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A Professional Role in Transition: Swedish Child Welfare Social Workers' Descriptions of Their Work in 2003 and 2014

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Abstract

This study is based on a follow-up in 2014 of a survey conducted in 2003 among Swedish child welfare social workers. The same questionnaire used in 2003 ($n = 309$) was distributed to social workers ($n = 349$) who, in 2014, were working with the same types of tasks as in the previously investigated areas. The overall aim was to examine and analyse how working conditions have developed over these eleven years. From the results, two general patterns emerge. *The first* shows a deterioration of their working conditions, with higher work demands, increased role conflicts and less possibility to influence important decisions. The intention to leave the workplace or the profession had also increased. *The second* overall pattern concerns the emerging changes in job content, where the work today seems to be focused on conducting investigations whereas the vast majority of the social workers in 2003 also mentioned other tasks, such as giving advice and support, as being part of their job content. Contrary to their wishes, the social workers of today seem to have less time to devote to direct contact with clients. The consequences of these changes for the professional role of social workers and for their clients are discussed.

Keywords: Child welfare, organisation, professional practice

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Introduction

Today, there is little doubt that social workers handling investigations of children and youth work under strenuous conditions. High work demands, recruitment problems and high staff turnover have for many years been reported in the Western world (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001; de Panfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Webb and Carpenter, 2012; Hussein *et al.*, 2014; Travis *et al.*, 2016). In recent years, these problems have received growing attention in Sweden and other Nordic countries (Tham, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2009; Pösö and Forsman, 2013; Aronsson *et al.*, 2014; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2014; Blomberg *et al.*, 2015). Also, in employment statistics, social workers are singled out as an especially vulnerable occupational group where 76 per cent of the sampled social workers have described their work as being mentally stressful; this is the highest proportion among all occupational groups (National Work Environment Authority, 2014). Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of the social workers report that, every week, they feel tired and listless, and find it difficult to stop thinking about the job when off work. In addition, the number of sickness cases reported to be caused by social or organisational conditions has almost doubled among social workers between 2010 and 2015 (National Work Environment Authority, 2015). In response to this development, the Swedish National Work Environment Authority has decided that, in 2016–17, it will conduct some 300 inspections in social workers' workplaces around the country. In sum, the situation pictured above leads to questions about how the working conditions for social workers in Sweden have developed in recent years. These questions were the starting point for the present study.

The Swedish social welfare system can be described as family-service-oriented, providing support rather than merely substantiating reports of abuse (Khoo *et al.*, 2002; Meagher *et al.*, 2009). Concurrently, the focus for social workers is to give support to parents to avoid having to remove the children from the family home. Although the Swedish welfare state has undergone changes in recent years and private companies have entered the previously public monopoly on the organisation and production of welfare, the majority of social workers still work in the municipal social services, most of them in the statutory social welfare sector (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005; Meeuwisse and Swärd, 2007). However, as in other parts of the Western world, the changing context of child welfare systems in Sweden has also impacted on the professional role and job content of social workers in several ways. The increasing standardisation is described as having negatively impacted social workers' professional discretion (Ponnert and Svensson, 2016), the focus on budget issues as

changing the work from a needs-led practice to a budget-led practice (Berg *et al.*, 2008) and the creation of an organisational climate of silence and abeyance as obliging social workers to lower quality standards (Astvik *et al.*, 2014). A question that arises is whether this development is also apparent in how today's social workers describe their work content and the conditions under which they work in comparison with their how their predecessors did a decade ago.

The present study is based on a follow-up in 2014 of a survey conducted in 2003 among Swedish child welfare social workers. The same questionnaire used in 2003 ($n = 309$) was distributed to social workers in 2014 ($n = 349$) who were working with the same types of tasks as in the previously investigated municipalities and town districts. The overall aim was to examine and analyse how working conditions have developed over the eleven years that have passed. More specifically: How do these social workers, compared with those who worked there in 2003, describe their working conditions with respect to: (i) job content; (ii) demands, control over decisions, role conflicts and role clarity; and (iii) whether they intend to leave their workplace or the profession?

