# Not Rocket Science: Implementing Efforts to Improve Working Conditions of Social Workers

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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate if the working conditions of child welfare social workers in one municipality would be improved after the implementation of three initiatives: weekly small group supervision for newly educated social workers, team-strengthening activities and training for the team leaders. Five teams consisting of thirty-six child welfare social workers and five team leaders participated. At project start and after the two project years (2017–2018), the social workers' perception of their working conditions was measured by a questionnaire (QPS Nordic). After the two years the social workers rated several aspects of their working conditions more positively. They were more satisfied with the organisational climate and leadership and with the collaboration in their work group. Turnover, which had been high for many years, had almost stopped and vacancies were now filled. The social workers were now more often satisfied with the quality of their work. Interestingly, these positive changes had occurred at the same time as the social workers now reported higher demands and more often experienced role conflicts. The overall results of this small-scale study indicate that working conditions of social workers can be improved after the implementation of rather modest means.

**Keywords:** child welfare, implementation, leadership, supervision, workgroups, working conditions

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## Introduction

This article presents the results of an implementation project that aimed to improve the working conditions of social workers. Five teams participated, consisting in all of thirty-six child welfare social workers and their five team leaders. The background to the project was a situation of high turnover and recruitment difficulties that had prevailed for several years at the workplace, as frequently reported in Sweden as well as internationally (Tham, 2007a,b, 2016, 2018; de Panfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Tham and Meagher, 2009; Webb and Carpenter, 2012; Aronsson *et al.*, 2014; McFadden *et al.*, 2014; Welander *et al.*, 2017). Besides the negative consequences for the professionals themselves and for their organisations, in the long run the situation means that the quality of social services runs the risk of being undermined and that the people who are in need of social services thereby may not get the help that they need and are entitled to. Whilst this situation has prevailed for a long time, studies with the aim of implementing strategies to improve working conditions are rare (Bambra *et al.*, 2007; Nielsen and Randall, 2009). In a review and meta-analysis examining which workplace resources are most important in predicting employee well-being and performance, the authors conclude that resources on the organisational level are more often studied, while individual-, group- and leadership-level resources have received less attention (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). This lack of research was a starting point for this implementation study.

## Background

The present study builds on results from previous studies on working conditions of social workers in child welfare (Tham, 2007a,b, 2016, 2018; Tham and Meagher, 2009). The first study, conducted in 2003 ($n = 309$), showed that social workers who intended to leave their place of work were less satisfied with the *human resource orientation* at the workplace (i.e. their perception of how well they perceived that they were looked after, were rewarded for a job well done, the extent to which management was interested in the social workers' health and well-being), and with the *social climate* at the workplace (i.e. to what extent the climate was encouraging, supportive and relaxed) (Tham, 2007a). In a follow-up study conducted among child welfare workers ($n = 349$) at the same workplaces in 2014, eleven years after the first study in 2003, it became clear that the working conditions had generally deteriorated, but particularly for those who were new to the profession. These social workers reported experiencing higher demands and having poorer health and well-being than the more experienced social workers. In addition, more of those new to the profession also reported that they intended to look

for a new job than in the previous study (Tham, 2016). These results are in line with previous research that has shown the difficulties experienced by newly educated social workers (Tham and Lynch, 2014, 2019; Hussein *et al.*, 2014; McFadden *et al.*, 2014; Carpenter *et al.*, 2015; Grant *et al.*, 2017).

After analysing the results of the questionnaire in the 2014 follow-up study, group interviews were conducted with social workers in five of the forty-nine work groups included in the 2014 study. These five groups were chosen as the social workers in the five work groups reported greater satisfaction with their working conditions and expressed a lower intention to leave the workplace than was average for all forty-nine groups included in the 2014 study. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate how these social workers described their working conditions and their reasons for remaining at the workplace.

In the interviews, two strong themes were identified. The *first* was satisfaction with the climate within the workgroup, which was described as positive and supportive. The impression of a strong cohesive team where all members worked together and were aware of and responsible for the other team members' work situation emerged. The *second* theme was satisfaction with their immediate supervisor who was often described as a reliable, stable, well-structured and sensible person, who could 'create a calm climate' and 'lower the level of anxiety among the social workers' (see also Tham and Strömberg, 2020). The results from these previous studies were the starting point for the design of the present study.

