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The Iron Cage of Leadership—the Role of First-Line Managers in Child Welfare

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Abstract

In the social services in general and particularly in child welfare, high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties have been reported for many years. Previous studies have shown that giving social workers adequate social support is important in getting them to maintain their job commitment and remain at the workplace. The aim of the present study was to investigate how child welfare managers perceive and respond to the content and demands of their professional role. Interviews were conducted with forty-two first-line managers. The results indicate that the expectations of the social workers and the demands of the organisation are in conflict. The overall picture is one of challenges and dilemmas in a changing managerial role, where the focus is increasingly on control, administration and budget responsibilities. While the managers highlight what can be regarded as transformative ideals and prioritise offering support and guidance to the social workers under them, the organisation seems to be pushing managers towards a leadership role characterised by control and authority, where quantitative measuring, monitoring and control processes are expected—a leadership style associated with transactional leadership. The influence of New Public Management on the conditions for, and the contents of, leadership in social services is discussed.

Keywords: first-line manager, leadership role, New Public Management, social work organisations, transformational leadership

Introduction

Social services in general, and child welfare in particular, have for many years been described as stressful workplaces marked by high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001; Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; de Panfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Webb and Carpenter, 2012). Although these problems appear to have developed later in the Nordic countries than in the UK, Australia and the USA, high workloads and work-related ill health combined with high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties have been described in the Nordic countries for over a decade (Tham, 2007a,b; Tham and Meagher, 2009; Aronsson *et al.*, 2014; Astvik *et al.*, 2014; Blomberg *et al.*, 2015; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2014; Tham, 2016, 2018a,b).

As many social workers begin their careers with tasks that are often described as the most difficult ones in social work, i.e. investigations of children and adolescents (Tham 2007b, 2016), there clearly is a need for help and support at the workplace (Tham and Lynch, 2019). This puts pressure on first-line managers who spend considerable time and effort on recruiting and introducing newly qualified social workers while they at the same time also need to have time for staff who have been at the workplace longer.

There is some confusion in the literature on leadership and supervision in social work as to what is actually being described and measured because these concepts have been defined differently in different countries (see, e.g. Bradley *et al.*, 2010). However, several of the reviews have highlighted the importance of leadership for outcomes such as social workers' job satisfaction and retention (Landsman, 2007; Elpers and Westhuis, 2008; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013; Carpenter *et al.*, 2013). In the present study, which is part of a larger follow-up study on working conditions among social workers in child welfare (Tham, 2016, 2018a,b), interviews were conducted in five workgroups that differed from forty-four other workgroups in that the social workers were more satisfied with their working conditions and had a lower turnover rate. Moreover, among the social workers from these five workgroups, satisfaction with one's immediate superior was a strong theme in the descriptions of their reasons for remaining at the workplace (Tham, forthcoming).

In sum, previous research has shown that first-line managers seem to play an important role in how working conditions are perceived by their subordinates, i.e. the social workers working under them. Although the research has stressed the significant role first-line managers play in social work, their own perception of their role has seldom been studied. This knowledge gap was the starting point for the present study.

Aim

The overall aim of the present study was to investigate and analyse how first-line managers in social work perceive their role, the demands placed on them by the social workers working under them and the organisation, and their possibilities to respond to these demands.

The context

In Sweden, the responsibility for providing social services lies with the municipalities. The vast majority of social workers are still employed by them, but municipalities can also contract private companies for child welfare investigations. The present study was conducted in twelve municipalities and nine town districts in mid Sweden. All of the managers included in this study were municipally employed. The organisation of child welfare services varies between the different municipalities with regards to how many social workers each manager is responsible for. Variations can also be found regarding the organisational model that is used, for example in terms of how specialised the work is (Steive, Tham and Wiklund, forthcoming) and to what extent the organisation has been influenced by New Public Management (Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Målquist *et al.*, 2011; Shanks *et al.*, 2015).