Job demands, *control over decisions*, *role conflicts* and *role clarity* have for a long time been recurrent themes in studies of working conditions. The combination of high job demands and low control (Karasek, 1979; Karasek and Theorell, 1990) has been described as having a negative influence on the health and well-being of workers. Role conflicts (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970) occur when the person is confronted with conflicting expectations. These conflicting messages can come from the same person, from two or more persons or can be inter-role—that is, when one person has two or more conflicting roles. Role conflicts have been shown to be a significant predictor of stress and job dissatisfaction among social workers (Carpenter *et al.*, 2003, 2015) and, in some models of job demands, have been grouped together with work overload (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Um and Harrison, 1998). In addition, role conflicts have also been linked to an intention to leave the workplace among social workers (Acker, 2004; Kim and Mor Barak, 2015). Social workers have emerged in previous studies as being more exposed than other professional groups to both role conflicts and job demands (Tham and Meagher, 2009; Kim, 2011; Blomberg *et al.*, 2015). Also, role clarity or role ambiguity (i.e. to what extent there is uncertainty about the scope of the job and the expectations from others) has in earlier studies emerged as an important source of job dissatisfaction (Balloch *et al.*, 1998; Pousette, 2001). Lower role clarity is described as a common problem in human service organisations in which goals are often described as vague and ambiguous (Hasenfeld, 2010).

Core concepts in understanding human service organisations

In human service organisations such as the social services (Hasenfeld, 1983, 2010), the relationship between the professional and the client is described as the *core activity*. This relationship is crucial for the help the client will receive, as it structures the content of the information the professional receives from the client as well as how the information is interpreted. Applied to social services, this means, for example, that a social worker who has enough time for, and experience of, meeting clients in similar situations will probably have a clearer picture of the clients' needs, which leads to a more correct decision than if an inexperienced social worker working under stressful conditions meets the same client. Other characteristics that distinguish human service organisations from other types of organisations are the appreciable influence of the institutional environment, unclear service technology and the fact that the work is emotional and gendered (Hasenfeld, 1983, 2010).

A useful theory for understanding human service organisations is institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). It proposes that the structure of such organisations is highly influenced by the institutional environment. A central concept is *legitimacy*. As organisations such as the social services are highly institutionalised, they must constantly seek, obtain and maintain legitimacy from the environment (Scott, 2010). They have to show that they actually do what is expected of them. The fact that the core activity—here, the relationship between social worker and client—is embedded in the activities and thus difficult to review and evaluate leads to the creation of rules, procedures and documents that can be displayed and judged from the outside. These activities are important for maintaining legitimacy. Examples of these procedures and documents in child welfare work are assessment tools such as Looking After Children Electronic System (Parker *et al.*, 1991), the Integrated Children's system (ICS) (Anderson, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2009) and, in Sweden, BBIC (Barns Behov i Centrum (Children's needs in focus)) (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2009).

Another key concept in institutional theory is *decoupling*, which means that, when institutionalised rules are embedded in the organisation's structure, they can be decoupled from the organisation's core operations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For example, service descriptions can vary considerably from what the employee actually does, and various policy documents do not always reflect the real activities (Alvesson, 2013). To use assessment instruments such as the ICS can, from an institutional perspective, be seen as a way to create and retain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Hasenfeld, 2010), as they are documentation that can be shown to an independent examiner. These core concepts

from institutional theory and from Hasenfeld's description of HSO were used in the current study as an interpretative frame.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of all the social workers in the field of child welfare who were handling referrals and investigating the situation of children and youth in half of the municipalities and half of the town districts in Stockholm County, in the years 2003 ($n = 309$) and 2014 ($n = 349$). The principle guiding the selection of municipalities and town districts was to obtain as wide a socio-economic variation among them as possible. The sampling method was systematic; municipalities and town districts were ranked by the proportion of children and youth in out-of-home care (proportion/1,000 children and youth habitants) and every second municipality/town district was chosen from the ranked list in order to ensure that areas with high, medium and low proportions of children in out-of-home care were included. Research has shown that this measure co-varies with other indicators of social disadvantage, such as high social assistance costs per inhabitant, a high proportion of single mothers and a high proportion of non-Nordic immigrants (Lundström and Vinnerljung, 2001). All in all, fifty work groups consisting of between three and twenty social workers were included. Most groups consisted of four to seven social workers.