## Aim

The aim of the study was to investigate if the working conditions of social workers in one municipality would be improved after implementing three initiatives: (i) small group supervision for newly educated social workers; (ii) team-strengthening activities and (iii) leadership training for the five team leaders.

The three initiatives are described in detail further on in the article.

## Method

The study was designed in close collaboration between managers on various levels in the municipality and researchers at the local university. The social workers and team leaders who were engaged in processing referrals concerning children and youth in the municipality, five teams in all, were invited to participate in the study. It was emphasised that their participation in the various project activities did not oblige them to also participate in the study itself. However, all the social workers agreed to

participate, together with the five team leaders. The study has strictly followed ethical guidelines and national laws (SFS, 2003). Informed consent was obtained and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the research process. They were assured of their anonymity and neither the questionnaire nor the interviews included any personal data. The participants were also informed that the findings would be presented in a way that would make it impossible to identify any individual or work group.

## Data collection

### Step 1: Baseline measurement: Questionnaire and group interviews

#### The questionnaire

Initially, a questionnaire was distributed through a personal visit by the researcher to the workplace during an ordinary staff meeting. After more information about the purpose of the study was provided, the social workers were asked to answer the questionnaire in seclusion and without consulting their colleagues. The anonymous questionnaires were collected by the researcher before leaving the workplace. Questionnaires with pre-addressed envelopes were provided for the three social workers who had not participated in the meeting. Two of the three questionnaires were filled in and returned. In all, thirty of thirty-one questionnaires were collected at baseline. As vacancies at the workplace were filled during the course of the project, the number of participants increased to thirty-six. All of them responded to the final questionnaire.

#### The instrument: QPS Nordic

The questionnaire was based on the general Nordic Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work (QPS Nordic), developed by researchers from four Nordic countries (Dallner *et al.*, 2000) and previously used in the data collections in the initial study in 2003 ($n = 309$) and the follow-up study in 2014 ($n = 349$). The QPS Nordic is based on three basic concepts—workload, complexity of tasks and quality of the management—and consists of twenty-six scales and thirty-six individual items. The QPS Nordic combines characteristics that have been measured by job stress and job design methods such as the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek *et al.*, 1998) and the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Dallner *et al.* (2000) rated its conceptual

validity as good; the factors corresponded well with most of the dimensions that were intended to be measured by the questionnaire. Reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was also judged to be acceptable, as was, in most cases, test–retest reliability. For a more detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts addressed by QPS Nordic, the preparation of the questionnaire and the validity process, see Dallner *et al.* (2000). The questionnaire was chosen as a measuring instrument because it included factors identified as important in previous research for how working conditions in human service organisations are perceived.

### Data analysis

Mann–Whitney *U*-test (for the scales) and Chi-square or Fisher–Freeman–Halton Exact test (for the single items) were used. Given the small sample, the differences in answers between the two data collections were however seldom statistically significant, even though the changes in numbers/percentages between the social workers' answers in the first and the final data collection were quite large in some cases.

### Group interviews

After the questionnaires were filled in, the researcher interviewed the five teams, all on the same day. The aim of the interviews was to obtain a deeper and more nuanced picture of the situation in each team at baseline. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on how the team members perceived their working conditions with respect to demands at work, support from other team members and from superiors. Also discussed were their expectations regarding the project activities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Information about the staffing situation during the previous two years was collected from the managers at the two units where the teams were working.

## Step 2: The implementation phase

### Weekly, small group supervision for newly educated social workers

As several of the social workers in these five teams were newly educated, two groups for supervision were created: one for social workers with less than one year's experience and another for those who had been working for between one and two years. These groups consisted of seven and six social workers, respectively, and were led by an external supervisor (i.e. a person from outside the organisation) who had

considerable experience of child welfare work. The purpose of the small-group supervision was to give the new practitioners the possibility to reflect on difficult situations they had experienced at work and to receive support and guidance. The supervision also aimed to scaffold the development of professional expertise and the social workers' ability to manage challenging situations in client work. In sum, these groups served as a place for skill-development, learning and support.