Transformational and transactional leadership

Although researchers have argued that the concept of leadership is vague (Lawler, 2007) and even questioned the evidence for leadership effectiveness (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003), several attempts have been made to define leadership. A common approach to describe leadership has been to distinguish between transactional and transformational leadership. Although this categorisation of leadership styles might be perceived as somewhat simplistic, it is useful for shedding light on different approaches and has frequently been used in earlier research. *Transactional leadership* can be described as the traditional leadership style, focusing on results and measuring success based on existing rewards and penalties. The leader's role here is to set goals, articulate the employees' expectations and follow up on how these expectations are realised. A *transformational leadership* style, on the other hand, means that the leader acts as a role model, provides intellectual stimulation for employees, formulates a clear vision for the future and shows understanding for each individual's needs (Bass and Riggio, 2006). The latter leadership style has been the focus of a great deal of research, and several reviews and meta analyses have indicated that a transformational

leadership style is positively related to employee performance (Lowe *et al.*, 1996; Wang *et al.*, 2011; Ng, 2017), well-being (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Skakon *et al.*, 2010) and is an occupational health factor (Montano *et al.*, 2017).

However, several studies have challenged this split between transactional and transformational leadership, where the latter is usually described as preferable. Already fifteen years ago, Judge and Piccolo (2004) highlighted that transformational and transactional leadership styles are closely related and that it can therefore be difficult to distinguish their unique effects. In a recent longitudinal study among social service managers in Sweden, Tafvelin *et al.* (2018) concluded that transactional leadership behaviours deserve additional research attention. In their study, the managers who initially were focused on transformational ideals later reported that they now increasingly strived for transactional leadership behaviours, such as being clearer and organising, structuring and setting clearer boundaries. Moreover, Skakon *et al.* (2010) found in their review that while in several of the studies a transformational leadership style was connected to positive outcomes, such as increased job satisfaction and well-being and less stress, in one of the studies in their review (Kanste *et al.*, 2007), a transactional leadership style was found to be connected to lower burnout among employees.

For the purpose of the present study, the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership styles serves as a tool to contrast different styles of leadership, making it possible to better shed light onto the different demands that managers in child welfare services can be caught between.

Method

Sample and data collection

Individual interviews were conducted with forty-two first-line managers in child welfare. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The interviews were focused on how the managers perceived their role, the demands placed on them by the social workers working under them and by the organisation, and their possibilities to respond to these demands. In addition to the interviews, data were collected among social workers ($n = 349$) who responded to a questionnaire that focused on how they perceived their working conditions (see Tham, 2016, 2018a,b). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using content analysis (Patton, 2002). The process of analysis began with the material being read repeatedly in order to create an initial sense of the whole. Thereafter, text passages relevant to the study's questions were highlighted, concentrating on these and abstracting themes from the material. To further assure the quality of the data analysis, two researchers were involved in this process, working on the same data independently at first. After working through the data, interreliability was checked and parts that to some extent differed between the two researchers were more thoroughly analysed and discussed. The quotes presented in the text were edited to increase readability and to protect the participants' identity, without changing the meaning of what was said.

Ethical considerations

The study strictly follows ethical guidelines and national laws (SFS 2003:460). The authors received permission to conduct the study from the heads of the divisions in all of the town districts and municipalities participating in the study. The managers were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous and that they could withdraw at any time; subsequently, their informed consent was obtained.

Results

Experience

Table 1 shows that all of the managers had previous experience of being a social worker. Half of them had worked as social workers for more than twenty years and 90 per cent for more than ten years. More than a third had been managers for over ten years.

Post-graduate training

As can be seen in Table 1, a third of the managers had no formal education in leadership, and only one had participated in a post-graduate university course in leadership at an advanced level. Among those who reported having received some type of management training, the structure, length and content of training varied greatly.

While the common lack of education in leadership at an advanced level in a formal academic setting at the university was something many of the managers were aware of, it was not seen as essential. Instead, the

Table 1. Sample description ($n = 42$)

	Number	Per cent
Proportion of women	39	93
Experience of working as a social worker		
0–5 years	1	2
6–10 years	3	7
11–20 years	18	43
21–35 years	20	47
Experience of being a manager		
0–5 years	18	43
6–10 years	8	19
11–20 years	12	29
21–35 years	4	9
No formal education in leadership	15	35
Shorter education (2–5 days)	27	65
University course (7.5 ECTS)	1	2

training they valued most was the training provided at their workplace in their role as a leader, where they were given the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their role:

> I had a process-oriented training in a group that focused on me as a supervisor, my strengths. It was good – I got a lot of confirmation (Manager 7).