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). The QPS Nordic is based on three basic concepts: work-load, complexity of tasks and quality of management. Dallner *et al.* (2000) have determined the conceptual validity of the instrument to be good; the factors correspond well with most of the dimensions that the questionnaire is intended to measure. Reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, has also been judged by the researchers to be acceptable, as was, in most cases, test–retest reliability. For a more detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of the questionnaire and its validation, see Lindström *et al.* (1997) and Dallner *et al.* (2000). The scales used in the present study and their items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Work demands, control of decisions, role clarity and role conflicts in 2003 and 2014. Mean (m) and per cent. Scales, their items and single questions

	Social workers in 2003 (n=309)	Social workers in 2014 (n=313)	Significance level[a]
Quantitative demands (1–5)[b] *(m)*	*3.43*	*3.68*	**
Work-load tends often to pile up (%)	50	60	†
Have to work overtime often (%)	33	45	***
Have very often or always too much to do (%)	28	37	ns
Control of decisions (1–5)[b] *(m)*	*3.44*	*3.18*	***
Can often influence work methods (%)	64	48	**
Can often influence the amount of work given (%)	20	13	**
Can often influence choice of co-workers (%)	55	32	***
Role clarity (1–5)[b] *(m)*	*3.90*	*4.05*	**
Responsibilities are often known (%)	85	90	ns
What is expected at work is often exactly known (%)	69	74	**
Role conflicts (1–5)[b] *(m)*	*2.82*	*2.95*	†
Often obliged to do things in a way that should be done differently (%)	17	30	**
Often given assignments without adequate resources to complete them (%)	28	35	†
Often confronted with incompatible resources from two or more people (%)	19	26	ns
Number of ongoing cases (mean)	10.1	10.3	ns
Often change the plans of the working day because of sudden crises in client work (%)	35	51	***
Often change the plans of the working day because of staff shortages (%)	14	25	***
Often negative influence from work on private life (%)	28	39	**

†$p<10$; *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
[a]The differences between the years 2003 and 2014 are tested by t-tests (scales/mean) and by Chi^2 tests for their items and for single questions.
[b]1=very seldom or never; 2 = rather seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = rather often; 5 = very often or always. ns, not significant.

Data collection and ethical considerations

As in the 2003 study, the questionnaire was distributed by personal visits to the workplaces during an 'ordinary' staff meeting. The study strictly follows ethical guidelines and national laws (SFS, 2003, p. 460). The author received permission to conduct the study from the heads of the divisions in all included town district and municipalities. Informed consent was obtained. The participants received written information about the study's purpose and procedure and that participation was voluntary. Further, the participants were ensured that the findings would be presented only on an overall level so that it would not be possible to identify the participating town districts/municipalities or work groups. They were also informed that the answers would not be communicated to

their colleagues or supervisors. The method of data collection made it possible to inform the participants further about the purpose of the study, assure them of their anonymity and answer any questions they might have concerning the study or the questionnaire. It also gave some measure of control over the circumstances under which the questionnaires were filled in; the respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire in seclusion and without consulting their colleagues. Questionnaires with addressed envelopes were provided for the social workers who had not participated in the meeting. The drop-out rate was 3 per cent in 2003 (eleven out of 321 questionnaires) and 19 per cent in 2014 (eighty-three of the 435 questionnaires were not returned). A difference between the data collections in 2003 and 2014 was that team members were more often missing during the visits in 2014. The most common reason for their absence, as explained by their supervisors, was that the absent social workers had to prioritise emergency situations in client work.

The data were processed in SPSS (version 22.0).

Results

Descriptive data: the social workers in 2003 and in 2014

As can be seen in Table 2, one of the more salient differences between the two groups under study is that a larger part of the social workers who currently work in the surveyed municipalities and town districts are younger—on average, three years—than those who worked there in 2003 (for the sake of readability, 'today' is used instead of 2014 and the social workers who answered the follow-up questionnaire in 2014 are named 'currently working' or 'today's social workers'). Today, a third of the social workers working at the study's sites are between twenty and thirty years old, compared with 17 per cent in 2003. Although there is no significant difference in work experience between those working in 2003 and those working in 2014, it is clear that more of the social workers in 2014 have been working for a shorter time with their current employer than were those in 2003. However, the average time at the current workplace has not changed significantly.

Slightly more of the social workers today have a Bachelor in Social Work (BSW). Furthermore, the proportion of men working in the study's sites has declined. In most other respects, the two groups of respondents are similar.

