

How unstandardized work tasks create arenas for leadership

Interviews with 41 employees and managers in the Norwegian public welfare services identify characteristics and behaviors experienced as leadership. The study identifies how management behaviors such as deciding, controlling, and structuring the work create arenas for leadership and how these arenas vary with the standardization of work tasks. The findings connect employees leadership experiences to their need for management, and thus challenge the assumption that management tasks are a hindrance to leadership in the public welfare sector.

Introduction

Leadership is an elusive term with many forms—transformational, emotional, or servant—that can be challenging to demarcate accurately. The research aim of this study was to identify how managers and employees within public human service organizations experience leadership, how leadership integrates with management behaviors, and how this integration may vary with different work tasks.

Inspired by Alvesson, Blom, and Sveningsson (2016), I define leadership as an interpersonal process in which an employee voluntarily accepts a manager's meaning or reality influencing acts. Thus, leadership is a set of behaviors that are experienced as influential. With this definition, we avoid falling prey to the "romance of leadership," which views leadership as solely contingent on the characteristics of a "natural leader" (Collinson, Smolović Jones, & Grint, 2018), or to any limitations that may restrict leadership to certain aims, such as being a "servant" (Neubert, Hunter, & Tolentino, 2016).

This research identifies employees' and managers' perceptions and experiences of leadership characteristics and behaviors, and thus falls within the tradition of implicit leadership theory (Offermann & Coats, 2017). The study presents a conceptual framework of implicit leadership in public human services, an important contribution because of an identified lack of research concerning how leadership improves human service organizations (Castro, 2017; Peters, 2017; Sullivan, 2016). The study includes frontline managers and their employees. A leader is a frontline manager who influences employees; a follower is a full-

time public welfare employee accepting this influence. Perceptions as used here describe informants' understandings of leadership characteristics and behaviors which informants experience as leadership. Work tasks describe the nature of the work performed by the informants, emphasizing the degree of standardization.

As the public provider of social and welfare services in Norway, the local offices of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav) perform a wide set of services, ranging from supporting job seekers and providing welfare services to assessing eligibility for welfare benefits. The state government is responsible for most of these services with caseworkers deciding eligibility and access to services; however, service delivery occurs at the municipal level by counselors. Despite these two different levels of responsibility, clients interact with Nav as a singular office. Previous studies on Nav have been concerned with the governance of a complex public welfare organization (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011) or with the relationship between clients and the welfare state at the social policy level (Carnochan & Austin, 2015). In contrast with such research, this study concerns the relationship between employees and managers as followers and leaders at the frontline of Nav.

Although we know that contextual elements such as work tasks can influence managers' and employees' leadership perceptions (Oc, 2017), we lack specific knowledge on how variation of work tasks may influence employees' experiences of leadership within public human service organizations. Considering the diversity of work tasks within these organizations, it is essential to understand how leadership might diverge between highly standardized tasks (caseworkers' assessing applications) and less standardized ones (counselors following up with clients). Such variation makes Nav an especially suitable organization in which to study how different work tasks may influence leadership experiences. With this contrast between caseworkers and counselors, the study sheds light on

how work tasks influence perceptions of leadership—a second important contribution to the literature. Consequently, I ask the following research questions:

- What characteristics and behaviors do employees and managers in Nav experience as leadership?
- How does the standardization of work tasks influence these experiences?

Leadership and management

Because leadership is a complicated theoretical field with competing and diverging definitions (Stogdill, 1974; Zhu, Song, Zhu, & Johnson, 2018), any empirical effort to understand leadership must build on a solid theoretical foundation of what “it” is. This foundation must be clearly demarcated from other organizational functions to avoid the categorical mistake of naming everything leadership. Drawing on a common definition of leadership as a process of influence (Yukl, 1989), I lean on Alvesson, Blom, and Sveningsson (2016) to define leadership as a specified voluntary, interpersonal process in which an actor influences the meaning-making and reality of a recipient.

