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Professional dilemmas and occupational constraints in child welfare workers' relationships with children and youth in foster care

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ABSTRACT

At the same time as the number of child and youth placements in foster care is increasing in Sweden, some serious deficiencies have been highlighted, such as instability in placements and shortcomings in the social services' monitoring. Because the child welfare workers are ultimately responsible for these children's situation, understanding how they handle their multi-dimensional occupational role is crucial. The aim of this article is to study child welfare workers' individual and collective experiences of and expectations about their occupational role and responsibilities in their administrative and relational work with children and youth in foster care. Individual interviews with child welfare workers from a previous evaluation of a national pilot project, and two focus groups with child welfare workers, constitute the empirical basis. Theoretically the article explores central concepts such as sub-roles, dilemmas, professionalism, and functional specificity. The results show that the child welfare workers are burdened by a heavy workload, but that the prerequisites and the obstacles they face also must be understood in relation to prevailing contradictions and dilemmas in their occupational role. Even though the child welfare workers stress that professionalism is about putting relational work first, their activity is dominated by administrative tasks and functional specificity.

1. Introduction

The number of child welfare placements is increasing in Sweden, the most common form being foster care (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2016). The ultimate legal responsibility for children and youth in foster care lies with child welfare workers at the local social services office. As identified in earlier research and politically commissioned investigations, this responsibility is particularly significant in cases where there are major deficiencies in the placement which have found to be relatively common, both in Sweden (e.g. Skoog, 2013; SOU 2011:61, 2011) and in other countries (e.g. Ridley et al., 2016; Ward, 2009). In recent years it has been highlighted in Sweden that child welfare workers often fail to follow up the placements adequately and constructively, and that these deficiencies are in various ways related to shortcomings in the relationships between child welfare workers and foster children as well as to constraints on time and the constant pressure to focus on more immediately urgent cases (e.g. Oscarsson & Lindahl, 2014; SOU 2011:61, 2011). The importance of the character of the relationship between child welfare workers and foster children is discussed and debated in many countries. For example, it has been accentuated in the United Kingdom after key contributions such as the Munro Review on Child Protection (Munro, 2011) and Iain Ferguson's (2008) Reclaiming Social Work. This article is clearly related to this area of research and debate, since it is based on the premise that different possibilities and constraints in the relationship between foster children and child welfare workers requires analysis of child welfare workers' occupational role and how it is formed under the prevailing organizational and institutional conditions.

The duties of the child welfare worker include administrative elements, such as assessments, decision-making, organizing care, and documenting the foster child's development and life situation (SOSFS (2012:11), 2012). These duties also include relational elements, because Swedish law requires that "the child and the child welfare worker should have frequent, continuous and trustful contact, in other words, a good relationship" (Government Bill (2012/13:10), 2012, p. 78, our translation). In this law, it is emphasized that trustful contact with the child welfare worker can "give the child or young person access to supportive and protective circumstances in their lives," and that a good relationship can "enable the child welfare worker to comprehend the child's situation and discover if something is not right" (Government Bill (2012/13:10), 2012, pp. 78–79, our translation). The importance of the legal expectations that the work is relational is reinforced by previous research findings that demonstrate that the establishment of continuity, closeness and trust in the relationship between social

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workers and clients is the most decisive factor for outcomes in social work (e.g. Bruhn & Källström, 2018; Hingley-Jones & Mandin, 2007; Knei-Paz, 2009; Trevithick, 2003).

In a previous study we interviewed children and youth in foster care. We found that most of them were either indifferent about their relationship with their child welfare worker, either negative, or even hostile, viewing the worker as an authority figure who represents a latent threat. They stated in general that the relationship is negatively affected by specific factors, such as a lack of time, availability and trust. It also became obvious that they generally expect the relationship with a child welfare worker to be characterized by distance and formality (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017).

The other side of the story concerns how the workers themselves perceive their professional role and, in particular, the need to maintain professionalism in their work under prevailing conditions. How do they view their ability to complete their administrative tasks while at the same time living up to legal requirements of relational work? This must be understood in terms of the workers' professional identity, i.e. their own ideas about what it means to be a professional working with foster children. These conceptions should be understood as extending beyond the prevailing organizational and occupational conditions, since to a great extent they are shaped during the process of socialization into a particular profession. This kind of professional unity can, for example, be formed around their possession of a shared field of knowledge – the scientific discipline of social work – and having the same or similar academic degrees and a common union affiliation (Brante, 2014; Freidson, 2001). Such unity can be seen to be summarized in the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014).