A difference in the organising of the workplace between 2003 and 2014 is that nearly half of the municipalities and town districts have set up specialised groups whose main task is to receive and pre-judge new referrals. Because these social workers' job content is not sufficiently

Table 2 Sample descriptives in 2003 and 2014

	Social workers In 2003 (n=309)	Social workers in 2014 (n=313)	Significance level[a]
Age (mean)	40	37	**
Proportion social workers under 30 years (%)	17	32	***
Proportion of men (%)	14	10	†
Married or co-habitant (%)	65	66	ns
Children under 18 years old (%)	50	52	ns
Bachelor of Science in Social Work (%)	78	84	*
Years as social worker (mean)	7.9	7.4	ns
Have been working a year or less as social worker (%)	15	19	ns
Have been working ten years or more as social worker (%)	30	23	ns
Years employed by current employer (mean)	4.4	4.2	ns
Have been employed a year or less by the current employer (%)	31	34	**
Have been employed more than 10 years by the current employer (%)	15	8	**
Handling only cases concerning *children* (%)	37	32	ns
Handling only cases concerning *youth* (%)	34	36	ns
Handling both *child and youth* cases (%)	29	32	ns

†$p<10$; *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
[a]Differences between the years 2003 and 2014 are tested by Chi^2-tests (%) and t-tests (mean). ns, not significant.

comparable with the job content of those who worked there in the study's sites in 2003, these (thirty-six) questionnaires were excluded from further analysis.

Differences in job content

From the social workers' descriptions of their work tasks, it is clear that the content of their work has changed considerably between 2003 and 2014. One of the more salient changes is that the work tasks today are described as being much more demarcated (Table 3). When the social workers were asked to list their various tasks, a large majority (84 per cent) in 2003 answered that *giving advice and support* was part of their work responsibilities—an answer given by only a quarter of the social workers in 2014. Similarly, a fifth of the social workers in 2003 answered that *treatment work* was included in their work compared with only 2 per cent giving that answer today. The same pattern emerges in how many state that *prevention work* is one of their tasks. In sum, while the

Table 3 Job contents in 2003 and 2014

Work also includes:	2003 (n=309)	2014 (n=313)	Significance level[a]
Giving advice and support (%)	84	25	***
Treatment work (%)	21	2	***
Prevention work (%)	39	9	***
Outreach work (%)	8	2	***
Follow-ups (%)	93	82	***
Spends a quarter or less of the working time in direct contact with clients (%)	18	33	***
Spends three-quarters or more of the working time in direct contacts with clients (%)	24	12	***
Would like to spend at least three-quarters of the working time in direct contact with clients (%)	53	61	*
Would like to spend more of the working time in direct contact with clients (%)	52	66	**

†$p<10$; *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
[a]Chi^2-tests on differences between the years 2003 and 2014.

job content eleven years earlier covered a wider range of tasks, the work today seems to be mainly about conducting investigations.

Another change in the social workers' descriptions of their job content is that today's social workers spend less of their working time in direct contact with clients. Today, a third of the social workers, compared with a fifth in 2003, state that they spend only a quarter of their working time in direct contact with clients. Similarly, twice as many of the social workers stated in 2003 that they spend as much as three-quarters of their working time in direct contact with clients compared with social workers today. This development is not something the social workers have chosen for themselves. The majority (61 per cent) of the social workers would prefer to spend at least three-quarters of their time in direct contact with clients. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of the social workers today would like to have more frequent contacts with clients, compared with half of the social workers (52 per cent) in 2003.

Work demands, control, role clarity and role conflicts

At the same time as the work tasks today are described as being more demarcated and that less time is spent on direct contacts with clients, the social workers who today work in the previously surveyed sites report having a heavier work-load than those who worked there in 2003 reported having (Table 1). More of the social workers today report that they often have to work overtime and very often or always have too much to do than their predecessors stated in 2003. Similarly, more of them report that their work-load often tends to pile up and that the

demands of work often negatively influence their home and family life.

The work is described today as being more often influenced by urgent situations arising in client work. Half of the social workers in 2014, compared with a third in 2003, report that they often have to change their work plans for the day due to emergencies concerning clients, and a quarter due to staff shortages, compared with half as many reporting this in 2003.

At the same time as job demands are described as being higher today, the social workers seem to have less control over decision making. They report having less possibility to influence the choice of methods, the amount of work given to them or the selection of co-workers than their predecessors reported in 2003. A perhaps positive result is that the work seems to be more clearly defined today; the social workers know more clearly what is required of them and what their responsibilities are. At the same time, however, more of them state that they are often obliged to do things that they feel should be done differently and are more often given assignments without adequate resources to complete them.

Intention to leave the workplace or the profession

Although staff turnover was high even in 2003 (Tham, 2007), the situation today seems to have deteriorated further (Table 4). Today, more of the social workers report intending to leave their workplace or considering changing it than was the case in 2003. In addition, more of them have during the past year considered changing their profession.

