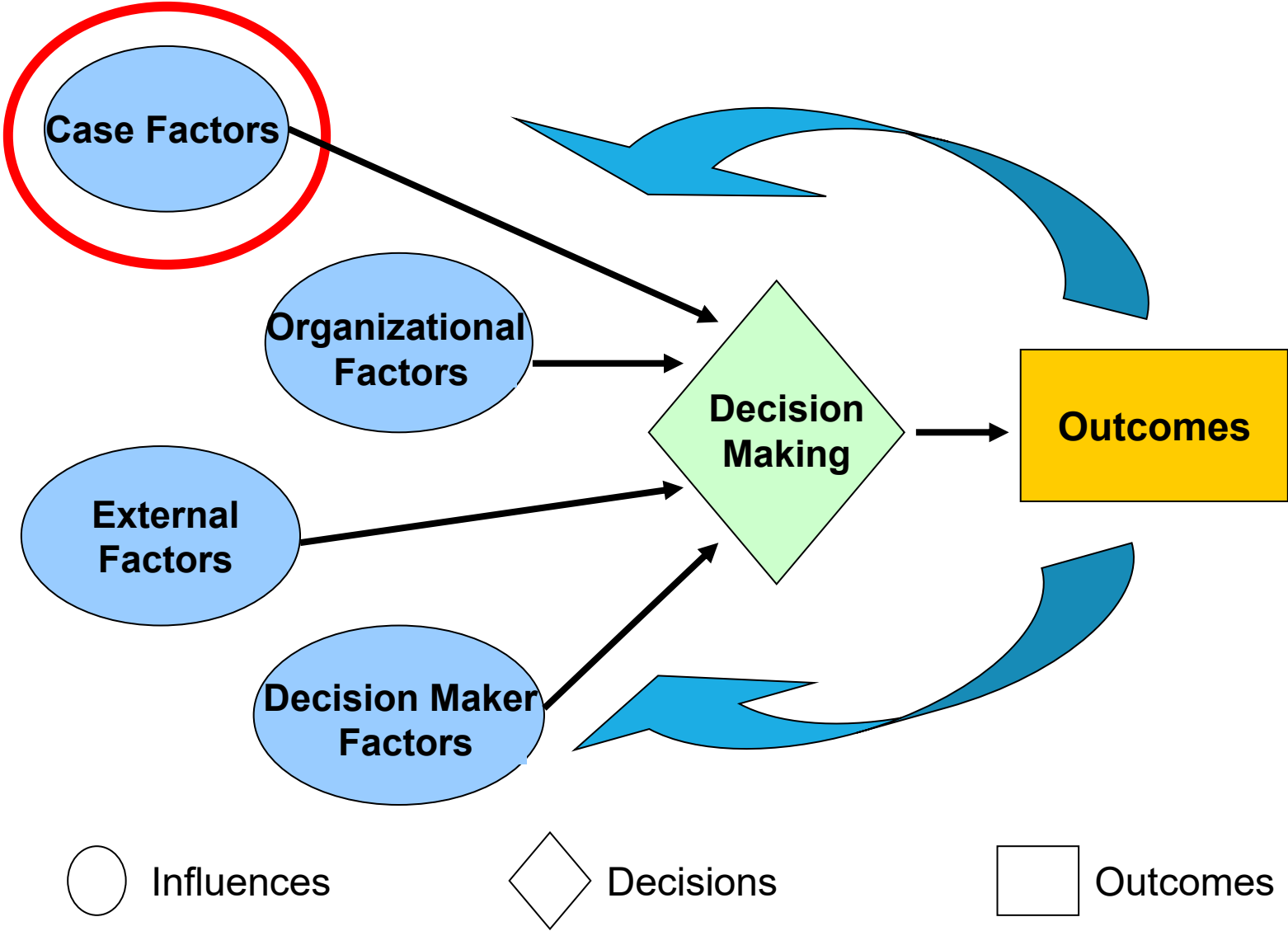


Decision Making Ecology

(Baumann, Dalglish, Fluke & Kern, 2011)