This understanding differs from previous efforts in human services research which have emphasized leaders at the organizational level as setting the “direction and tone of their organization[s]” (Hurst & Hurst, 2017, p. 440), reaching certain goals such as change or client service (see Peters, 2018; Sullivan, 2016), portraying values (see Peters, 2017, 2018; Rank & Hutchison, 2000), or as being distributed within the organization (McKitterick, 2015).

Instead, my understanding builds on the identified prevalence and effectiveness of interpersonal leadership in social work (Peters, 2018; Rønningstad, 2018) and the influence of positive emotions in nonprofit organizations (Silard, 2018). Interpersonal leadership includes a wide variety of behaviors centering on the relationship between a manager and an employee, such as listening, talking, and providing feedback.

As a demarcated process of interpersonal influence, leadership differs from management. While both are acts performed between a superior and a subordinate actor, they differ in their experienced influence. Leadership acts influence reality-definition and meaning making through interpersonal behaviors, while management concerns acts such as planning, controlling, and coordinating which do not influence reality-definition and meaning making (Alvesson et al., 2016, p. 95). In practice, this definition of leadership allows for overlap between management and leadership behaviors, which occurs when employees experience management behaviors as influential. For example, delegation of a challenging task may be influential by serving to motivate an employee, or increasing controls could lead to feelings of alienation.

The potential for this overlap or integration is distinct for formal managers because informal or distributed leaders have fewer opportunities to combine management and leadership behaviors. Theories on the integration of management and leadership are limited, attributing the process to contextual contingencies best described empirically (Alvesson et al., 2016; Yukl, 1989). For the purpose of understanding how management and leadership integrate in experiences of leadership, it is thus of interest to draw on leadership and management as theoretical frameworks to categorize characteristics and behaviors individually before asserting how they integrate.

According to implicit leadership theories, followers' perceptions of leadership have two sources: the behaviors and functions that leaders perform ("inference-based" perceptions) and the correspondence between the leader's characteristics and the follower's understanding of what a leader should be ("recognition-based" perceptions) (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Offermann & Coats, 2017). This study draws on both perspectives to identify experiences of leadership behaviors and characteristics. I use the term characteristics broadly to include traits

and competencies comprising the manager's "foundational traits and leadership capacities" (Zaccaro, Green, Dubrow, & Kolze, 2018, p. 6).

The connection between leadership and work tasks is interesting because employees with less standardized work tasks tend to need more managerial guidance (Mintzberg, 1979) than those performing standardized tasks. Some work tasks themselves are standardized or may become so through a manager's direction. In addition, a "professional habitus" acquired through education can standardize the work (Freidson, 1986; Witman, Smid, Meurs, & Willems, 2011), which limits the need for managers to intervene as employees lean on the collegium, their own education, or experience (Noordegraaf, 2015; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). In this latter case, managers are expected to lead through influence rather than decision making because employees rely on their own knowledge to make decisions (Empson & Langley, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015). Therefore, we can expect Nav counselors, who perform less standardized work tasks, to require more managerial guidance to structure their work than caseworkers. Considering the influence of work tasks on leadership perceptions (Oc, 2017), there is reason to believe that their different management needs will lead caseworkers and counselors to have divergent perceptions of leadership.

Previous research

As a public human service organization, Nav itself can be expected to influence how leadership is experienced. Nav has been described as having a tension between employees who perform knowledge-intensive work and an organization that limits their use of knowledge (Sagatun & Smith, 2012), which makes it an interesting case study for the contextual influence on experiences of leadership. According to Gjersøe (2016), counselors in Nav experience their professional discretion as limited by organizational demands. Other research on leadership in Nav also emphasized a limited managerial role, dealing mostly with "running tasks," as "structural contingencies" such as standardization, control measures, and

IT systems restrict leadership opportunities (Fossetøl, Breit, & Borg, 2016b, p. 10–12).

Similarly, Swedish public welfare managers were found to work reactively and with a heavy workload, keeping them from performing strategic work and leadership (Shanks, 2016).