Table 4 Intention to leave the workplace or the profession in 2003 and 2014

	Social workers in 2003 (n=309)	Social workers in 2014 (n=313)	Significance level[a]
Intend to look for a new job actively within a year (%)	48	54	ns
Have often considered changing *place of work* during the last year (%)	32	45	*
Have often considered changing *profession* during the last year (%)	23	32	**

$^{\dagger}p<10$; *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
[a]The differences between the years 2003 and 2014 are tested by Chi^2-tests. ns, not significant.

Discussion

This study has provided an overall picture of the changes that have occurred between 2003 and 2014 in the working conditions of social workers investigating the situation of children and youth in the County of Stockholm, Sweden. As the same questionnaire was distributed to the same work groups of social workers—although not to the same individuals—as in 2003 in the previously investigated municipalities and town districts, the changes are hard to ignore. In this respect, the study presents unique evidence on the changes that have occurred.

However, some clarification is needed. *First*, as the results presented here are on an overall level, the results can—to a greater or lesser extent—vary between work groups, municipalities and town districts. *Second*, it should be borne in mind that, already in 2003, the social workers in these work groups reported experiencing their working conditions as being difficult (Tham, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2009), indicating that this seems to be an ongoing negative spiral and that negative results should be understood as describing a situation that has deteriorated further.

The limitations of the study should be mentioned. As the study is based on cross-sectional data (the follow-up in 2014 does not include the same individuals who participated in the 2003 study), it is not possible to detect causal relationships. Another limitation concerns the nature of quantitative data, which do not allow a deeper analysis of the background, for example, by follow-up questions. Hence, the following discussion is based on an analysis of possible factors that have contributed to the changes that have occurred.

The results of this study reveal the deterioration of working conditions, where two general patterns emerge. *The first* pattern is that the working conditions of today's social workers appear to be more strenuous compared with the situation described by those who were working with the same types of tasks in 2003. Today's social workers report that they more often have too much to do and are more often obliged to work overtime. Today, the work appears to be more influenced by urgent situations, forcing the social workers to more often change their work plans for the day in order to handle emergencies that have arisen in client work or as a result of staff shortages. Today's social workers also more often describe their work as having a negative impact on their home and family life. They more often report being forced to do things in a way that should be done differently and are more often given assignments without adequate resources to complete them. The intention to leave the workplace, which was already high eleven years earlier (Tham, 2007), has increased even more and a higher percentage of the social workers of today have often even considered leaving the profession.

The second overall pattern concerns the emerging changes in *job content*. An absolute majority of the social workers in 2003, in addition to their investigative duties, reported that giving advice and support was part of their job. Four out of ten also included preventive work, and a fifth treatment work, in their work tasks. However, it is obvious that, for the vast majority of social workers today, their job focuses on conducting investigations. Another result pointing in the same direction is that less time today is devoted to direct contact with clients, whereas the vast majority of social workers would prefer to spend more of their working hours in contact with clients.

In sum, at the same time as the social workers in 2014 describe their work as being more demanding but with less opportunity to influence it, the scope of their work tasks today has apparently narrowed, and less of their working time—contrary to their wishes—is spent in direct contact with clients.

How can these changes be understood?

How are we to understand what has brought about these changes in social workers' job content? As the results of the study are based on quantitative data, a deeper analysis of the changes, or what has led to them, cannot be made. Therefore, the discussion here is tentative, with suggestions for what might be contributing factors.

A first reflection refers to the fact that the social workers of today are younger and more of them have been employed a shorter time by their current employer. That persons with less work- and life-experience perceive their work tasks as more difficult than more experienced persons do is not surprising. Another reason for the increase in perceived work demands between 2003 and 2014 might be linked to changes in society resulting in increased marginalisation and income inequalities (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010; Harslof and Ulmestig, 2013; Scarpa, 2013). That a consequence of such a development is increased demands on social services seems highly probable. Even if the average number of cases the social workers were responsible for does not seem to have increased, the severity of the cases might have increased. This was also a recurring theme in the interviews with the forty-two supervisors (Tham *et al.*, forthcoming).