Decision Making Ecology



Case Factors

Type Maltreatment

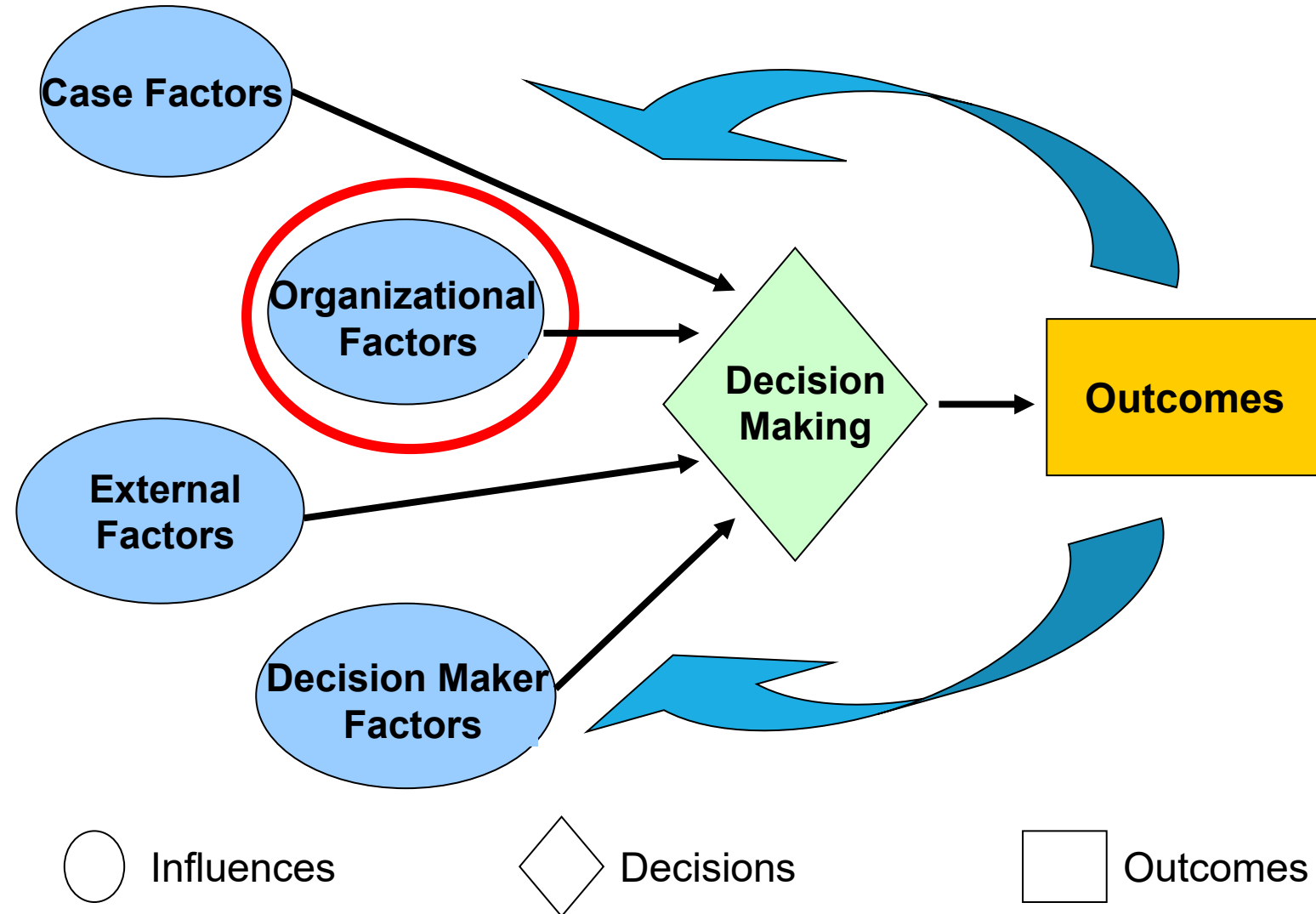
Pattern of Maltreatment

Risk of Harm

Safety

Child and Family Characteristics

Decision Making Ecology



Organizational Factors

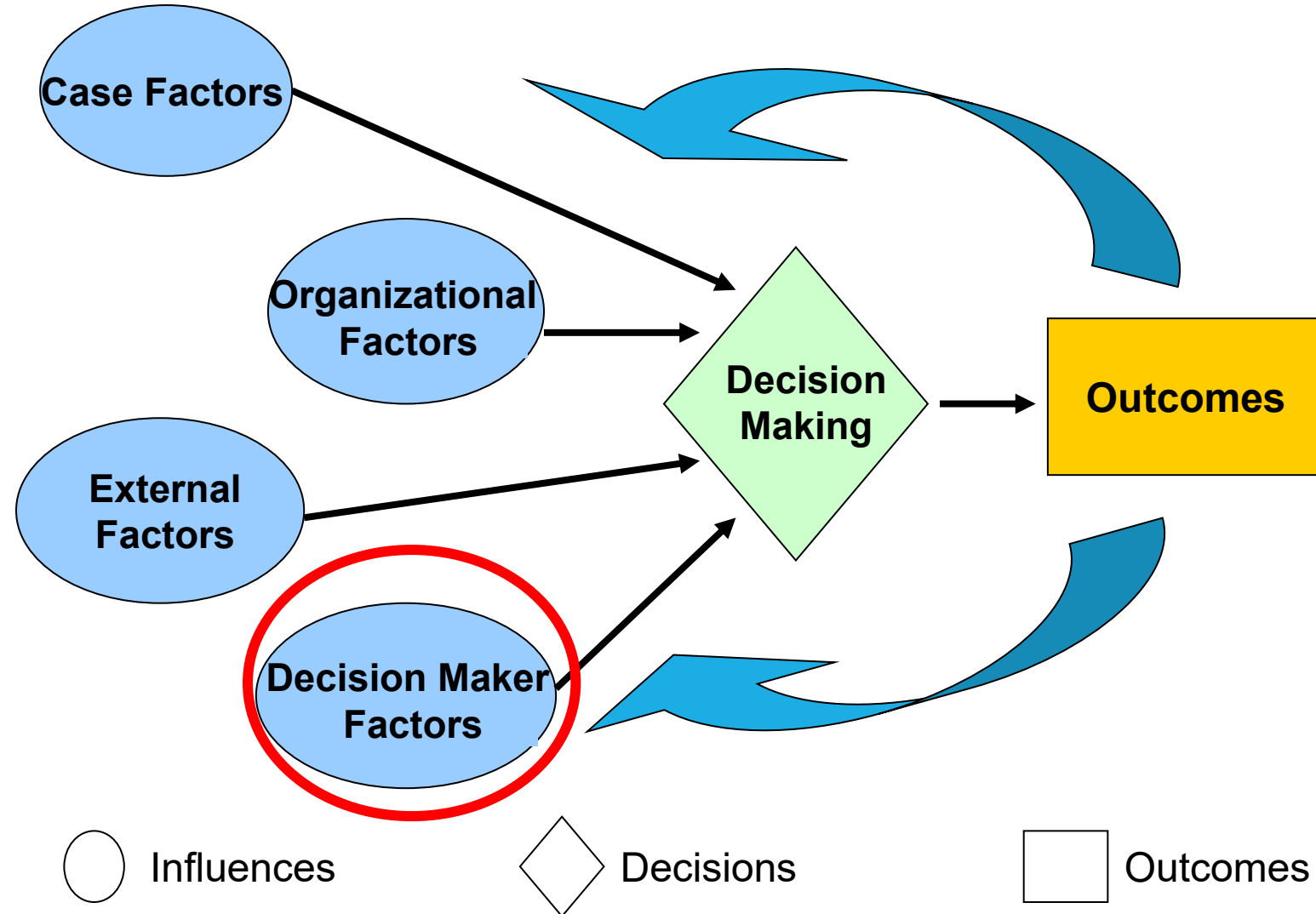
Resources and Caseloads

Bureaucratic Distractions

Support & Unit Cohesion

Policy

Decision Making Ecology



Decision Maker Factors

Experience

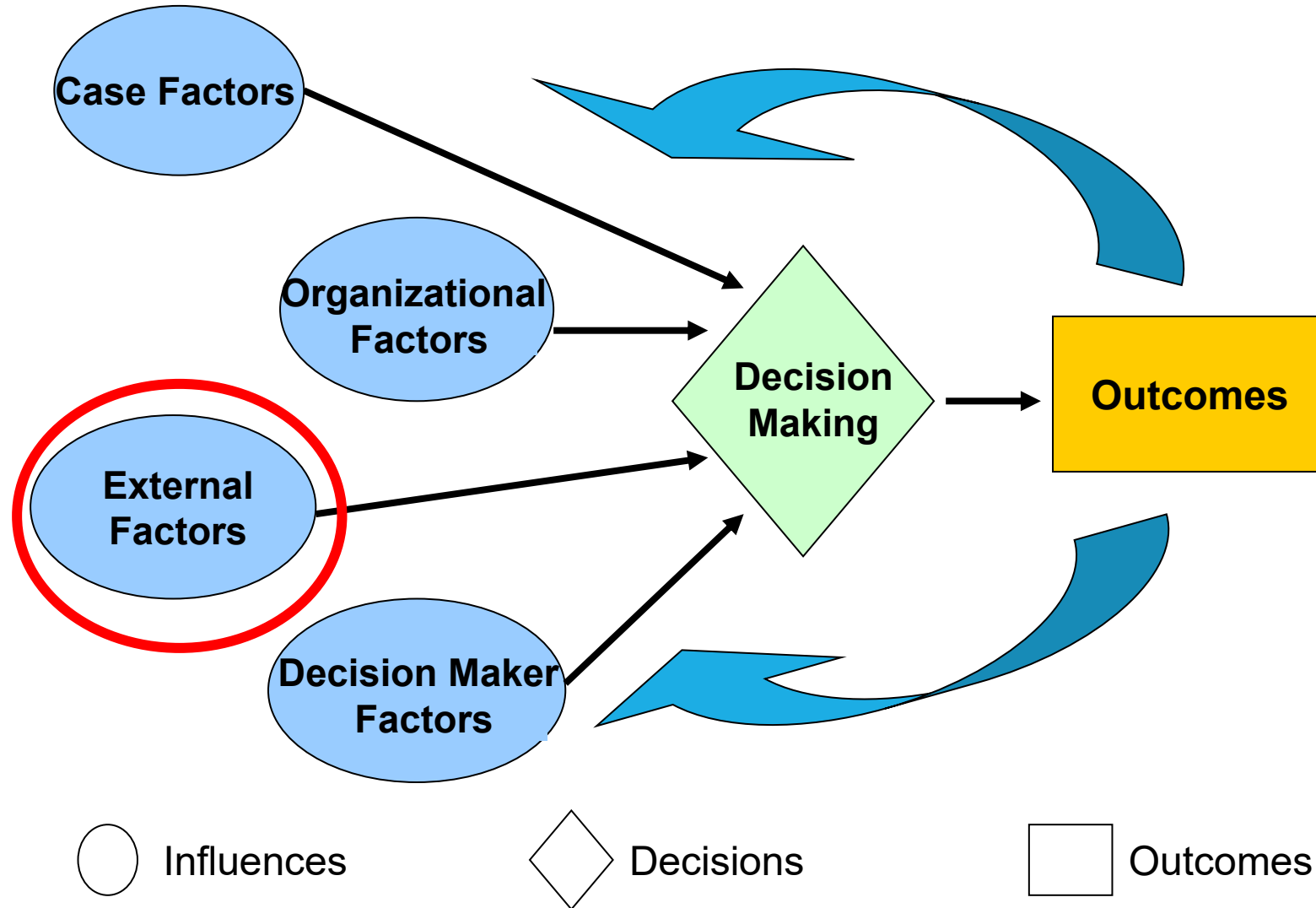
Skills

Values

Comfort with Casework

Orientation (protection vs. preservation)