### Team-strengthening activities

The second support initiative offered was team-strengthening activities. The description of a strong cohesive work group was a main theme in the interviews with the five work groups that, in the 2014 follow-up study, had reported greater satisfaction with their working conditions. Previous studies have also shown the importance of creating a positive climate in the workgroup if social workers are to remain at the workplace (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006, Tham, 2007a; McFadden *et al.*, 2014; Frost *et al.*, 2017).

The aim was to increase the social workers' ability to develop as a cohesive team, i.e. to create a strong feeling of being a team (Wheelan, 2013). On a revolving schedule every fifth Friday (three occasions/team per semester), the teams were invited for lunch in a restaurant outside the workplace, followed by group activities at the University. These activities were led by a teacher who had a background in physical education, a field of study where knowledge of teambuilding is essential. Each session began with a lecture followed by practical group exercises. These involved communication in the team, group-dynamics, self-reflection concerning norms and values and the participants' view of themselves and of the others on the team.

### Training for team leaders

The third support initiative offered was training through a special programme designed for managers in social work, which focused on their individual strengths and abilities as team leaders. This initiative built on results from the group interviews and on previous research indicating that leaders play an important role in social workers' work satisfaction and intention to remain at the workplace. Several studies have highlighted the importance of leadership for outcomes such as social workers' job satisfaction and retention (Landsman, 2007; Elpers and Westhuis, 2008; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2009; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013) and its close relation to employee well-being (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Skakon *et al.*, 2010).

The training was provided by external consultants who were professionals in leadership training. The team leaders first completed a questionnaire that aimed to measure their leadership style, after which they were given feedback by the course leaders and the social workers in their team. Another part of the training involved reflecting—both within the group and individually with a course leader—on their own strengths as team leaders and on how their leadership could be improved.

## Step 3: Evaluation of the project activities and final measurement

The three activities were evaluated after the first semester and then again after the first year. The participants' evaluation of, and feedback on, the activities were measured by a brief questionnaire with mainly open-ended questions and by interviews with the five teams. Interviews were also conducted with the team leaders in order to obtain their feedback on the training that had been designed especially for them. As the evaluations showed that the social workers appreciated and were satisfied with the content of the team-strengthening activities and with the small group supervision and that they wished to continue in exactly the same way, no changes were made. The team leaders were also satisfied with their training. Their only complaint was that they would have liked to have met more frequently with their course leaders. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the limited project budget.

After two project years, the social workers, the five team leaders and the two heads of the units were gathered together with the project leader for a full day of reflection and evaluation. Initially, the social workers were asked to once again answer the questionnaire individually, in seclusion and without discussing it with their colleagues.

After responding to the questionnaire, the five teams, the team leaders and the two unit heads separately discussed and reflected on their experiences of the project in response to questions that had been formulated in advance. They were asked to summarise their reflections in PowerPoint presentations in an afternoon session together with the project leader.

## Results

### The group interviews at baseline

When the project started, it was clear that the situation at the workplace had been under strain during the last few years. High turnover, recruitment problems, many newly educated and hired-in social workers from staffing companies, sick leaves, overtime and budget cuts were recurring

themes in the group interviews. In addition, dissatisfaction with the facilities and with technical equipment were frequently mentioned. Many also mentioned that they had wanted more time for reflection together within the team.

## The questionnaire

### Background data

At project start, more than half of the group of social workers were younger than thirty years, while almost a third were between thirty and forty years old (Table 1). Furthermore, almost a third had been working one year or less as social workers, and nearly half of the group for five years or less. All were women and all held a bachelor's degree in social work. Two-thirds were handling cases concerning children, the rest concerning adolescents.