Despite these hindrances, research has found a prevalence of interpersonal leadership in social work (Rønningstad, 2018). Gunnarsdóttir (2016) found that emotional management was an essential leadership function in times of change among managers in child welfare services, and Belgian social workers found empowered management behaviors to be supportive (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). Castro (2017) identified four types of managers—formal, professional, entrepreneurial, and informal—in Italian social work who lead interpersonally to varying degrees. Others have found leadership in social work to be about performing important intermediary functions, such as supporting employees emotionally and through supervision (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambley, Spolander, & Cocker, 2014). Taken together, and despite divergent views, existing research and theory suggest that leadership in human service organizations is often associated with various types of interpersonal interactions.

Method

The empirical data for this study consists of interviews with 41 counselors, caseworkers, and their frontline managers in Nav. I conducted these interviews to gather the experiences of employees and managers on leadership characteristics and behaviors; therefore, the study is phenomenological in that informants described their experiences of the underlying reality of leadership behaviors. Interviewing both managers and employees treats leadership as co-constructed between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014), an epistemological approach that is essential to implicit leadership theory and avoids an introspective leader-centric view. Co-construction accounts for leadership as acted by the potential leader, but perceived and interpreted by the potential follower (Zaccaro et al., 2018,

p. 4). Thus, in the tradition of Schutz (1962), leadership is a social product of shared experiences. Subsequent research also has supported this understanding, showing that employees react differently to the same manager (Martin, Thomas, Charles, Epitropaki, & McNamara, 2005) and that leaders and followers may assess the same situation differently (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009).

Nav caseworkers and counselors provide good data for comparison of different types of work. Although they share some similar tasks, such as completing a considerable amount of paperwork, counselors have more personal interactions with clients. By its nature, counselors' work is less standardized because of these direct meetings with clients of different backgrounds and needs. Casework, on the other hand, is easier to standardize. Caseworkers evaluate data against rules and regulations to determine each applicant's eligibility for benefits and produce a written decision following a schematic form. Although caseworkers are not devoid of discretion as they evaluate, interpret, and make decisions, they follow a more schematic evaluation than is possible for counselors.

In other research (Author, In-review), I emphasized the influence of ambiguous tasks and how clashing professional and organizational logics influence manager behaviors and necessitate professional knowledge among managers. This study builds on the same data to describe characteristics and behaviors experienced as leadership and how different work tasks influence these perceptions.

Data collection

I recruited participants from Nav departments of similar size (between 10 and 20 employees) to avoid the influence of very small or large departments. The departments were geographically spread and included both caseworkers and counselors. Across departments, I sought workers who performed similar types of casework or counseling to avoid responses based on the nature of the services rather than the work tasks. I identified possible available

departments through Nav’s research and development department and the governance division of the municipal and state services, an approach that avoided challenges in securing interviews from busy offices. Working from the list of departments that fit my requirements, I then recruited directly through the managers.

Table 1. Characteristics of informants

	Counselor	Casework
Type of work	Direct counseling w. clients	Assessing eligibility to services
Organizational level	Municipality	State
Departments visited	4	3
Managers	5	4
Social Work	25%	0%
Professionals		
Jurist Professionals	0%	50%
Average age	45	47.5
Self-identifying females	75%	50%
Years of experience	17	13.75
Employees	17	15
Social Work	47%	0%
Professionals		
Jurist Professionals	0%	60%
Average age	36.1	40.1
Self-identifying females	90.5%	63.2 %
Years of experience	4.3	9.1

Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the informants. I recruited these individuals through mass emails to the departments and through visits. Managers did not handpick informants, and all participation was voluntary. Only three male managers were interviewed, and to preserve anonymity, I refer to all managers as “she.”

The interviews were between 45 and 60 minutes and “semi-structured,” following a list of topics and questions that allowed me to change the order of questions and pose follow-ups based on responses. Rather than introduce the integration of management and leadership during the interviews, I constructed the interview guide with naïve questions, such as: “How does your manager support you in your work?” and “What kind of leadership do you need to

do your job?” and asked about how they experienced these behaviors. I followed up ambiguous and conflicting responses with clarifying questions to elicit clear, trustworthy answers.