Decision Making Ecology



External Factors

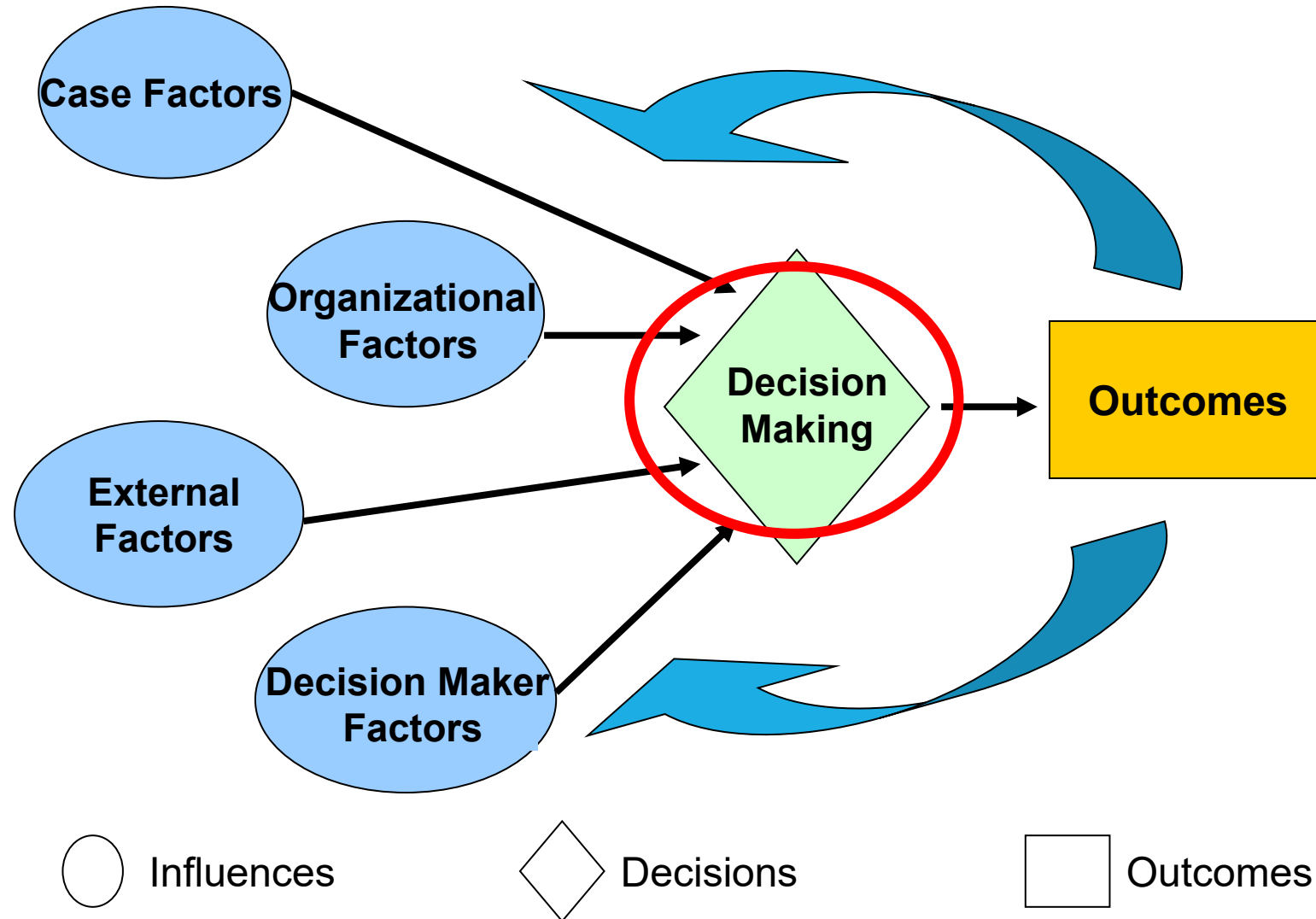
Law

Critical Events

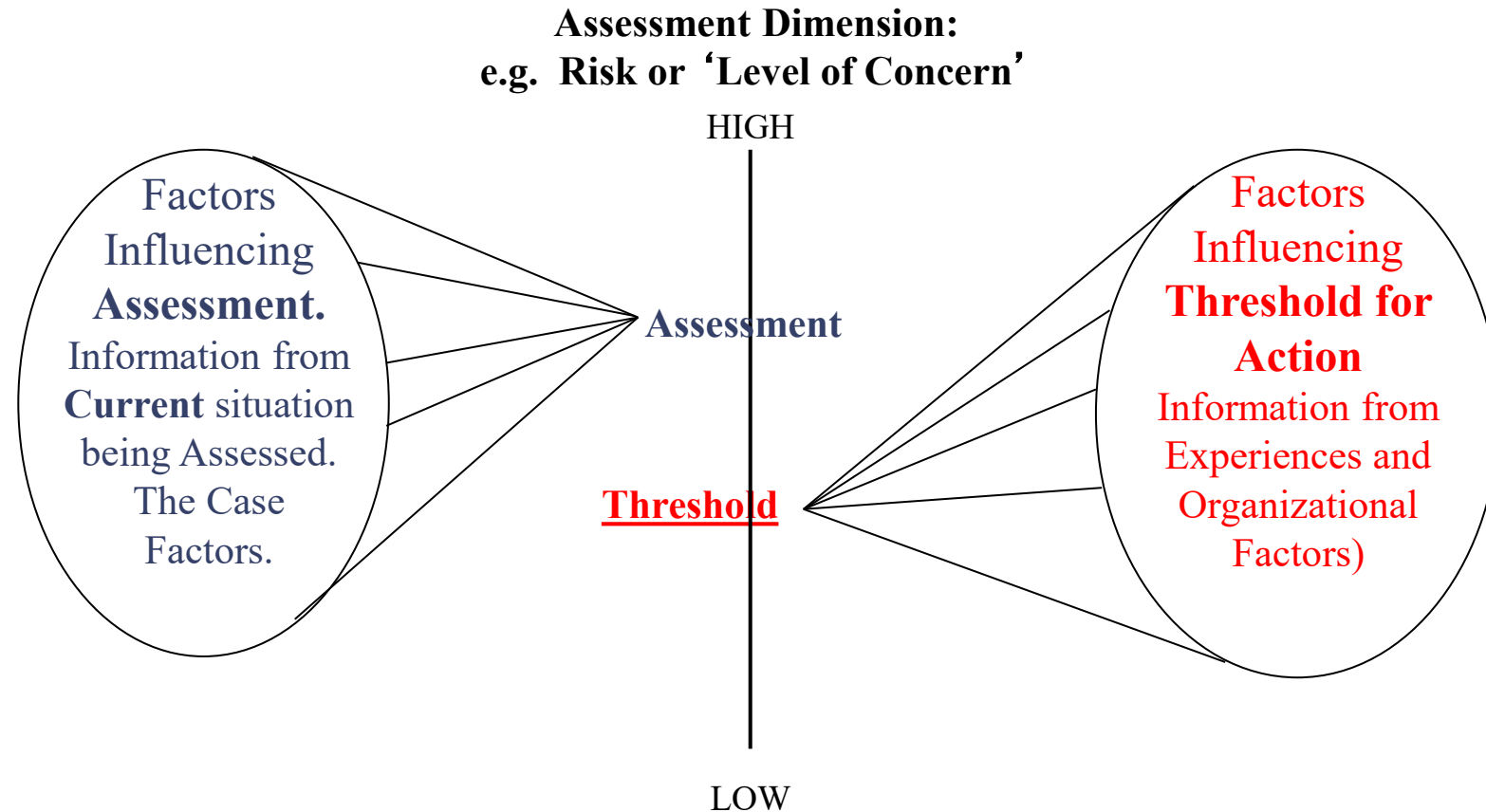
Funding

Community Engagement

Decision Making Ecology



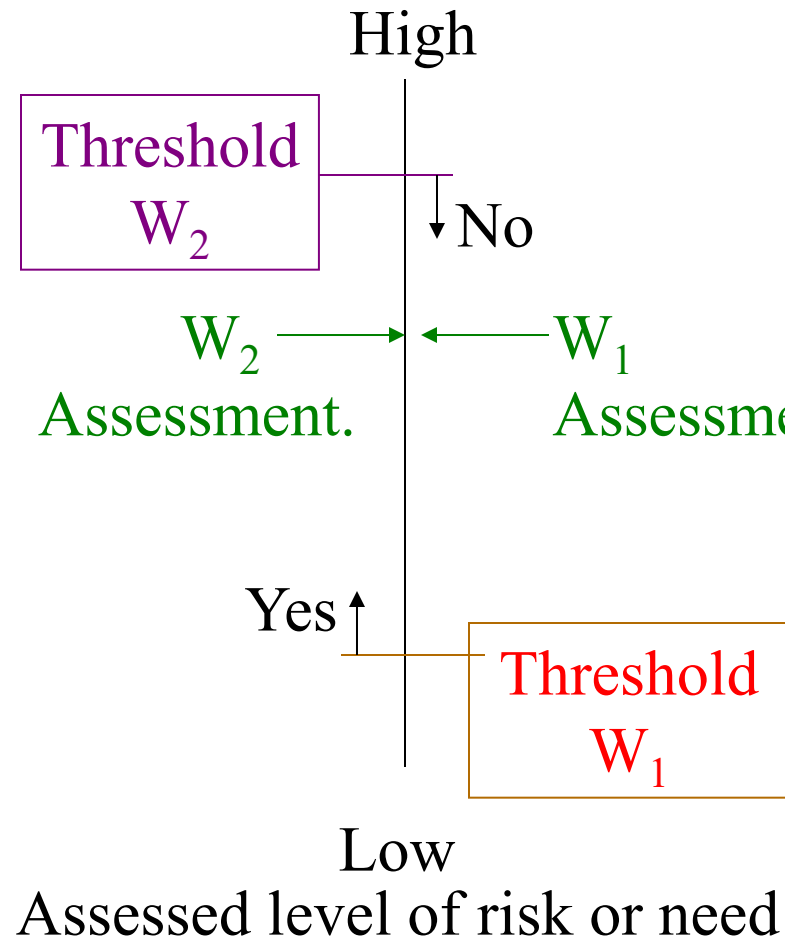
A General Model for Assessing the Situation and **Deciding** what to do about it - Dalglish



If the **Assessment** is *ABOVE* the **Threshold**, then ACTION is taken.

If the **Assessment** is *BELOW* the **Threshold**, then NO ACTION is taken.

The Process of Decision Making: The Threshold Concept



If threshold low, W_1 needs little evidence before taking action.

○ If threshold high, W_2 needs much evidence before taking action.

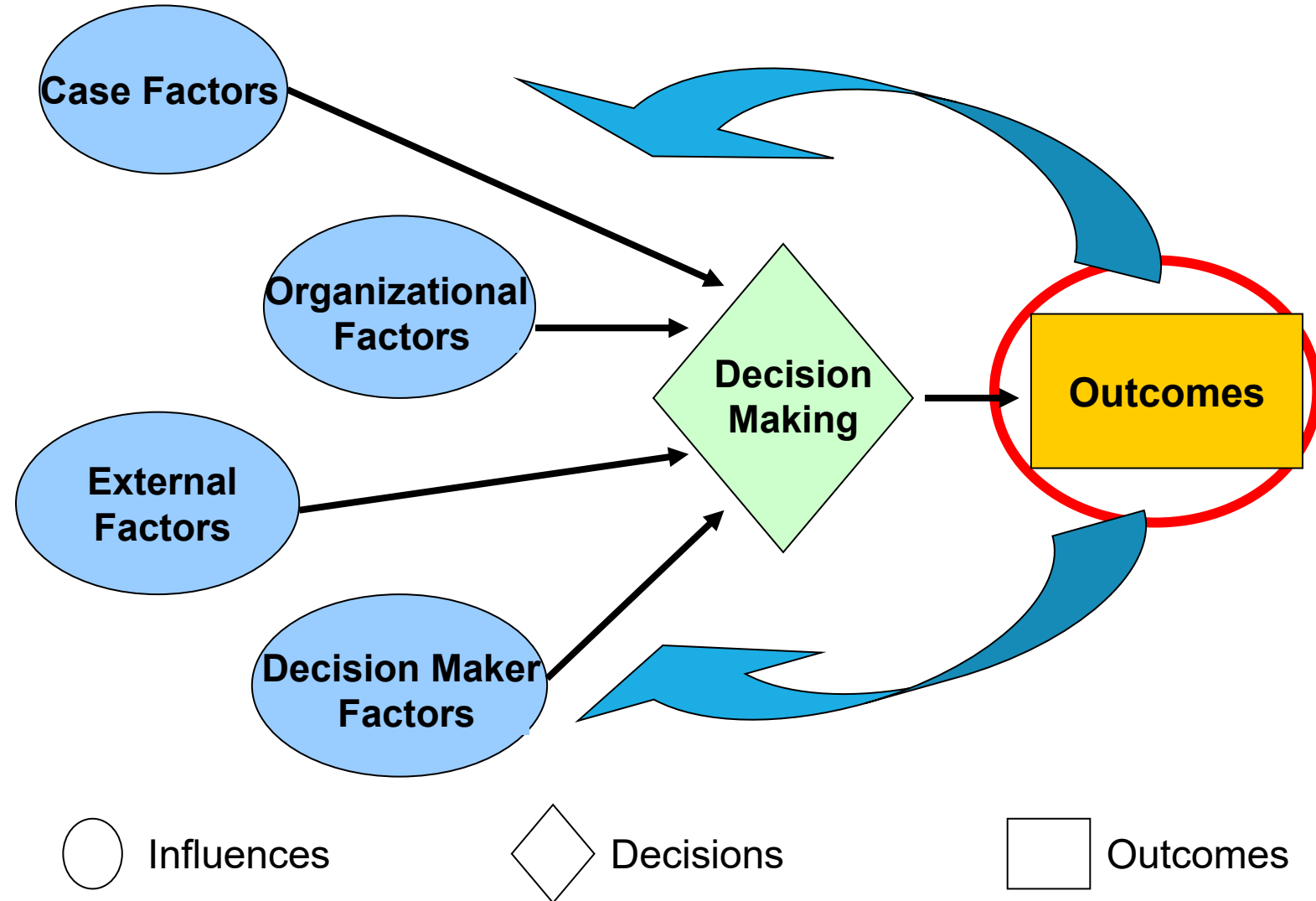
○ Even if they agree on the assessment,

○ they disagree about taking action.