Another common view among the managers was the priority given to learning in practice:

> I have the cognitive basis of practical social work and I think it's enough. Becoming a manager is a process. You can be prepared through training – but then you have to learn it in practice (Manager 14).

In summary, receiving support and guidance in relation to the managerial role was clearly something the managers described as more important and useful than a post-qualifying academic education. It was obvious that the managers were generally practice-oriented in their leadership skills and that they drew most on their, often times, long experience as social workers. Similar results were also found in another Swedish study on managers in social work (Shanks *et al.*, 2015) as well as in an earlier Australian study (Healy, 2002). Moreover, in a British study, all but one of the interviewed managers saw themselves as social workers who were now in management roles (Evans, 2011).

Reasons for becoming a manager

Very few of the managers said that their ambition from the start of their career had been to become a manager. Rather, their motives were described not only in terms of 'making a difference' and improving the situation of their fellow workers, but also to manage, educate, create structure and develop the workgroup. Having long experience of being a social worker was regarded as a requirement:

> I had been working for many years as a social worker and I have a certain talent for it. I'm calm and rational. I'm the one who puts things in order and I think that was the reason why my manager chose me (Manager 29).

The fact that managers in social work often are recruited among skilled social workers has also been noted in previous studies (Patti, 2000; Evans, 2011; Shanks *et al.*, 2015).

How do the managers describe the content of their role?

When the managers in the study were asked to describe the content of their role, most of their reflections concerned their role in relation to the social workers and not primarily in relation to the organisation. They were focused on offering support, guidance, stress relief and on promoting the social workers' development. A strong theme in the interviews was their emphasis on the importance of interactions with the social workers.

Offering support in practical work

Child welfare was described by all of the managers as a complex activity that requires in-depth knowledge of the laws and legislation, human behaviour, developmental psychology, municipal management structures as well as knowledge of research and evidence-based methods. The managers therefore described it as fundamental to the quality of work that the social workers, who are often newly qualified, receive support from supervisors in the areas of case management, documentation procedures and assessment procedures, which require personal knowledge of the contents of the work. The managers stressed that in order to provide social workers with the tools they need, it was important for managers to have knowledge and experience from having worked as a social worker.

As a consequence of the high staff turnover, the managers remarked that much of their time was spent on recruitment and introducing new

social workers to the job. Because many of the new staff had recently graduated, considerable tutoring was required:

> It's important to be here for the social workers. Many of them are new to the profession and are not up to it yet. They need guidance and there I am. Supporting the social workers in their investigations is of the utmost importance… I don't allow them to make decisions all on their own (Manager 38).

Being there and listening

There was broad consensus among the managers on the importance of being present and available for the social workers—being there to offer support, if needed. The image is one of 'the always-present manager who puts the well-being of the social workers at the heart of her work':

> As a manager, you have to be present, comment and confirm, answer questions, support and make the necessary decisions as needed (Manager 7).

Another strong theme in the managers' reflections was being prepared to listen to and be engaged in discussing everyday issues of concern for the social workers:

> I think how you act as a manager is very important to make them feel motivated. I talk to people all day long. My door is usually open (Manager 38).

Promoting the social workers' personal development

Another important task the managers described was promoting the social workers' personal development:

> It's important not to think you should have all the answers, but to treat the social workers like they are the experts. To be supportive. Some of them want you to point them in the right direction and tell them what to do. You have to be careful even if they ask you to decide. Otherwise, they won't develop (Manager 31).

Many of the managers also expressed satisfaction with contributing to the social workers' professional growth:

> It's so much fun to teach them how to think and act in social work, to see how they grow (Manager 7).