I sought responses that were the individual participants’ subjective understanding of leadership, rather than a complete model of what a manager does or how a leader supports a worker. I aimed for insights into what informants experienced as leadership, from which I could glean leadership characteristics and behaviors that defined these experiences.

I performed and analyzed the interviews in Norwegian and translated the selected quotes. In everyday speech in Norwegian, the concepts of “leadership” and “management” are not distinct; however, in work settings, we distinguish between the neutral word for “leader” (leder) and the more hierarchical word for “boss” (sjef). Therefore, I asked respondents about their experiences with their leader. This approach was a strength for the study as the answers provided information on the respondents’ perceptions, allowing me to analyze and categorize them as either management or leadership behaviors according to the theoretical concepts. Hence, I based my decision to use management or leadership in the translations on the informant’s answers. I transcribed and coded interviews in the spring of 2017 using Nvivo11 Pro for Windows. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the study.

Data analysis

From the transcribed interviews, I coded responses thematically with the theoretical frameworks of management and leadership as sensitizing concepts, which guide an analysis and help categorize the findings (Bowen, 2006). In this way, I was not limited in my ability to capture emerging themes, such as the integration between management and leadership. With a close reading and a thematic comparison of responses, I analyzed differences between caseworkers and counselors. I drew upon the coding to identify sections for close reading, but I did not base my analysis on counts of keywords or other quantitative approaches. My

analysis followed a phenomenological approach focusing on the informants' descriptions of characteristics and behaviors, rather than a discourse-level identification of converging and diverging language structures among informants. Quotations were selected to illustrate the differences between caseworkers' and counselors' ideal leadership perceptions (Weber, 1904/2012).

In the first round, I coded responses based on characteristics, such as a trait or skill a leader possessed or a behavior performed for the individual or organization. At this stage, I used descriptive codes such as "listening" and "delegating." If in doubt, I coded responses in multiple categories. In the second round of coding, I analyzed characteristics and behaviors separately, applying broader codes such as "feedback" and "administrating." I reviewed all coding in this round and sorted elements into categories of management or leadership. In the third round, I identified characteristics as belonging to one of three categories (see Table 2). A fourth category, creativity, is not included here because it lacked support in actual behaviors. The integration between leadership and management became apparent in the fourth round of coding as I further refined and categorized behaviors as management or leadership. For example, I moved some behaviors coded as management to leadership, such as "decision making," when informants described the behavior as a process that influenced their meaning making or reality. The findings present the characteristics and behaviors from the fourth round of coding.

Findings

The findings identify how managers and employees experienced managers' characteristics and behaviors as leadership (see examples in Table 2). Managers, caseworkers, and counselors alike viewed leadership in relational terms, characterized as personable, emphatic, and showing engagement. These characteristics linked to interpersonal behaviors such as chatting and answering questions.

Work experience, gender, or age did not indicate differences between counselors and caseworkers, nor did professional education seem to influence experiences of leadership, a finding that may be explained by strong internal training, adoption of internal logics, and the lack of standardized professional education in Nav (Øvrelid, 2018). Work tasks were a more obvious factor in differences between perceptions than professional education.

Table 2. Examples leadership characteristics and corresponding behaviors.

Leadership Characteristics	Behaviors		
	Managers	Counselor	Caseworker
<u>Relational</u>			
Personable	<i>Answering questions</i>	<i>Chatting</i>	<i>Chatting</i>
Empathy	<i>Having an “Open door”</i>	<i>Having a good relation</i>	<i>Having a good relation</i>
Engagement	<i>Acknowledging Contributions</i>	<i>Acknowledging Contributions</i>	<i>Acknowledging Contributions</i>
<u>Communication</u>			
Clarity	<i>Speak with clarity</i>	<i>Speak with clarity</i>	<i>Speak with clarity</i>
<u>Professional Knowledge</u>			
Knows the profession/organization	Provide answers/ Administer	<i>Assess quality of work/ Structure the work</i>	Assess quality of work/ Ensuring Performance

As perceived by managers, counselors and caseworkers. Behaviors perceived as management in bold, leadership italicized.