*From Len Dalglish, 2000



Decision Making Ecology



What Are we Worried About or Hoping For? Outcomes – Real and Perceived



Children

- Safety
- Permanency
- Well-Being

Worker

- Job Satisfaction
- Being Blamed
- Trauma
- Stress

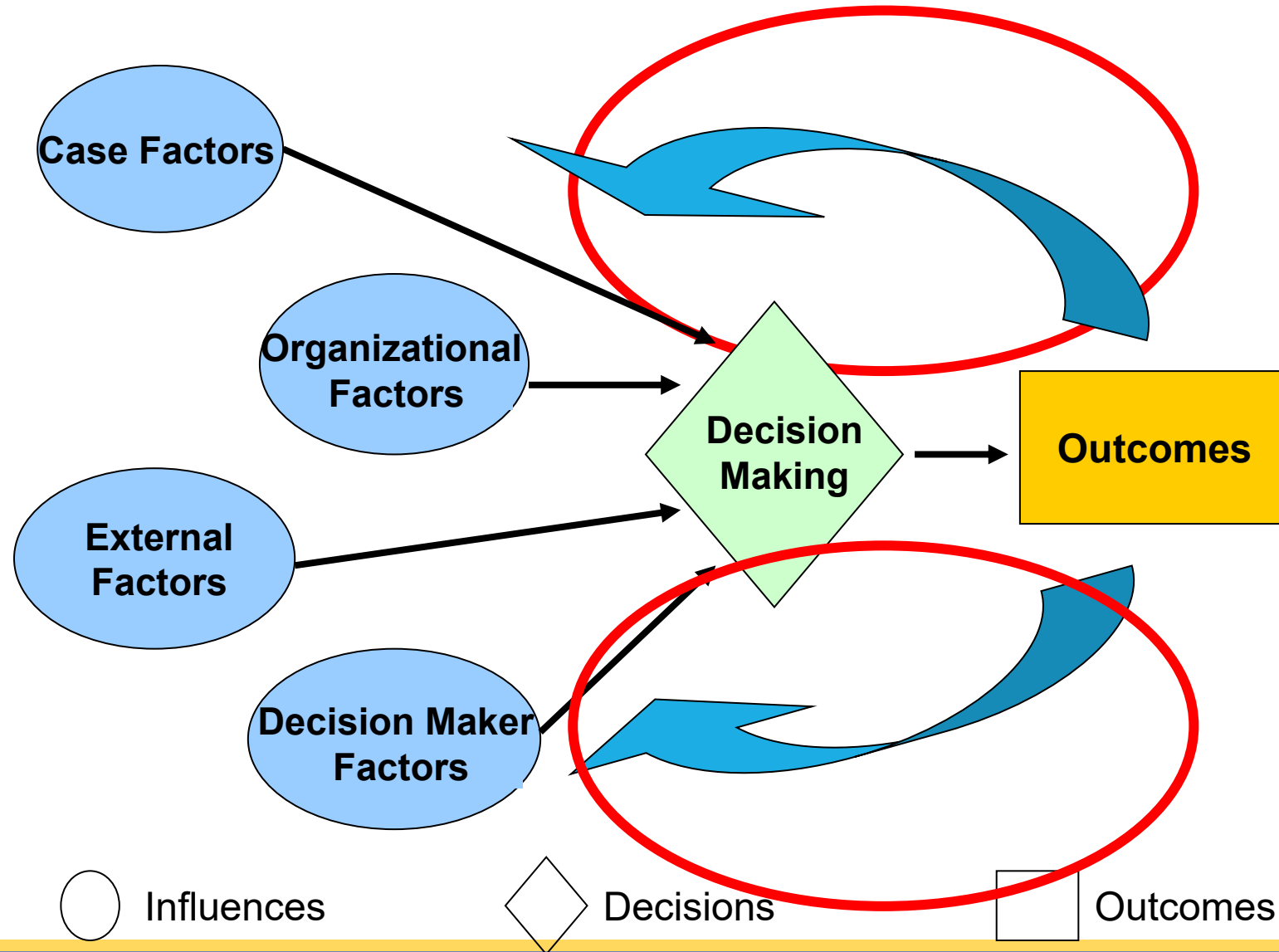
Organization

- Turnover
- Reorganize
- Redefinition of Functions

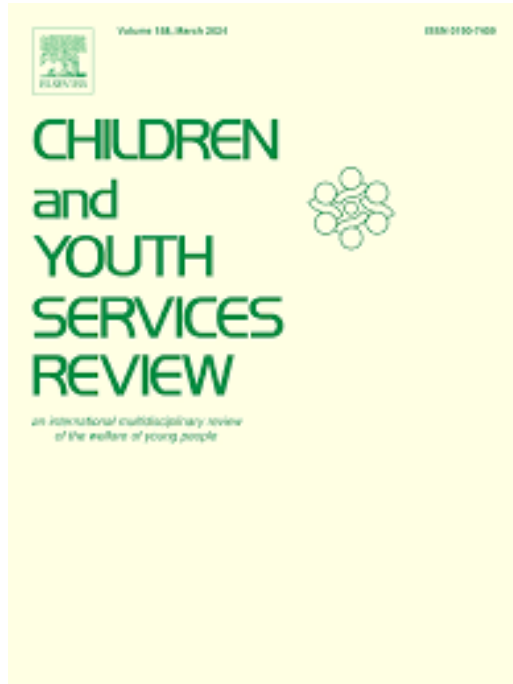
Community

- Public Anxiety
- Media Scrutiny
- Legislative Scrutiny

Decision Making Ecology



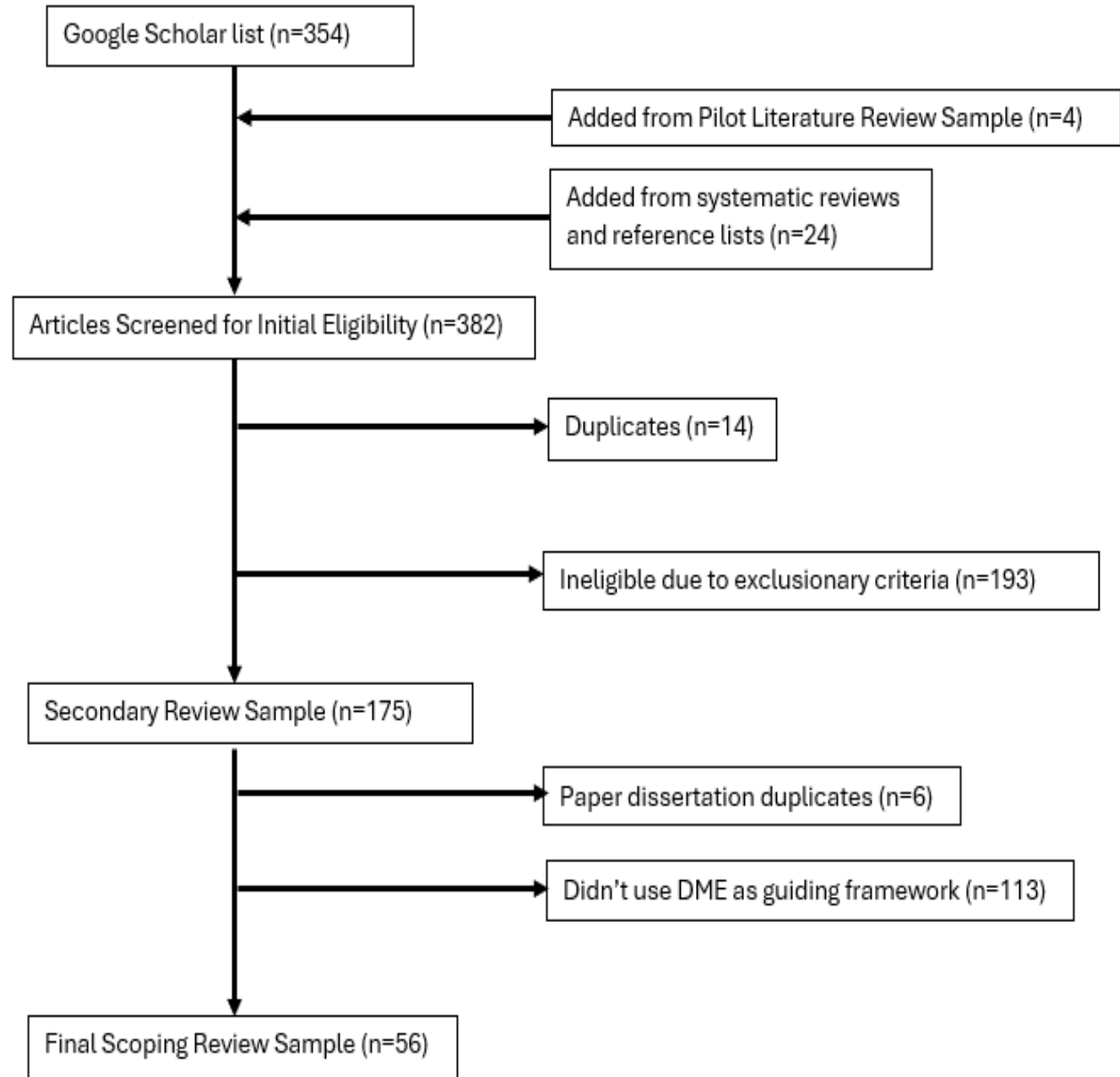
DME Scoping Review



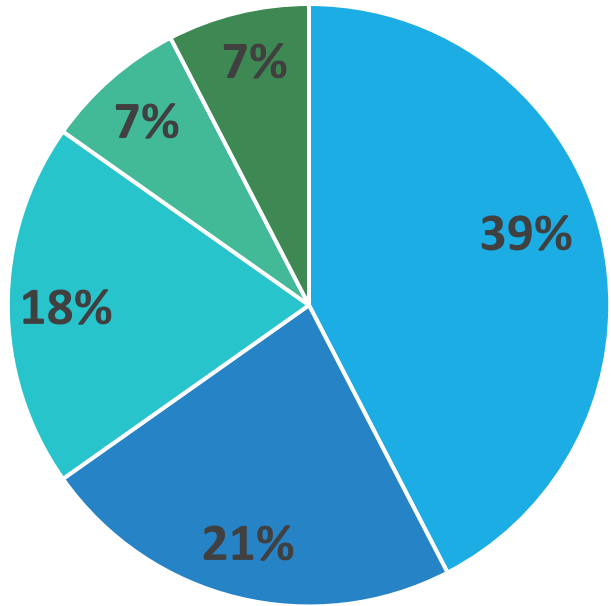
Allan, H., Hollinshead, D., Rockwell, K., Ender, K., Antwi-Boasiako, K., O’Leary, D., Middel, F., & Fluke, J. (2025). *Illuminating the complexity of decision making in child welfare using the Decision Making Ecology: A scoping review. Children and Youth Services Review*



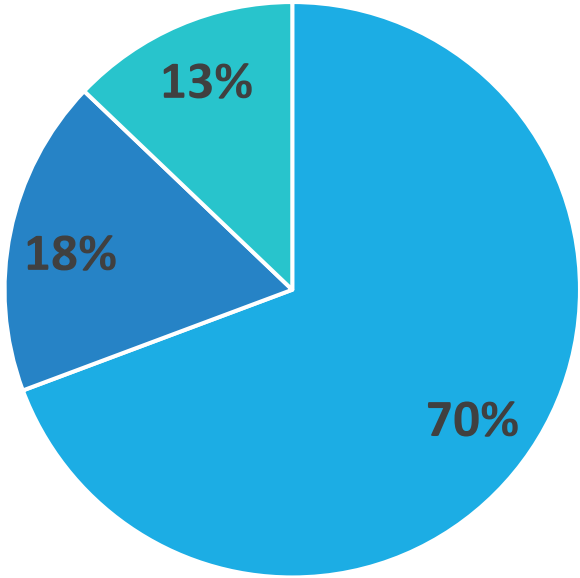
PRISMA Diagram



Results: Sources and Methods of Studies



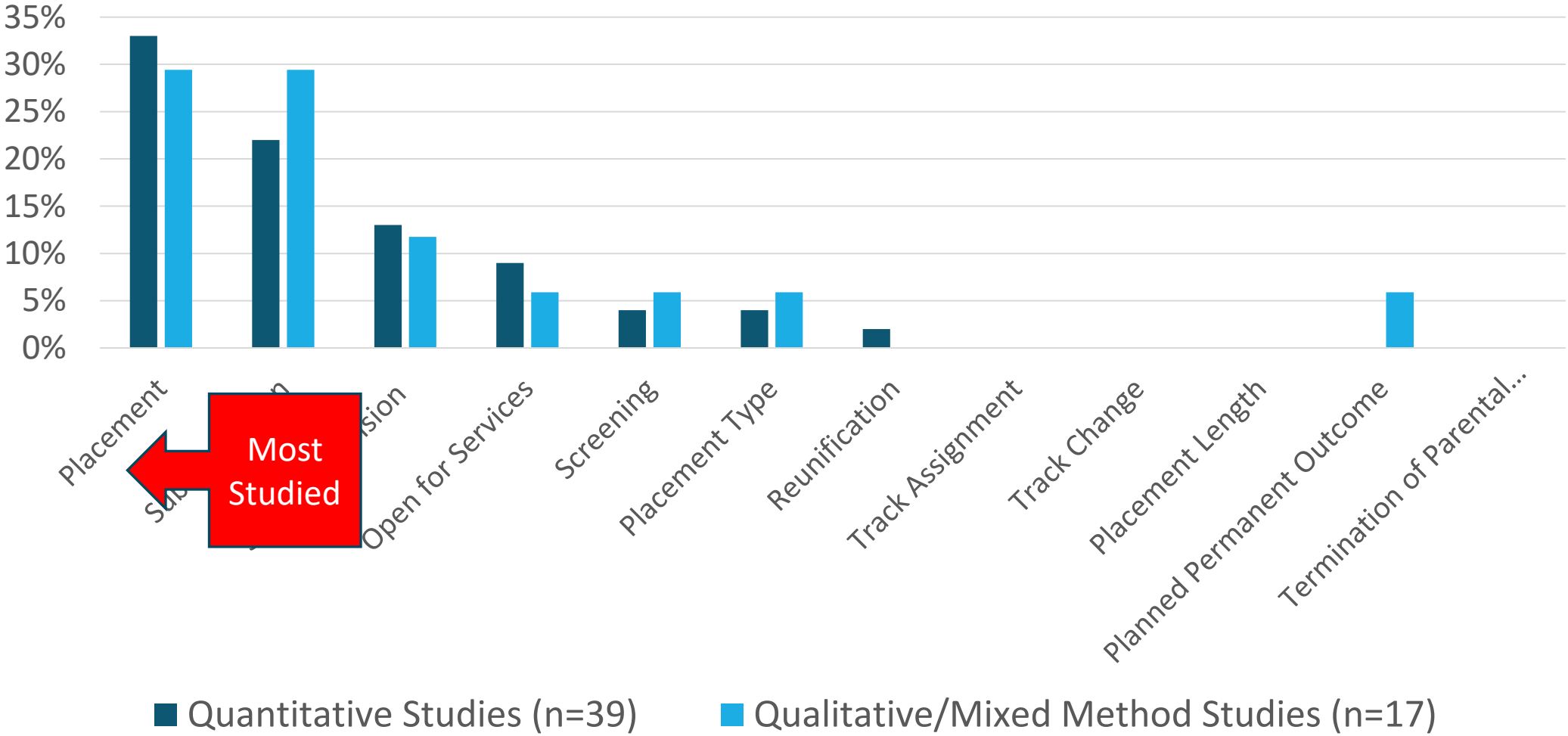
- United States (n = 22)
- Canada (n = 12)
- Europe (n = 10)
- New Zealand (n = 4)
- Other (n = 4)