## What changes had occurred during the two project years?

After the two project years (2017–2018), it was clear that the situation at the workplace had improved in several respects. Organisational factors such as how the social workers rated the climate in the organisation, the leadership and collaboration in the work group had improved and more of them expressed an intention to remain at the workplace. On the other hand, however, the social workers' perceptions of their work tasks were more varied than at project start. For example, more of them perceived demands at work as being higher than at project start and more often

**Table 1** Age and work experience

|  | Social workers | |
|---|---|---|
|  | January 2017 (n = 30)[a] | December 2018 (n = 36) |
| Age (years), n (%) | | |
| 20–30 | 15 (52%) | 15 (42%) |
| 31–40 | 9 (31%) | 14 (39%) |
| 41–50 | 4 (14%) | 6 (17%) |
| 51–60 | 1 (3%) | 1 (3%) |
| >60 | 0% | 0% |
| Work experience (years), n (%) | | |
| 0–1 | 9 (31%) | 1 (3%) |
| 1–3 | 5 (17%) | 13 (36%) |
| 3–5 | 3 (10%) | 10 (28%) |
| 5–10 | 8 (28%) | 8 (22%) |
| >10 | 4 (14%) | 4 (11%) |

[a]One of the social workers did not respond to these two questions.

perceived role conflicts. Interestingly, more of the social workers were now at the same time often satisfied with the quality of their work and more often perceived the work as positively challenging.

The two unit managers reported that they had been able to fill all the vacancies that they had had for years, and that they no longer needed to hire from staffing companies. Filling the vacancies increased the number of participants in the project from thirty to thirty-six.

The results are presented in more detail below.

### Support from colleagues and perception of group work

As can be seen from Table 2, at the start of the project, the majority of the social workers were satisfied with the group work and their relationship to their colleagues and after the two-year period of the study their views had improved further. For example, now all stated that their colleagues were often willing to listen to their problems at work and nearly all said that they often received help and support from their colleagues. Their assessment of their work group's ability to solve problems had also improved. However, the proportion of the social workers who perceived that the work was often carried out in a flexible manner was now somewhat lower.

### Leadership and support from the immediate superior

Looking at how the social workers rated their immediate superior's leadership, some improvements had occurred here as well. For example, now nearly all of them perceived that the superior often treated the social workers fairly and equally compared with three quarters of them at project start.

The changes regarding *empowering leadership* were also in a positive direction. However, although the proportions had increased, still only slightly more than half of the group answered that their immediate superior often encouraged them to speak up if they had a different opinion, or that the relationship to their superior seldom was a source of stress.

While a larger proportion of the social workers now answered that they often could get *help and support* from their immediate superior, fewer of them than at project start perceived that their superior often was willing to listen to problems occurring at work. Notably, still only a third of the social workers answered that their achievements at work often were appreciated by their immediate superior.

### Organisational climate

Regarding the organisational climate at the workplace, and especially the aspect of *human resource orientation*, the positive changes were

**Table 2** Support from colleagues and superior, group work and leadership

| | Social workers | |
|---|---|---|
| | January 2017 (n = 30) | December 2018 (n = 36) |
| Support from colleagues (1–5)[a] (m) | 4.21 | 4.47 |
| I can often[b] receive help and support from my colleagues, n (%) | 23 (79%) | 34 (95%) |
| My colleagues are often willing to listen to problems in work, n (%) | 25 (86%) | 36 (100%) |
| Group work (1–5)[a] (m) | 4.08 | 4.24 |
| Work is often carried out in a flexible way in my work group, n (%) | 25 (83%) | 28 (78%) |
| My work group is often good at solving problems, n (%) | 24 (80%) | 34 (94%) |
| Fair leadership (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.83 | 4.12 |
| My immediate superior often distributes work fairly and impartially, n (%) | 20 (74%) | 26 (74%) |
| My immediate superior often treats the workers fairly and equally, n (%) | 22 (76%) | 33 (94%) |
| My relationship to my immediate superior is seldom a source of stress, n (%) | 28 (93%) | 34 (94%) |
| Empowering leadership (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.32 | 3.67 |
| My immediate superior often encourages me to participate in important decisions, n (%) | 18 (64%) | 25 (69%) |
| My immediate superior often encourages me to speak up if I have another opinion, n (%) | 13 (45%) | 20 (56%) |
| My immediate superior often helps me to develop my skills, n (%) | 12 (43%) | 18 (51%) |
| Support and feedback from superior (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.66 | 3.78 |
| I can often receive feedback and support from immediate superior, n (%) | 21 (72%) | 28 (78%) |
| My immediate superior is often willing to listen to problems at work, n (%) | 25 (86%) | 27 (75%) |
| Work achievements are often appreciated by my immediate superior, n (%) | 7 (24%) | 11 (31%) |

Mann Whitney U-test (for the scales) and Chi-Square or Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test (for the single items) were used; none of the values were significant

[a]1 = very seldom or never; 2 = rather seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = rather often; 5 = very often or always.