Helping to deal with stress and frustration

Another central part of their role was described as helping the social workers deal with the stress, frustration and concern their work tasks can cause:

> It was a larger step than I thought it would be to be a manager, more challenging than I thought. The case load is so high, the social workers are so tired and are showing signs of burnout. It was really tough to face this situation... And there is no training in how to handle staff who are crying... (Manager 13).

Many of the managers described their ambition to be present at the office as much as possible, to make decisions in difficult situations, not only provide guidance and support but also to help the social workers in setting achievable goals. These high ambitions meant they also put a great deal of responsibility on themselves:

> I should have the overall control of all the on-going cases, if the social workers have twenty cases each, that means that I as head of this unit have 200 cases to monitor and ensure the quality of (Manager 13).

The managers reported processing investigations to relieve the social workers' case load and not infrequently taking work home during the evenings and weekends:

> I feel I don't have enough time for them all. I have to take home work, but the group doesn't know that, so they think I have time for them (Manager 25).

In sum, the descriptions of how these managers perceive their role raise questions concerning how much time they have to focus on developmental and strategic work. According to their reflections, this kind of work seems to be lost in favour of day-to-day supervision and spending time on resolving daily issues, at the expense of dealing with long-term, overall concerns.

The demands of the organisation

The analysis shows two main themes for what the managers stressed as the demands of the organisation: the administrative workload and control of the budget.

Increasing specialisation and administration

A common reflection among more experienced managers was that both social work and the demands placed on them by the organisation have changed contextually in two ways. First, the work was described as more specialised today and the organisation as divided into smaller units responsible for only one task. Second, all of them had witnessed an increased administrative burden involving excessive documentation. This

was one of the strongest themes in the interviews. A common estimate of the managers was that at least twice as much time is spent on documentation compared to two decades ago. There was a strong consensus among the managers that these demands were unrealistic and forced them as well as the social workers to spend too much time on documentation. Some even stated that the time spent on documentation today is three times what it was in the 1980s or '90s.

> Earlier we were afraid of not being able to help people enough, now we're afraid of not writing enough (Manager 23).

One of the managers said that the documentation requirements led to work of poorer quality:

> We made these assessments before as well, but now we have to write them down in detail also, which means we don't have time to do the assessment work as thoroughly as we did before... (Manager 42).

The increased documentation requirements can be connected in part to the use of assessment tools. An example of these procedures and documents in child welfare work is the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (Anderson, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2009), in Sweden named BBIC (Barns Behov i Centrum [Children's needs in focus]) (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2009). While positive aspects of BBIC such as it leading to higher quality in child welfare investigations and giving newly qualified social workers a structure for their work were mentioned as well, the increased documentation requirements were described as disproportionate:

> BBIC offers a lot of opportunities, but all the documents and all steps you need to keep in your head... I think it's good in the sense that the child focus becomes clearer, the focus has moved from the parents to the child. But all the different documents that need to be filled in! – It would be possible to simplify the system, it could be much better. There must be a reasonable balance in it all (Manager 4).

Another common description was that the documentation requirements have shifted from one extreme to the other:

> In the early eighties, we wrote almost nothing and that meant awfully bad quality. Now it's going the other way. In cases when children are placed in out-of-home care it can be good to have all this documentation. In follow-ups, it's good. But easier versions (of BBIC) are needed (Manager 2).

Negative consequences for the clients were also described:

> BBIC makes me sad, all these forms... And the clients say: I don't want you to *write* about us, I want you to *be* with us! (Manager 12).

Increased control

Another strong theme was the increased control exercised by various statutory authorities:

> Being a middle manager, I feel like more and more things are required from you... The demands of the government and state have increased enormously. We get new control documents all the time (Manager 42).

The increasing time spent on administrative tasks was described as leading to thoughts of leaving the profession:

> When I've thought about leaving this profession, it has never been because of the work with clients or the social workers. It's connected to all the crap you have to deal with, statistics, economy, invoices, it's not only the documentation, it's all the other things (Manager 25).

These results are in line with findings from other Swedish studies looking at human service organisations (see, e.g. Forssell and Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Skillmark and Oscarsson, 2018).