- Quantitative (n = 39)
- Qualitative (n = 10)
- Mixed Methods (n = 7)

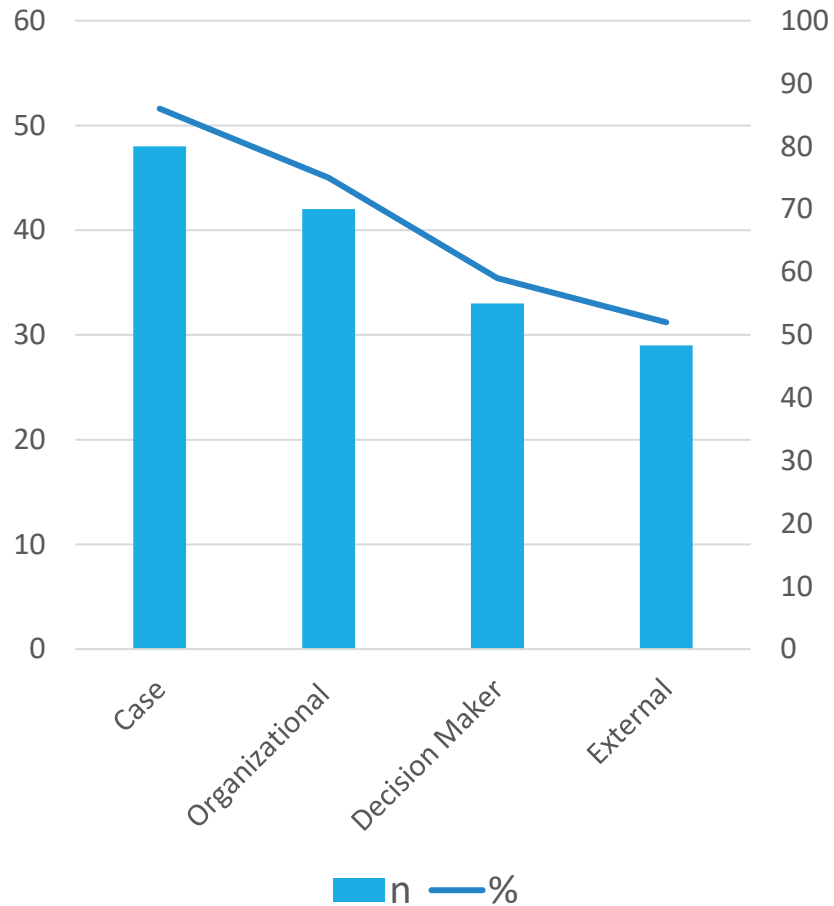


Decisional Outcomes by Method (n=56)

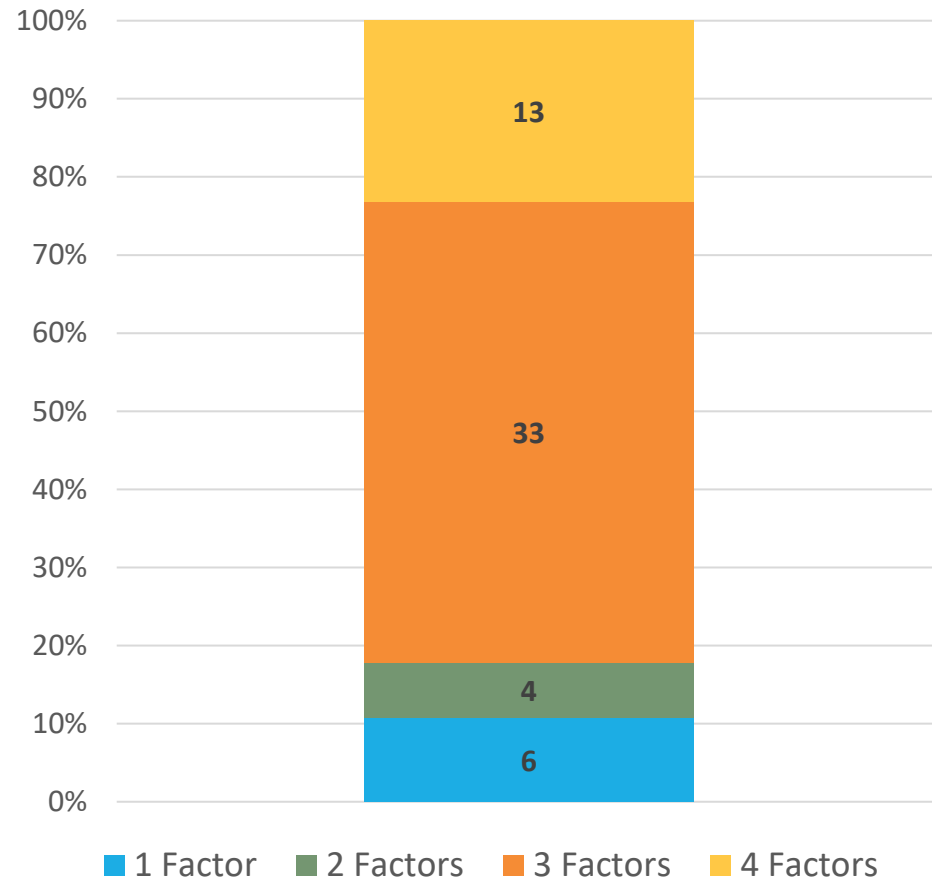


Factor Domains Across Studies (n=56)