[b]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who answered *rather often* and *very often or always* taken together.

significant (Table 3). However, still only about half of the group answered that the personnel often are rewarded and that they often felt looked after at the workplace, and only about a third remarked that the management often showed an interest in the health and well-being of their personnel.

The *social climate*, which was perceived as encouraging, supportive, relaxed and comfortable by the vast majority of the social workers at project start, had now in most aspects improved even further. This change was also statistically significant. Nine out of ten now expressed

**Table 3** Organisational climate

| | Social workers | | Significance level |
|---|---|---|---|
| | January 2017 (*n* = 30) | December 2018 (*n* = 36) | |
| Human resource orientation (1–5)[a] (m) | 2.77 | 3.25 | 0.026* |
|   Workers are often[b] rewarded for a work well done, *n* (%) | 9 (35%) | 18 (53%) | ns |
|   Workers are often well taken care of in the organisation, *n* (%) | 6 (21%) | 17 (50%) | ns |
|   The management is often interested in the health and well-being of the personnel, *n* (%) | 5 (17%) | 12 (36%) | ns |
| Social climate (1–5)[c] (m) | 4.11 | 4.29 | ns |
| The climate at the workplace is,[d] *n* (%) | | | |
|   Encouraging and supportive | 24 (83%) | 33 (92%) | ns |
|   Relaxed and comfortable | 21 (72%) | 32 (89%) | 0.013* |
|   Not distrustful or suspicious | 26 (90%) | 29 (81%) | ns |
| Innovative climate (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.56 | 3.81 | ns |
|   Personnel at my workplace often take their own initiative, *n* (%) | 22 (76%) | 30 (83%) | ns |
|   Personnel at my workplace are often encouraged to suggest improvements, *n* (%) | 15 (56%) | 26 (72%) | ns |
|   There is often enough communication at my workplace, *n* (%) | 16 (55%) | 19 (56%) | ns |
|   Method development is often discussed at my workplace,[e] *n* (%) | 11 (39%) | 21 (58%) | ns |

ns = not significant ($p > 0.05$), * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$. Mann–Whitney U-test (for the scales) and Chi-Square or Fisher–Freeman–Halton Exact test (for the single items) were used.
[a]1 = very seldom or never; 2 = rather seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = rather often; 5 = very often or always.
[b]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who have answered *rather often* and *very often or always* taken together.
[c]1 = to a very small extent or not at all; 2 = to a small extent; 3 = to some extent; 4 = to a rather great extent; 5 = to a very great extent.
[d]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who have answered to a *rather great extent* or to a *very great extent* taken together and to a *very small extent or not at all* and to a *small extent*, respectively.
[e]Not included in the scale.

that the climate in the workplace was to a large extent encouraging and supportive, as well as relaxed and comfortable.

More of the social workers now stated that personnel at the workplace often took their own initiatives and were encouraged to suggest improvements (*innovative climate*). Yet, still only slightly more than half of the social workers perceived that there was a sufficient flow of communication at the workplace.

### Overall work satisfaction and intention to leave

The overall work satisfaction had improved, which also was statistically significant (Table 4). Nine out of ten social workers in the study had