The increased control also included the budget. That this could lead to negative consequences for the clients was described:

> We don't always have the resources we need, we almost need to draw lots as to who we should help ... I'm sometimes told by the managers of the groups who process the referrals: "Do you have to start an investigation? That child has only said on two occasions that she has been beaten." It's crazy! (Manager 25).

The pressure to keep within the budget and to provide the Municipal Council with budget reports and annual reports was frequently described. Recurring key concepts in the interviews were dilemmas, limited scope of action, control and loyalty. The managers emphasised that there are political objectives and limits that essentially determine how child welfare work must be controlled. In addition to the legislation, there are guidelines from the National Board of Health and Welfare, local goals, action plans and budgets. One of the managers remarked:

> The question is really how we are governed; we are public servants, we work in a political organisation and we don't have our own agendas. We are there to accomplish a mission given to us by others, so there is a lot that governs us (Manager 3).

Similar findings were reported in a British study, where time-compressed and fragmented tasks and being torn between having a more supportive and reflexive leadership style on the one hand, and managerial accountability on the other, were described (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2015). A recent Swedish study among eight newly hired managers in social work showed that after six months in the position, the managers described themselves as increasingly striving for transactional leadership behaviours such as being clear, organising, structuring and setting clear boundaries (Tafvelin *et al.*, 2018).

How did the managers respond to these demands?

When discussing how they managed the demands, most of the managers talked about their own abilities, seldom referring to organisational structures or help from others. Regarding the demands from the social workers, a strong theme was the emphasis put on the manager's own personality traits and strengths. The personal qualities highlighted by the managers as essential to successful leadership were numerous: personal maturity; experience of life as well as of social work; the ability to reflect and create structure; clarity; absence of self-importance; humanity, humility, curiosity, tact, self-assurance; calmness; ability to motivate, see and confirm; have a stabilising effect, be responsive, organised, driven; and the ability to prioritise and manage group processes. One of the managers concluded:

> Quite a lot in this role has to be found in your personality (Manager 4).

Flexibility and being prepared to change the plans for the working day were mentioned as important traits:

> Usually my working day is quite unplanned. I walk around in the morning to get an overview, how the social workers are feeling and what should be done during the day. I have a lot of planning to do, but I may need to put it aside if I notice that there is something else more urgent out there (Manager 33).

Moreover, many of the managers put great emphasis on personal maturity:

> Maturity is important for managing the leadership here. It has nothing to do with education; it's a process that comes in different ways throughout your life (Manager 7).

Such a statement of the managers' own views on desirable attributes illustrates that their own personality is placed at the forefront. It is

worth noting that no mention was made of theoretical/academic education or administrative skills being important factors, even peripherally.

Although the managers in the study highlighted the demands placed on them by state authorities as well as by their own organisations, they did not reflect on how to lodge a protest or request a change.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate how managers in child welfare describe and define their roles, what they believe the social workers and the organisation expect of them, and how they deal with these demands.

The results indicate that there is a conflict between the expectations of the social workers and the demands of the organisation. The managers in the study highlight what can be seen as transformative ideals and prioritise offering support and guidance to the social workers. However, the organisation seems to push them towards a leadership style associated with transactional leadership: a leadership role characterised by control and authority, where quantitative measuring, monitoring, controlling processes are expected (Bass and Riggio, 2006). The challenges of a changing managerial role, where greater focus is being put on control and budget responsibilities, are described. These results are in line with previous findings from studies among managers in social work in Sweden (Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Shanks *et al.*, 2015; Tafvelin *et al.*, 2018).

Leadership ideals on a collision course

These conflicting demands and ideals, which can be understood as the result of an increased number of responsibilities, constituted one of the strongest themes in the interviews. The pressure emerging from control from above in the organisation as well as an over-emphasis on administration and solving current issues in everyday work seem to force the managers to spend considerable time taking care of day-to-day realities rather than engaging in long-term and overarching issues. Strategic work and long-term planning were hardly mentioned at all. Their descriptions of what the social workers at the workplace require of them can be described using a relational, process-oriented leadership model. The managers highlight individual, integrating and practical characteristics, such as being emotionally supportive, responsive and relationship-oriented. As all of them were experienced social workers, they could presumably relate to the needs of the social workers more spontaneously, but they had little education in leadership and management. One question

emerging from these results is whether their strong reliance on personality traits and knowledge of the social work profession is a consequence of their lack of theoretical education in leadership and management? Perhaps managers with a more theoretical education would have put greater emphasis on these aspects.