That the work today is described as being much more specialised and more clearly defined than was reported in 2003, and that the social workers today report having less personal discretion and less time to spend in contact with clients, are findings that are in line with the consequences of New Public Management (NPM) as described in several international studies (Connell *et al.*, 2009; Burton and van der Broek, 2009; Healy, 2009; Baines, 2010; Welbourne, 2010). Although Sweden

has fewer private or non-profit social service agencies than most other welfare states, the country's private and non-profit sectors are growing and traditional municipal social services are increasingly becoming contracted out to private service providers (Hartman, 2011). Furthermore, the social services are experiencing increased marketisation through various forms of NPM strategies, specialisation and evidence-based social work (Meagher and Szebehely, 2013). In a review of Swedish studies on the impact of marketised management models on working conditions in Swedish health care, the consequences described in these studies were similar to the changes described in the present study, where higher work demands, less personal control and increased role conflicts were evident (Målquist *et al.*, 2011). However, the authors pointed out that it was difficult to know to what extent these negative changes could be directly linked to the implementation of marketised management models.

Whether seen as a consequence of NPM or not, a question arising from the results of the present study is what role have the new technology systems currently being implemented in child protection services played for the changes in work tasks as described by the social workers in the present study. In international studies, the use of various assessment instruments is described as hampering rather than facilitating qualified assessments (White *et al.*, 2010; Yardley, 2014), especially for newly qualified social workers (Gillingham, 2011). An overall picture of social work as having shifted from a relationship-based approach to a handbook-based one, where the work is largely about following manuals and 'ticking boxes', has been described in a number of studies (White *et al.*, 2010; Baines, 2010; Gillingham, 2011; Yardley, 2014). In interviews with Swedish social workers, a mixed view on the effects of using the assessment tool BBIC (Barns Behov i Centrum (Children's needs in focus)) is expressed, where this assessment tool is believed to improve the quality of the social workers' assessments but at the same time increases the time they have to spend on paperwork (Matscheck and Berg Eklundh, 2015). These results are supported in interviews with the forty-two supervisors of the social workers in the present study who described the implementation of the Swedish version of ISC BBIC as involving significantly increased paperwork (Tham *et al.*, forthcoming). In line with Gillingham (2011, 2013), the supervisors pointed out how difficult it was for new practitioners to handle these forms.

In the perspective of institutional theory, this can be seen as an example of decoupling (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991)—that is, the core activity of the organisation is decoupled from what the social workers actually do. 'Doing things right' seems to have become more important than 'doing the right things' (Munro, 2011).

Implications for the professional role of social workers

What, then, do these changes mean in terms of the development of the professional role of social workers? In the course of their work, the social workers in this study are regularly confronted with vulnerable children, youth and parents, but, unlike their colleagues eleven years earlier, only a quarter of them mention giving advice and support as being a part of their job. Hasenfeld (1983, 2010) placed strong emphasis on the relationship between social worker and client in human service organisations; indeed, he regarded it as the *core activity* of these organisations. In this perspective, these social workers' descriptions of their job content, entailing higher demands and less time for contacts with clients, raises serious doubts as to the possibility to establish good, trustful and supportive relationships between these social workers and their clients.

Another question arising from the results of this study is what this development of job content means in relation to social workers' expectations regarding their professional role and for their intention to remain in the profession. Studies that have investigated social work students' motives for having applied to the education clearly underline the humanistic and altruistic motives behind their career choice (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Christie and Kruk, 1998; Weiss, 2005; Tham and Lynch, 2014). A strong driving force for many student social workers is to have close contact with people in need and to help them to change their situation. This was confirmed also in interviews with newly qualified social workers, where progress in client work and their clients' well-being and positive development were significant factors for feeling satisfied with their work situation and career choice (Tham and Lynch, forthcoming). Also Hasenfeld underlined this: 'The well-being of the worker is enhanced by investing in the well-being of the client and vice versa' (Hasenfeld, 2010, p. 23).

Conclusion

To conclude, this picture of how the working conditions and job content of child welfare social workers have changed over the past decade raises several questions that require further investigation. While the longitudinal design of this study is unique in giving a picture of the changes that have occurred in the study's sites during the past eleven years, it should be borne in mind that the study involves social workers in only one county in Sweden. This, of course, limits the possibility to generalise to a wider context. However, as these results include all social workers in more than fifty work groups working with the same types of tasks, it is unlikely that the changes have occurred only in this one county.

One question is what the changes pictured here might mean for the professional role of social workers. Are these changes something that should be accepted and viewed as indicative of the new professional role of social workers? And, if so, what are the consequences for the children, adolescents and parents who are the social workers' clients, for the possibility to build trustful working relationships and, not least, for the quality of the help clients receive?

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