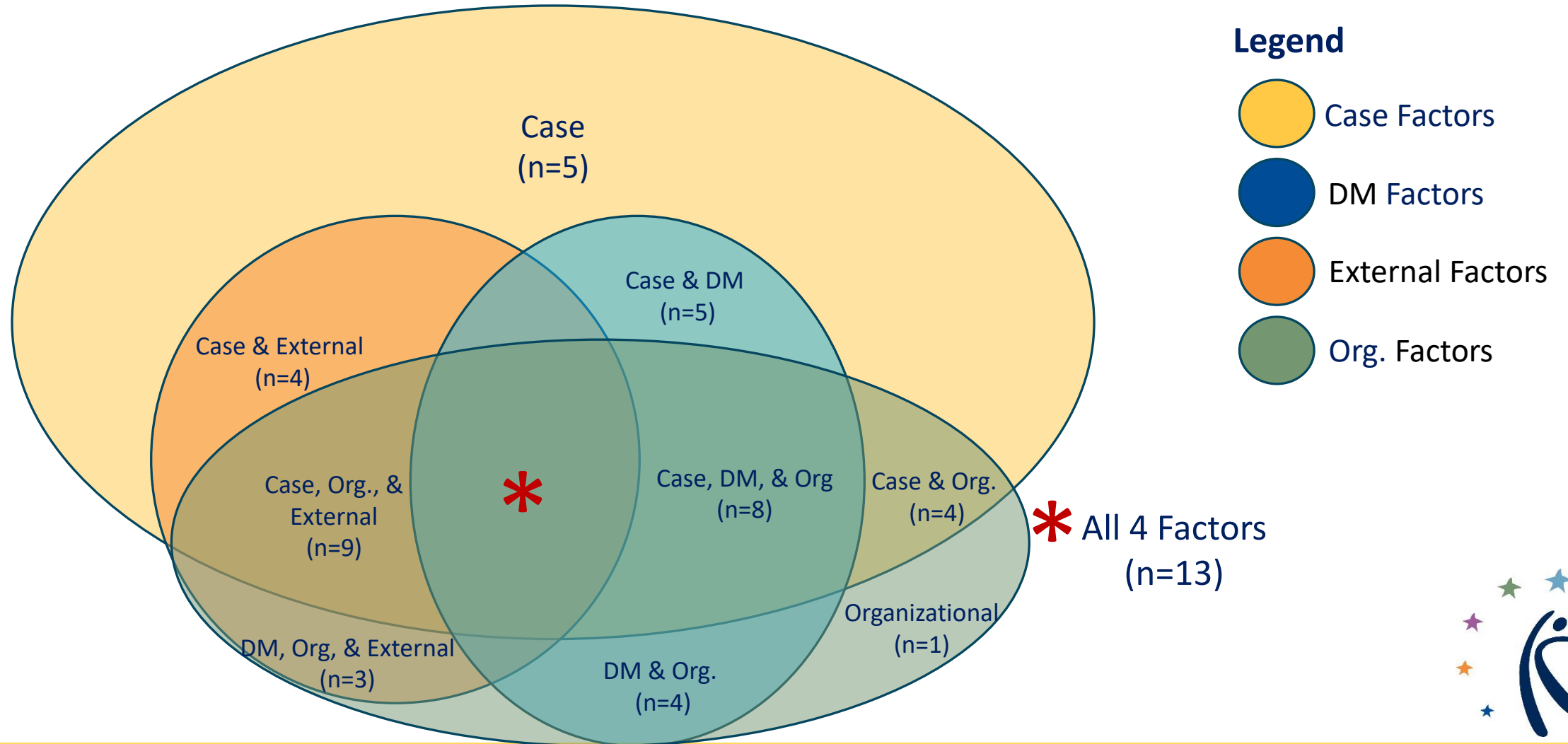
Factors Explored Across Studies



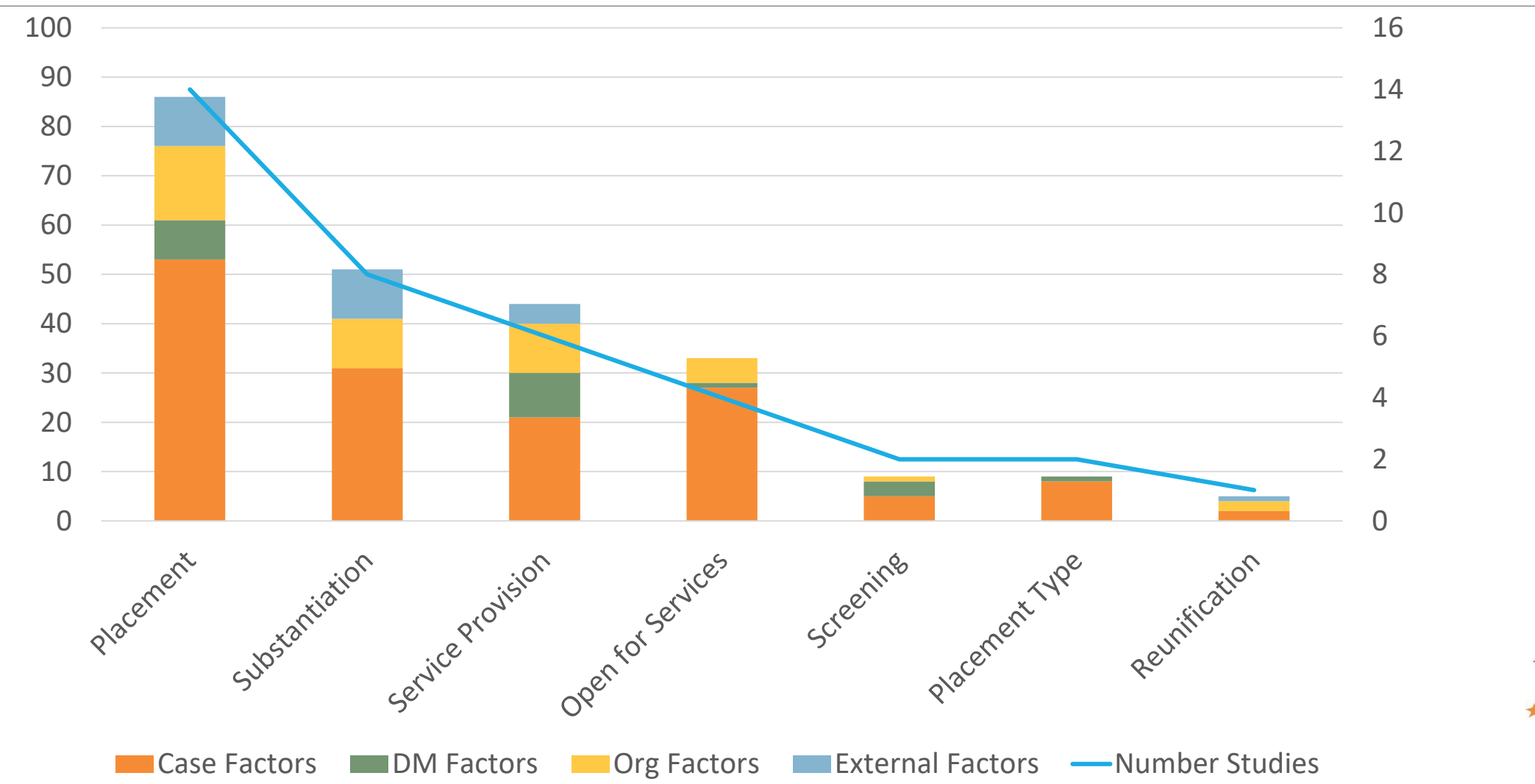
Number Factors Explored Per Study



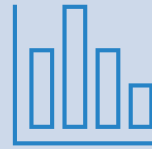
DME Factor Domains Across Studies (n=56)



Q2. Statistically Significant Findings by Factor Domain (n=39)



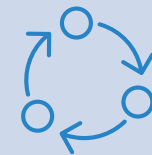
Reflections



Variation in how DME constructs were conceptualized and operationalized across studies



Many non-DM constructs are still case-worker self-reports. This is subjective!



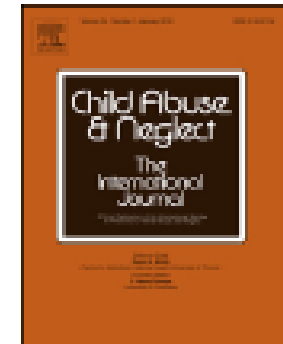
There are likely interaction effects to many constructs

Example: worker turnover (organizational construct) can impact worker satisfaction (DM construct)



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

The Decision Making Ecology of placing a child into foster care: A structural equation model



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^b *Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*

^c *Saint Edwards University, USA*

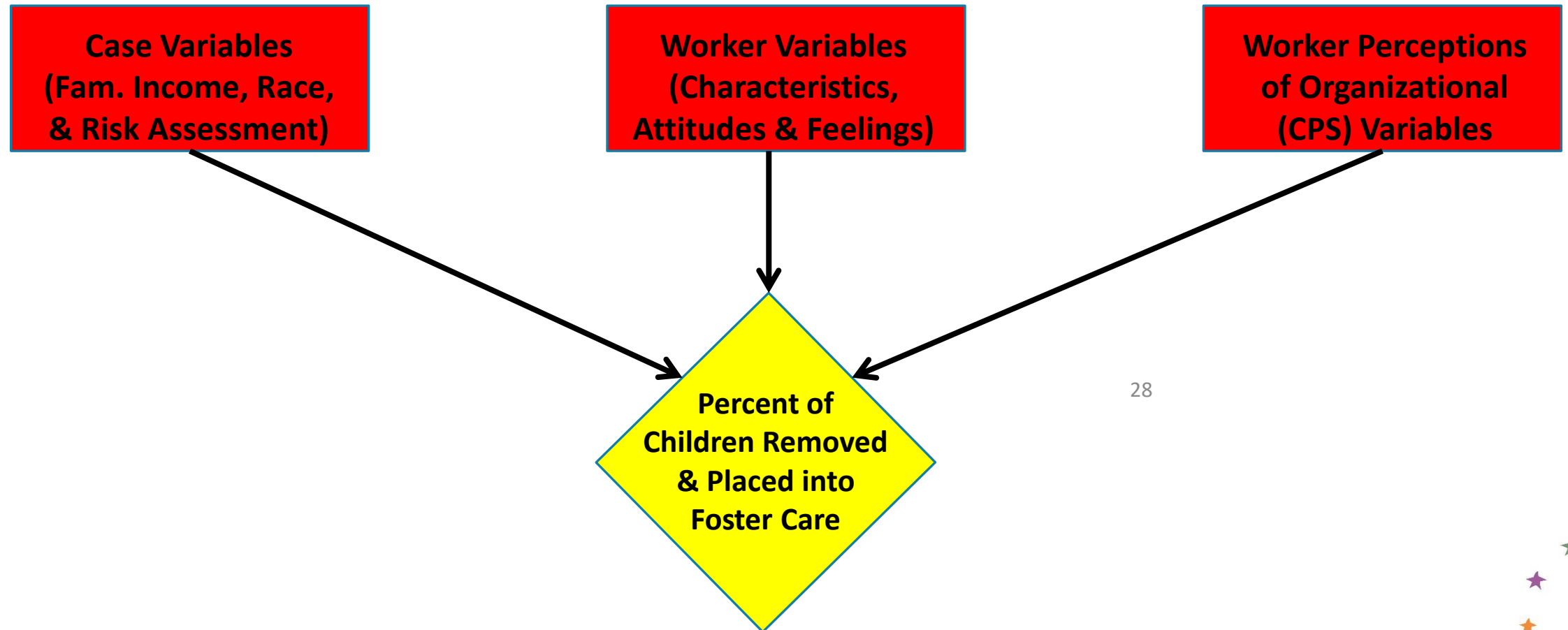
^d *Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, Department of Pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine, USA*