How do they deal with this conflict?

The results of the present study show that these managers have not renounced their ideals in favour of those of the organisation, but rather try to get these conflicting ideals to coexist. On an overall level, the managers seem to have a tendency to adapt to rather than to resist these changes. Many of their statements point at the governmental and organisational level, in relation to which the managers seem to feel they lack the mandate to push for change. It is as if the changes are considered to be 'the rules of the game', and as if these rules cannot be changed (Hoff, 2015). The increased documentation requirements are described as inevitable and unchangeable, even though they are perceived as unrealistic, unhelpful and as not improving the quality of the work. This situation also raises questions about the channels of dialogue between the municipal and governmental level.

How have these changes evolved?

In Sweden, as in many Western countries, the preconditions for and content of the social services have in recent decades undergone major organisational changes. In this connection, New Public Management (NPM) has influenced organisations to varying extents (Blom, 1998; Hartman, 2011; Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Meagher and Szebehely, 2013; Shanks *et al.*, 2015; Meagher *et al.*, 2016). A key tool in the NPM logic is to standardise work in order to assure quality, simplify, clarify and reduce costs. NPM has led to the decentralisation of profit and cost responsibility and increased budget control requirements (Hood, 1991, 1995; Almqvist, 2006; Målquist *et al.*, 2011). A consequence of this development is that first-line managers are expected to take economic matters into consideration and that their personal responsibility has become more pronounced (Hasselbladh *et al.*, 2008). This means that they are also subject to a closer evaluation, requiring clearer descriptions of production in terms of efficiency and quality (Blomquist and Packendorff, 1998).

The descriptions of the demands made by the organisation, reflected by the managers in the present study, are in line with the consequences of NPM. Increased control, limited professional discretion, increased

administrative burdens and weakening professional discretion have also been discussed in other more recent studies focused on social work in Sweden (Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Harlow *et al.*, 2013; Lauri, 2016, 2019; Shanks *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, there also seems to be some resistance on the part of professionals to following guidelines and manuals (Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Skillmark and Oscarsson, 2018). However, a time study measuring the contents of the working day among 121 managers in social work showed that they spent only 12 per cent of their working time on strategic and developmental work, while almost twice the amount of time (23 per cent) was spent on administration (The Swedish Government, 2017).

In the present study, the managers' descriptions of what the social workers expect of them—which also seems to be the role they prefer—are indicative of a value-based, transformational leadership, while the demands placed on them by the organisation seem to force them towards a more results-oriented kind of leadership pursued in a more transactional manner. This means that the difference between transactional and transformational leadership ideals puts the managers in a problematic situation; they seem to be locked in an iron cage between conflicting expectations and needs.

Conclusion

This study shows a mismatch between the wishes and ambitions of these managers and the demands of the organisation. Considering that it has been shown that managers play an important role in social workers' work satisfaction and intention to stay at the workplace (Landsman, 2007; Elpers and Westhuis, 2008; Carpenter *et al.*, 2012, 2013; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013), it would seem to be invaluable for managers to be given the chance to serve as role models and supervisors. On the other hand, on an organisational level it is important for managers to have the time and opportunity to focus on developmental work and long-term planning. This gives rise to a concluding question: Is it possible for one person to manage to fill both of these roles? The present results seem to point to the need to separate these two roles. The first-line managers could be allowed to focus on tutoring and taking care of the social workers, while a manager—perhaps with another background—could be responsible for long-term planning, control and the budget. The increasing organisational and political demands on first-line managers illustrated in this article seem to force these managers to a management style few of them would have chosen themselves. Letting managers out of the iron cage would appear to be one key to creating working conditions in social work that support social workers' work satisfaction and intention to stay at the workplace.

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