**Table 4** Work satisfaction and intention to stay at the workplace

| | Social workers | | Significance level |
|---|---|---|---|
| | January 2017 (n = 30) | December 2018 (n = 36) | |
| Work satisfaction (1–5)[a] (m) | 2.18 | 2.53 | 0.031* |
| Satisfied[b] with: | | | |
| My colleagues, n (%) | 26 (87%) | 35 (97%) | ns |
| The management n (%) | 15 (52%) | 26 (73%) | ns |
| Facilities, sound and lighting, n (%) | 2 (7%) | 6 (17%) | ns |
| How the organisation is run, n (%) | 4 (14%) | 9 (26%) | ns |
| My salary, n (%) | 11 (38%) | 21 (58%) | 0.022* |
| Intention to leave (1–5)[c] (m) | 2.72 | 2.32 | ns |
| During the last year often[d] thought of: | | | |
| Changing professions, n (%) | 8 (28%) | 9 (25%) | ns |
| Changing work tasks within the organisation, n (%) | 8 (29%) | 2 (6%) | 0.006** |
| Changing place of work, n (%) | 12 (41%) | 12 (31%) | ns |

ns = not significant ($p>0.05$), *=$p<0.05$, **=$p<0.01$, ***=$p<0.001$. Mann–Whitney U-test (for the scales) and Chi-square or Fisher–Freeman–Halton Exact test (for the single items) were used.
[a]1 = very satisfied; 2 = satisfied; 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 4 = dissatisfied; 5 = very dissatisfied.
[b]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who answered *satisfied* and *very satisfied* taken together.
[c]1 = very seldom or never; 2 = rather seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = rather often; 5 = very often or always.
[d]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who answered *rather often* and *very often or always* taken together.

already at project start indicated that they were satisfied with their colleagues; after the two-year study period, nearly all of them expressed satisfaction. Furthermore, more of them expressed satisfaction with the management and with their salary, also a statistically significant change. Notably, only two of the social workers at project start said they were satisfied with the facilities, sound and lighting and only a few more did so after the two years. The same pattern can be seen concerning satisfaction with how their organisation was run, as still only a quarter of the social workers expressed satisfaction.

Fewer of the social workers stated that they during the past year often had thought of leaving the workplace or changing their work tasks within the organisation. This development was statistically significant and most salient regarding those who at project start often had thought of changing work tasks within the organisation, where now only two persons compared with eight at project start answered so. However, worth noting is that almost a third of the social workers answered that they often had thought of changing their place of work.

*Work tasks*

As can be seen from Table 5, the changes in how the social workers perceived their work tasks point in different directions. While more of the social workers now expressed being satisfied with the quality of their own work and with the amount of work done (*mastery*) and more often perceived *positive challenges* at work compared with at project start, more of them now answered that they often perceived *role conflicts* and they assessed *quantitative demands* as high. For example, more of the social workers now answered that they often were given assignments without adequate resources to complete them, a statistically significant change, and that they were often confronted with incompatible requests from two or more people. Furthermore, more of them now answered that they often needed to work overtime and that the work was so unfairly distributed that the tasks tended to pile up. While fewer of the social workers answered that they often needed to change their work plans for the day due to staff shortages, more of them now answered that they needed to do so because of urgent situations arising in client work.

Regarding *control over decisions*, the answers pointed in different directions. While more of the social workers now stated that they often could influence work methods, fewer of them now answered that they could influence which colleagues to work with or the amount of work they were assigned (where the latter also was statistically significant).

A few more of the social workers now perceived that responsibilities at work often were known and that they knew exactly what was expected from them (*role clarity*).

## Reflections at the closing-up day

After spending some two hours on reflecting together on what the project had meant for them as a team (in terms of communication, norms, values and roles), for them individually as social workers and what it had meant for their clients, the five teams presented the summaries of their discussion to each other.

In sum, it became obvious that the participants generally had appreciated taking part in the various project activities. Frequently mentioned was that they now had gained a stronger team feeling, a sense of cohesiveness, that the climate at work was more positive now, more open and that there was acceptance of individual differences. Furthermore, they commented that they now knew each other better and felt more secure in the team. Many underlined that this also meant that it was easier to collaborate with one another on difficult client cases, which also resulted in improvements in the quality of the work and led to positive outcomes for the clients. Having lunch and taking part in other activities