ARTICLE INFO

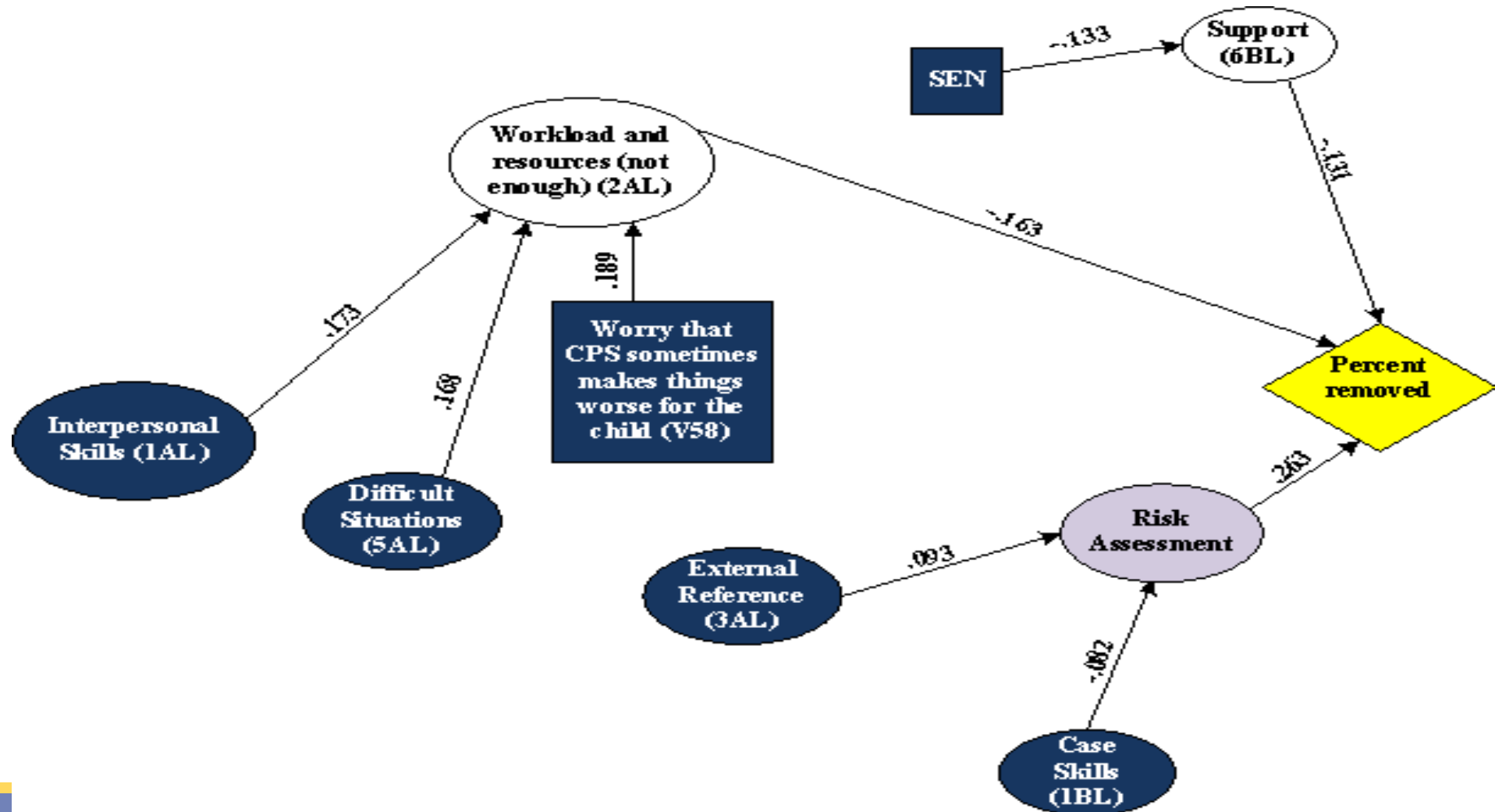
ABSTRACT



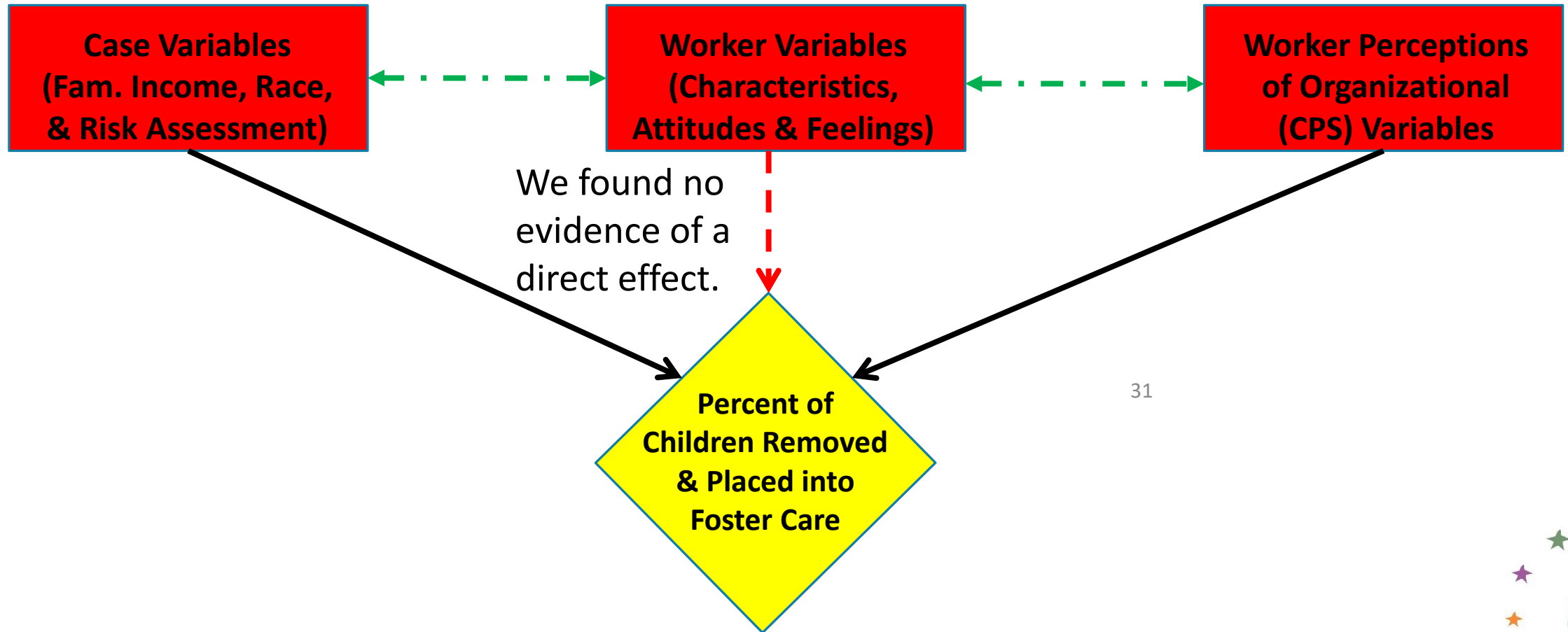
Schematic Diagram of Hypothesized Relations of DME Domains Involved in the Placement Decision



Structural Diagram – 6. First-Order Mediated Worker Effects



Schematic Diagram of Hypothesized Relations of DME Domains Involved in the Placement Decision



Int. Journal on Child Malt. (2021) 4:325–347
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42448-021-00083-9>

ORIGINAL PAPER



Associations Between Case, Staff, and Agency Characteristics and the Decision to Place a Child in Out-of-Home Care

Dana Hollinshead¹ · Dustin Currie¹ · Klaudia Kroll² · Sara Wolf Feldman³ · Kerry Monahan-Price³ · John Fluke¹

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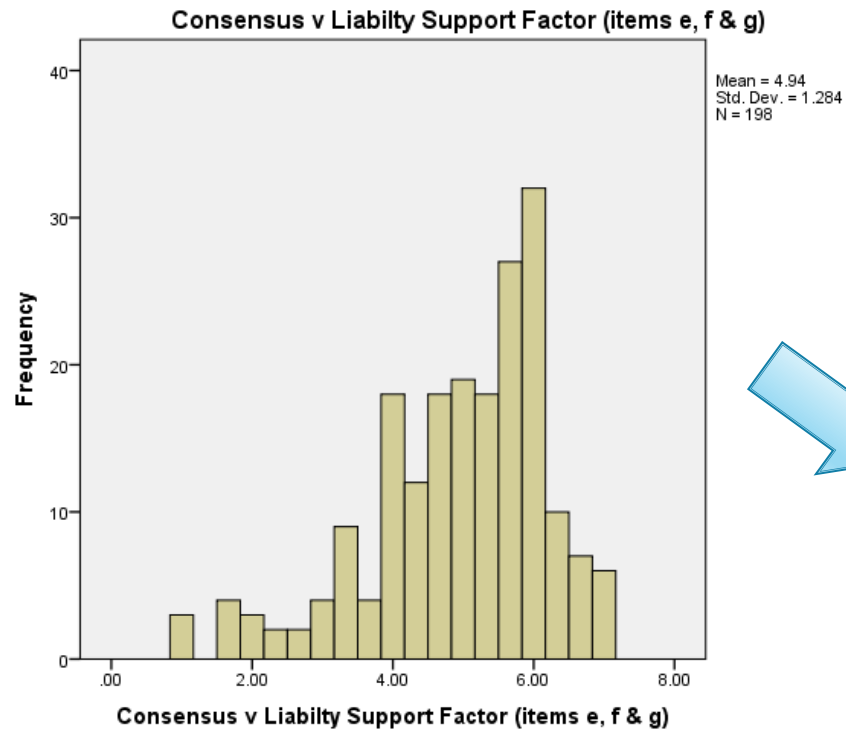
Level 2: Perceptions of Support

Items

If a child in one of my cases is harmed, I believe the agency will conduct a thorough investigation into what happened before assigning blame.

I know my supervisor will be supportive of me and the decisions I made if a child is harmed in one of my cases.

I know my coordinator will be supportive of me and the decision I made if a child is harmed in one of my cases



As worker perceptions of support increase ->

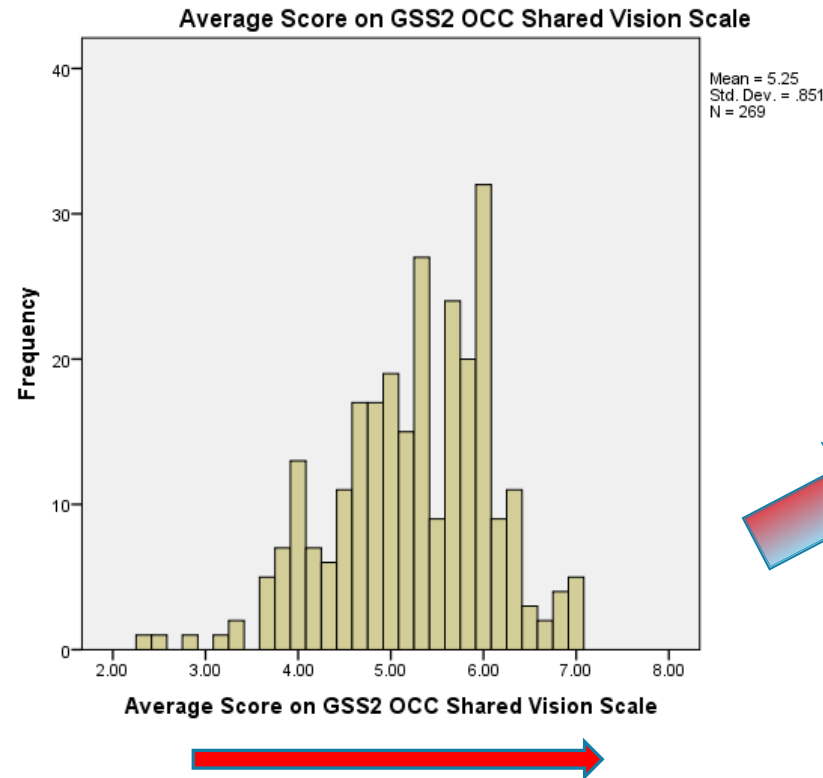
the likelihood that a child will be removed to out of home care decreases



Level 2: Perceptions of Shared Vision

Items

- Workers in my unit are proud to work in child welfare
- Workers in my unit clearly understand the agency vision for child welfare programs
- Workers in my unit are committed to continuous professional development
- Workers in my unit believe they can have a positive impact on the lives of most of their clients
- Workers in my unit spend time in professional reflection about their work
- Workers in my unit use the findings from child welfare research in their work with children and families



As worker perceptions of shared vision increase->

the likelihood that a child will be placed in out of home care increases

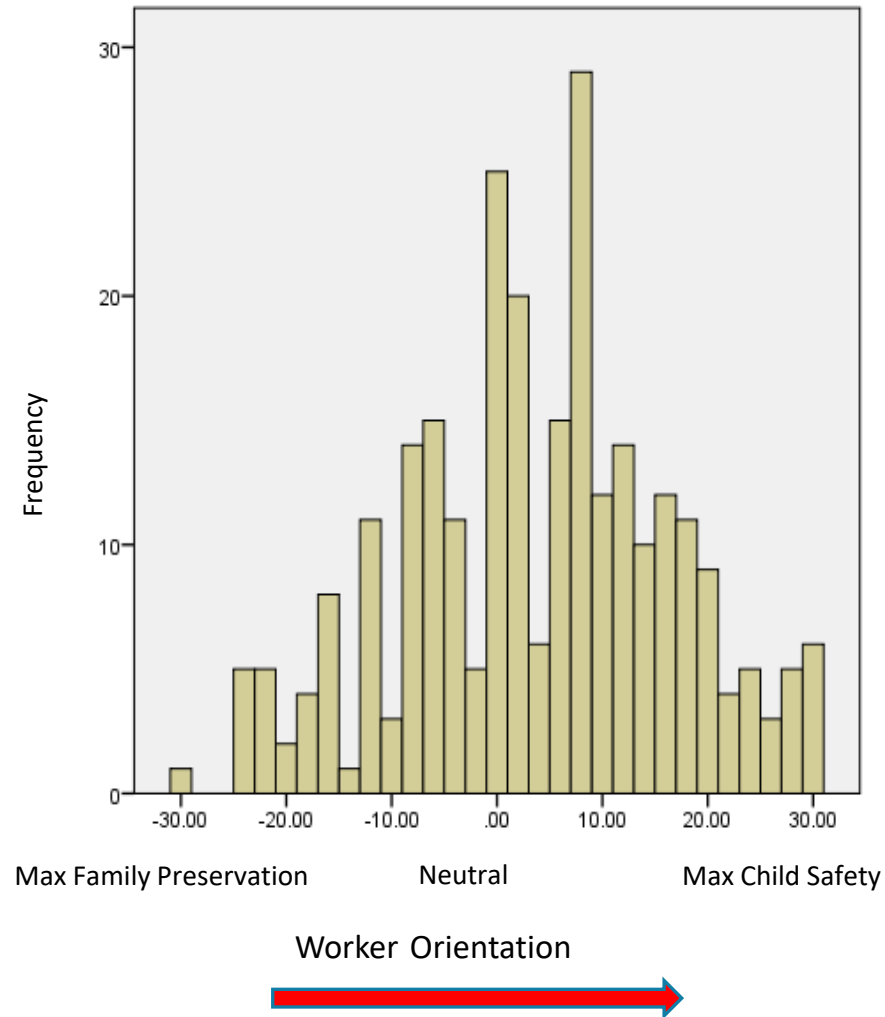
All Responses Analysis - Level 2: Child Safety vs. Family Preservation Orientation-

Example Forced Choice Item

(A) The child is the client and all other work is secondary.

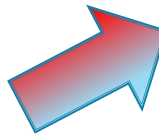
OR

(B) Work should be focused on keeping the family together.