The aim of this article is to study child welfare workers' individual and collective experiences of and expectations about their occupational role and responsibilities in their administrative and relational work with children and youth in foster care.

(i) How can different parts and aspects of the child welfare workers' occupational role be understood in relation to each other?
(ii) How do the child welfare workers describe the balancing of different, and potentially contradictory expectations about their occupational role?
(iii) What do the child welfare workers consider to be a professional approach to working with foster children, and how can this be understood in relation to the prevailing conditions in their occupational role?

The article is based on individual interviews with child welfare workers conducted in a previous evaluation of a national pilot project, as well as on two separate focus groups with child welfare workers.

2. Theoretical framework

Previous research on the relationship between social workers and clients in general has often focused on clinical and individual aspects, such as interpersonal skills and communication techniques (e.g. Baylis, Collins, & Coleman, 2011). Similarly, research specifically focusing on the relationship between child welfare workers and foster children tends to emphasize factors which primarily can be derived from the individual welfare workers' skills and abilities, such as level and content of education, and emotional competence (e.g. De Boer & Coady, 2007; Winter, 2009). However, in this article and in our above-mentioned study about foster children's experiences and expectations (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017), the analysis is based on the assumption that in order to do the required work effectively, individual and dyadic factors need to be complemented by an explicit understanding of the institutional and organizational conditions that create a framework for how relationships can be developed. We find that research about what individual and non-individual factors have an effect on this kind of activity, and how and why they do so, is relatively under-developed and under-theorized.

In order to enable analysis of individual, organizational and institutional conditions for child welfare workers' administrative and relational work, the article is theoretically structured around the concept of role and in particular on the need to understand role conflicts (e.g. Biddle, 1979; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Goffman, 1999; cf. Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). As indicated above in the introduction, to understand the relational work it is crucial to make clear that child welfare workers occupy an occupational role that contains certain built-in and legally based sub-roles within the overall organizational framework of social welfare. First, their role implies expectations about an official sub-role, which concerns the formal upholding of authority and includes assessments, decision-making, documentation, and other forms of administrative work. Second, the child welfare worker is expected to uphold an advocacy sub-role vis-à-vis the foster child, which means representing when needed the interests of the child in contacts with foster parents, biological parents, school staff, and different authorities. And, last but not least, the child welfare worker is expected to develop an attachment sub-role vis-à-vis the foster child, which is related to expectations about the establishment of close and trustful relationships (cf. Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017).

In line with our ambition to combine an individual and an institutional understanding it is important to stress that, in addition to legal expectations, child welfare workers also have to handle general expectations concerning their role. These are institutionalized on a societal level and comprise the social setting for what should be accomplished; this includes expectations from colleagues, parents and other authorities, as well as, of course, from the children themselves. The child welfare worker is (in Sweden) also almost always a member of the social work profession. Among other things this means being socialized into a professional identity endowed with a specialized field of knowledge about how this kind of work should be performed, and with an occupational cohesion and unity strengthened by various factors such as an academic degree (The Social Work Programme), daily interaction with colleagues, and membership in an organized professional community (Brante, 2014; Freidson, 2001). About the latter, in Sweden professional issues are covered by two unions in the field.

Harrits (2016) argues that conceptions about what it means to be professional tend to be formed and confined by predominating and institutionalized expectations of functional specificity. This concept, originally formulated by Talcott Parsons (1939), refers to the notion that professionalism is about possessing and exercising expert knowledge about the client's problems. This formal knowledge is perceived as being universal, and therefore all clients should be treated in the same way, that is, without special engagement in the unique conditions of the client and without emotional involvement. This view of what it means to be professional instills asymmetry, formality and distance into the relationship between professional and the client, since it implies the importance of developing universal and standardized knowledge about clients' problems and needs, rather than focusing on the unique circumstances surrounding each individual client. Harrits (2016) argues, however, that within welfare and human services, where the professional and the client are supposed to interact frequently and over a long period of time, closer and more personal relationships may be developed (which in our case is also demanded by law). In these services, professionalism tends to involve a question of the ability to combine and balance expectations about, on the one hand, functional specificity and, on the other hand, relational work characterized by emotional engagement and consideration of the unique conditions of each case. Child welfare workers' ability to balance contradictory sub-roles can also be linked theoretically to the concept of street-level bureaucracy, which Lipsky (1980) describes as translating official policy and regulations into practice while working with unique individuals under specific and complex circumstances. Harrits (2016) stresses, however, that to help welfare workers perform relationship-based work, institutionalized expectations of professionalism need to be challenged and developed.