**Table 5** Work demands, control of decisions and role conflicts

| | Social workers | | Significance level |
|---|---|---|---|
| | January 2017 ($n = 30$) | December 2018 ($n = 36$) | |
| Mastery (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.67 | 3.89 | 0.084[†] |
| Often[b] satisfied with the quality of my work | 11 (39%) | 21 (58%) | ns |
| Often satisfied with the amount of work done | 13 (45%) | 17 (47%) | ns |
| Often satisfied with my ability to solve problems in work | 22 (76%) | 32 (89%) | ns |
| Often content with my ability to maintain a good relationship with my colleagues at work | 26 (90%) | 34 (94%) | ns |
| Positive challenges at work (1–5)[a] (m) | 4.18 | 4.38 | ns |
| Work is often challenging in a constructive way | 23 (77%) | 34 (94%) | ns |
| Often consider my work to be meaningful | 28 (93%) | 36 (100%) | ns |
| Role conflicts (1–5)[a] (m) | 2.59 | 2.85 | ns |
| Often have to perform tasks that should be done differently | 6 (21%) | 8 (22%) | ns |
| Often given assignments without adequate resources to complete them | 6 (20%) | 16 (44%) | 0.020* |
| Often confronted with incompatible requests from two or more people | 3 (10%) | 8 (23%) | ns |
| Quantitative demands (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.30 | 3.51 | ns |
| Have to work overtime often | 6 (21%) | 11 (31%) | ns |
| Often have too much to do | 18 (62%) | 22 (61%) | ns |
| Workload tends to pile up often | 14 (50%) | 23 (64%) | ns |
| Often forced to change the plans of the working day because of sudden crises in client work[c] | 11 (37%) | 17 (47%) | ns |
| Often forced to change the plans of the working day because of staff shortages[c] | 9 (30%) | 8 (22%) | ns |
| Demands from work often influence private life negatively[c] | 14 (48%) | 13 (36%) | ns |
| Control of decisions (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.17 | 3.10 | ns |
| Can often influence work methods | 16 (55%) | 26 (72%) | ns |
| Can often influence the amount of work given | 12 (40%) | 8 (22%) | ns |
| Can often influence choice of co-workers | 10 (34%) | 3 (8%) | 0.008** |
| Can often decide when to be in contact with clients | 21 (75%) | 26 (72%) | ns |
| Can often influence important decisions in work | 16 (55%) | 19 (53%) | ns |
| Role clarity (1–5)[a] (m) | 3.98 | 4.07 | ns |
| Responsibilities at work are often known | 26 (87%) | 32 (89%) | ns |
| Often know exactly what is expected from me | 23 (77%) | 30 (83%) | ns |
| Work goals are possible to reach[c] | 15 (58%) | 21 (75%) | ns |

ns = not significant ($p > 0.05$), *= $p < 0.05$, **= $p < 0.01$, ***= $p < 0.001$. Mann–Whitney U-test (for the scales) and Chi-Square or Fisher–Freeman–Halton Exact test (for the single items) were used.
[a]1 = very seldom or never; 2 = rather seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = rather often; 5 = very often or always.
[b]The numbers and percentages in the table show how many who have answered *rather often* and *very often or always* taken together.
[c]Single item (not included in a scale).

together outside the workplace were greatly appreciated and was expressed as having contributed to the positive feelings. The social workers underlined the importance of continuing the team-strengthening activities and that these activities should continue to be led by someone from outside the organisation. Many of them commented that these activities in fact had been like a university course.

The importance of continuing the small group supervision for newly educated social workers was also underlined. Many commented that they felt anxious about how their situation at work would develop after the project ended. Considering that only one of the social workers among the thirty-six participants in the study now was new to the profession and had been working for less than a year as social worker, it was suggested to start a joint group of social workers from all sections of the social services, which the two unit mangers also agreed on.

The unit managers also expressed satisfaction with the project activities. They reported that they now had been able to fill all the vacancies they had for years and no longer needed to hire from staffing companies. They both underlined the importance of continuing with the team-strengthening activities and discussed possible ways for that to happen.

## Discussion

This study investigated if working conditions for social workers would be improved after implementing three initiatives: team-strengthening activities, small group supervision for newly educated social workers and training for their team leaders. Bearing in mind the limitations of having a small sample and the impossibility of drawing causal conclusions from a study with this design, the results from the questionnaire and the social workers' reflections show that several aspects of the working conditions had improved during the two project years. The improvements were most evident in connection with how the social workers perceived the organisational climate, their immediate superior and their intention to remain at the workplace. An important result was that the turnover which had been high for many years now almost had stopped and vacancies that had existed for years were now filled. These results are in line with a previous study which found that when the social workers felt looked after and that management was interested in their health and well-being, they were more inclined to remain at their workplace (Tham, 2007a).