As worker orientation towards child safety compared to family preservation increases->

the likelihood that a child will be removed to out of home care increases



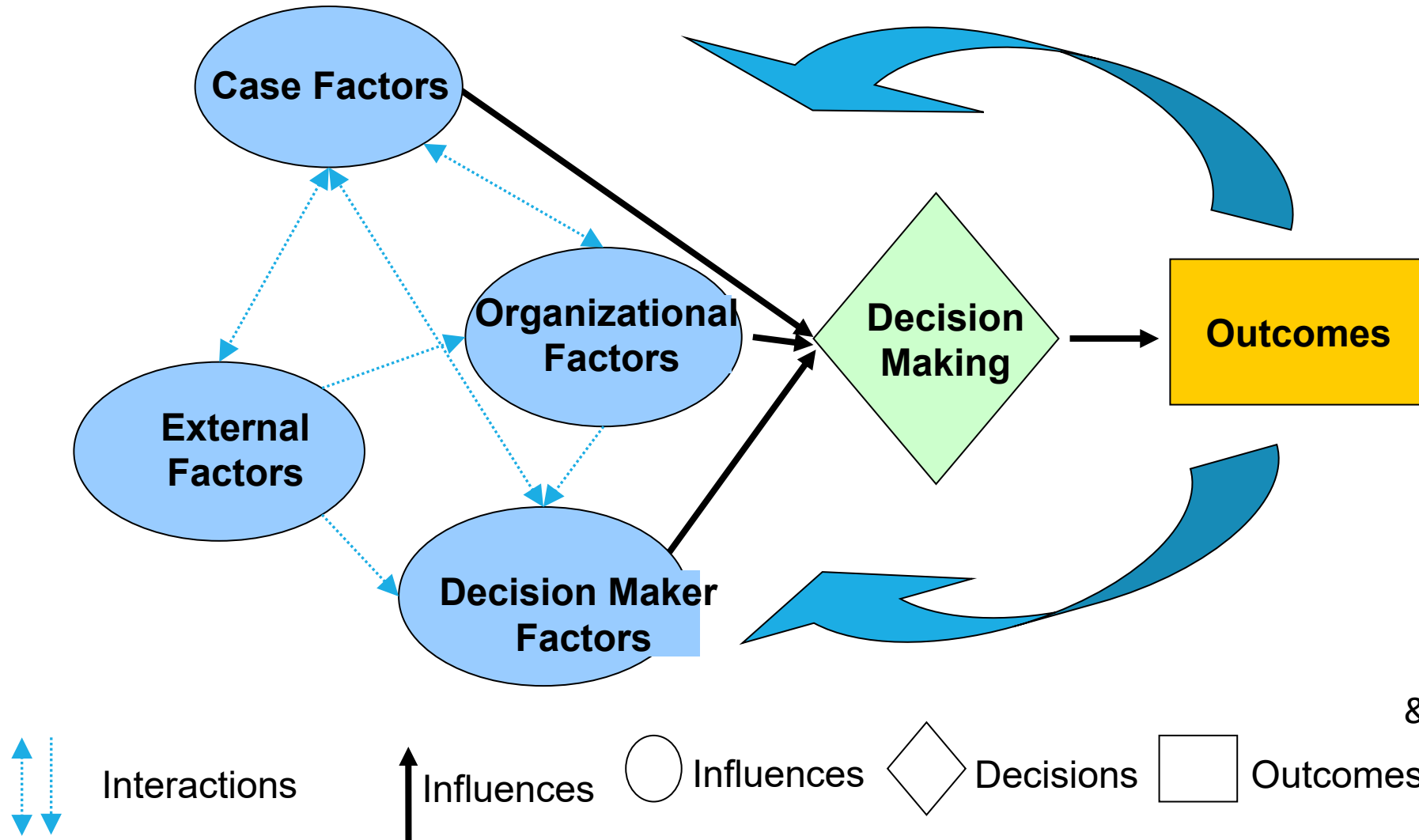
Other Level 2 variables remained significant in the same direction when compared to the first response analysis

Case, organisational external and decision maker factors in judgments and decisions during initial assessments (O’Leary & Fluke, 2025)

<h2>Case Factors</h2> <p>Protective factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persons • evidence of protection from harm or evidence of child welfare • behaviours, e.g., actions to protect and safeguard children in light of domestic violence, and enrolment in behaviour modification programmes • involvement with services focused on addressing presenting risks <p>Risk factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persons • evidence of abuse or compromised child welfare • incapacity to protect children or promote their welfare • behaviours including parental violence, drug and alcohol misuse, non-engagement with services, failure to follow social workers’ advice, maintain service attendance, or breaching court orders. <p>Absence of evidence or conflicting evidence</p> <p>Risk rating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This incorporates the categorisation of the case as welfare or abuse, and the determination of future risk. It also incorporates the ranking of concerns among cases in a case load. 	<h2>Organisational Factors</h2> <p>National policies</p> <p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personnel • time <p>Caseload</p> <p>Policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • policies for classifying risk and protective factors; threshold guidance • absence of policies (e.g. how to rank risks in cases of domestic violence) <p>Informal policies or local protocols for caseload management</p> <p>Data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tusla national aggregate referral and assessment statistics
<h2>External Factors</h2> <p>Referral rates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rates of referral on a given day <p>Client involvement with external services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventive or family support services • potential for surveillance by referring agency (healthcare service particularly) • services addressing specific parental risks (e.g. drug and alcohol services, domestic violence services) or child risk (e.g. juvenile liaison services) <p>Professional knowledge of a case, and professional expertise</p>	<h2>Decision Maker Factors</h2> <p>Professional knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expertise • Capacity to assess interactions among co-occurring risk factors or protective factors <p>Perception of capacity to manage case load and individual cases</p> <p>Trust in (external) professionals’ judgment</p> <p>Personal and professional worry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decision regret and worry about false negatives • worry about the effects of wait-listing cases • worry about the burden on families • worry about the impact of a decision on the organisation (data, caseload)

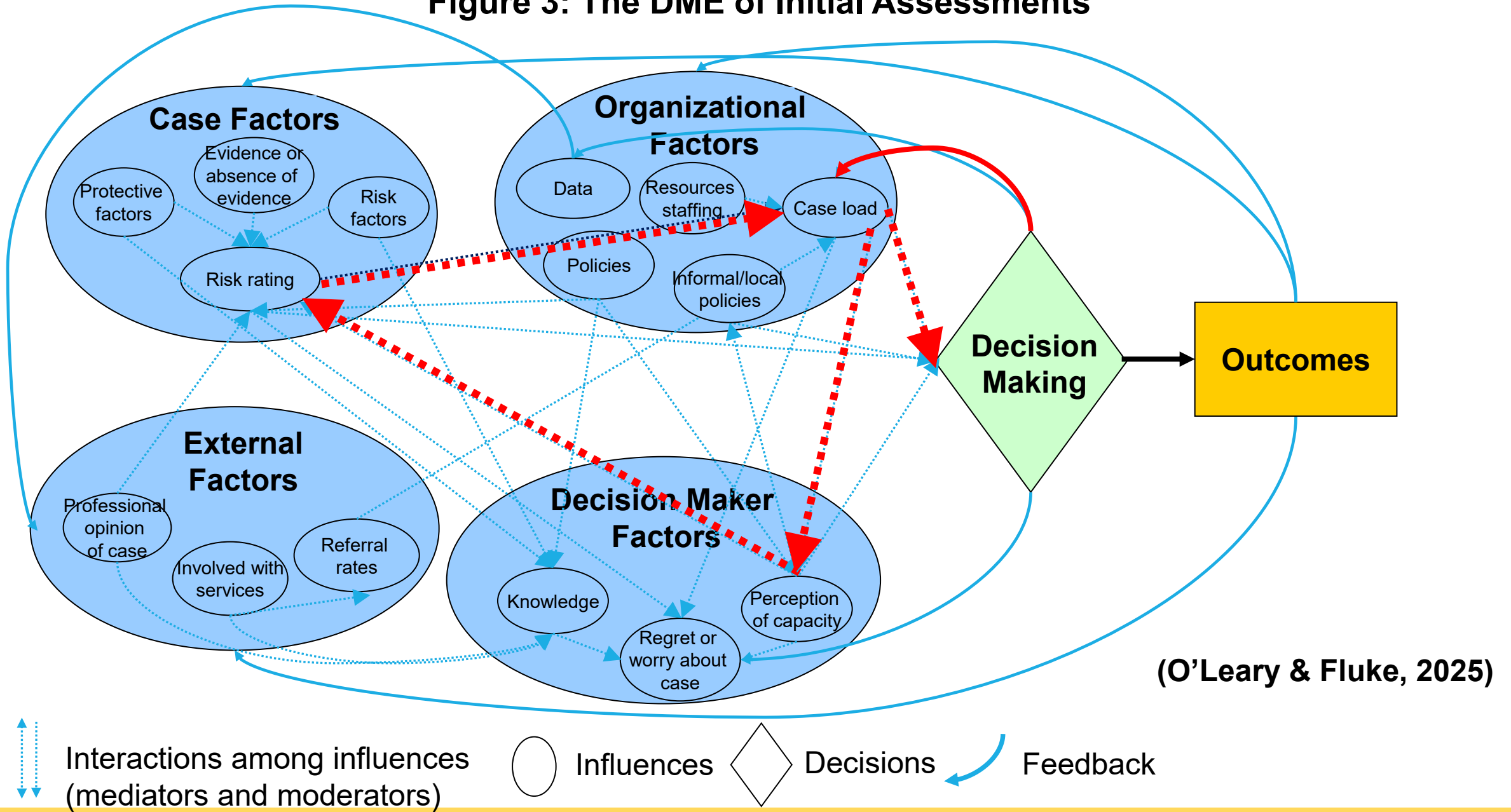


Figure 2: Aggregate interactions among influences in the Decision Making Ecology



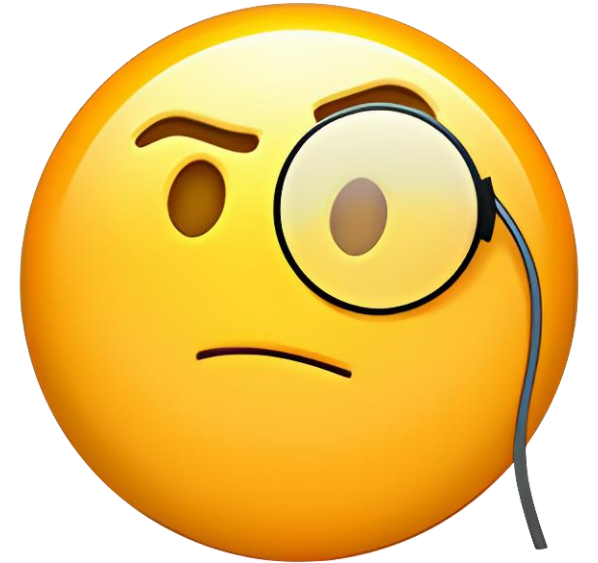
(Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke & Kern, 2011; O’Leary & Fluke, 2025)

Figure 3: The DME of Initial Assessments



What do you think?

- ❖ What **resonates** with you?
- ❖ What are you **curious** about?
- ❖ What is **missing** from our understanding of child welfare decision making?



Contact Us

Questions?

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Interested in learning more or working with us?

<https://kempecenter.org/impact-areas/transformational-research/child-welfare-decision-making/>