However, we cannot conclude from this study that the project activities were the main—or the only—reason for the improvements. Perhaps, the implementation of other initiatives would have reached the same result; for example, it might have been the fact that the management at the municipal level showed interest in the social workers' health and

well-being that was the main reason for the improved situation. That the most salient improvements can be found in how the social workers perceived the human resource orientation in the organisation can be seen as supporting this possibility. Now almost twice as many of the social workers than at project start perceived that management often showed interest in the health and well-being of the personnel and that workers were often taken care of in the organisation.

Yet, not all aspects of the working conditions had improved. Taking a more critical perspective, the fact that the social workers' relation to their closest superior did not show the same positive development as their relation to their co-workers merits further discussion. In fact, after the two project years, fewer of the social workers answered that their immediate superior often is willing to listen to problems in work. This raises the question of whether the use of external supervisors both for the small group supervision and for the team-strengthening activities might have led to less contact with, and less appreciation of, the superiors. The data suggest that the social workers now received more external support than internal supervision, which in the long run might lead to negative consequences for the relationship between the superiors and their teams. Perhaps focusing more on the team leaders and providing them with their own peer supervision could have led to more salient improvements concerning the social workers' relationship to their team leaders?

At the same time as the social workers expressed greater satisfaction with their organisation and their colleagues and fewer of them expressed an intention to leave the workplace, the demands of their work seem to have increased during the two project years. More of the social workers now answered that they often have to work overtime, that the work often builds up and that they often have to change their plans for the workday due to urgent situations arising in client work. However, that the intention to leave had decreased at the same time as work demands had increased also in line with the previous studies among social workers that have shown that demands at work were not associated with the intention to leave the workplace (Nissly *et al.*, 2005; Tham, 2007a).

That work demands had increased while some aspects of control over decisions and role clarity had decreased indicates that the social workers were working under greater strain than before (Karasek, 1979). At the same time, they regarded their work and their own ability to cope with these demands more positively, which could be understood as a consequence of having worked for an additional two years and having become more experienced. In these respects, the results underline the importance of work experience for managing complex cases, such as those concerning child welfare.

Notably, even if the social workers now expressed greater satisfaction with many aspects of their organisation, room for improvement remains.

This is particularly clear when it comes to some of the aspects of leadership and the human resource orientation in the organisation. These two aspects of working conditions, along with the social climate in the organisation, have been shown to be the most important for social workers' intention to remain at the workplace (Tham, 2007a; Landsman, 2007; Elpers and Westhuis, 2008; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013). For this reason, it seems to be of high priority for employers and managers to ensure that the social workers feel rewarded for a job well done and that the organisation is looking after them and is interested in their health and well-being.

Although these problems have existed in the Western world for decades, studies aiming to investigate if or how the working conditions of social workers could be improved are hard to find. The results of this study are therefore likely to be of interest to managers and employers in social work. As the initiatives undertaken here mainly concerned training to improve communication within and between workgroups and with team leaders, as well as providing support to newly educated social workers, the results are likely to be transferrable to other social work organisations in other countries as well. In future research, it would be interesting to perform this type of implementation study in organisations that serve different client groups. That the social workers' relationship to their closest superiors did not improve as much as their relations with their co-workers suggest that this relationship could be examined further in future studies. A comparative study where work groups in different countries are followed could shed some light on the question of whether similar initiatives would lead to improvements in other contexts.

## Conclusion

Although this was a small-scale study undertaken in only one organisation, with a design that does not allow us to draw causal conclusions, the positive outcomes—especially when it comes to workplace retention—might be of interest to other social work organisations that have been struggling with these problems for decades. This study indicates that even small-scale and fairly low-cost initiative might make a difference when it comes to improving the working conditions and increasing retention among social workers. Finding ways to make improvements does not have to be rocket science, nor are such initiatives difficult to implement.

## Acknowledgements

## Funding

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