First, I present the main finding that management behaviors provided an arena for leadership characteristics, and then show how the experiences of these characteristics differed between managers and employees, caseworkers and counselors. Finally, I discuss counselors’ increased need for managers to standardize their work tasks as an explanation for their differing experiences of leadership.

Management behaviors as arenas for leadership

Employees experienced managers who supervised their work as leaders, indicating an integration between management behaviors and leadership characteristics. Leadership characteristics, such as possessing knowledge, were integrated with management behaviors, such as evaluating work quality. Thus, a manager’s leadership characteristics appeared

integrated with management behaviors when managers combined administrating and decision making with some kind of meaning- or reality-making influence. Leadership also was found in managers who structured employees' work and created frameworks within which to operate. From the employees' perspective, management behaviors such as structuring and controlling were experienced as leadership when these behaviors motivated workers, acknowledged their contributions, or provided feelings of security:

There is also something about, that a leader should create—some clear frames, some clear guidelines. To have such a clear leader is very simple and easy, then you have a frame to relate to, and should you go outside it there is also a clarity around that being wrong—I do not need a manager to follow me closely in any way, but there is something about—knowing: Here is the framework. [Counselor]

Workers experienced management behaviors such as supporting their work and structuring and defining work tasks as motivating. These behaviors allowed employees to work with freedom and provided them with opportunities to demonstrate their skills, suggesting that leadership occurred through management behaviors that made employees feel important and capable. Thus, managers exercised influence by defining individual discretion and acknowledging its importance:

I think that—what becomes the manager's, what the manager must do. Is that—they must give the employees—discretionary room, because if we do not have that, if I had no room for discretion, then—I would not have been able to work, anywhere. Because then I would have felt that I could be exchanged with anyone. Because everyone can just do what they are told. I think that the manager must be clear about the discretionary room, how big is it? What can and what can you not do within it?
[Counselor]

The way in which managers communicated was also important to how employees perceived leadership. Employees viewed unambiguous, clear, authoritative communication as characteristic of leadership. They found managers who clearly stated their expectations and willingness to help when necessary to be motivational as in the example above praising a manager who communicated clear frames and guidelines.

The integration of leadership characteristics and management behaviors was strongly connected to managers' role of being in charge of the office and having decision-making capability. Management behaviors such as quality control or handling employee inquiries were arenas for leadership, providing opportunities to influence employees. The ability to exercise influence was contingent not only on the managerial role, but also on the individual manager's leadership characteristics. Therefore, integration of management and leadership depended on the formal position to create an arena for leadership in combination with managers' leadership ability, such as professional knowledge:

[A manager] must know what's going on, know what it's all about—to see when things go wrong. Or enter a situation if I'm out of office a day, that my manager can go in and do that conversation, which has happened many times. For her to do it (laughter), as good as myself, right? That she knows what it's all about. Eh—but at the same time—you must have that freedom, and the opportunity, that you are able to, if the confidence is there, to be able to do your job without feeling monitored. The follow-up that I experience in the office, I feel is to my own best and to the best of the clients. I want that security. [Counselor]

Management behaviors such as decision making could be arenas for leadership if the managers used them as such, which makes it interesting that managers and employees had diverging perceptions of leadership from mundane management tasks.

Diverging perceptions on the importance of chatting

Management behaviors often originated in ad-hoc interactions in which employees needed clarifications, answers, or someone to talk with. Managers believed employees expected them to possess these relational characteristics, an expectation the employees demonstrated by constantly asking questions. Despite acknowledging the need, one manager found it dreadful to have to be always accessible for such interactions. She could see no upside to just talking about things all day, and found such chatting to be mostly a waste of time and a burden of leadership. Nonetheless, she remained available for these interactions because employees wanted them:

I do not think it's because they need clarifications and such, they come to me to solve big and small problems and—inform maybe, perhaps say: “It's like this, and now it's like this, and how should we? Can we do it like this?” So mostly, my working day goes mostly to chatting. Then it's the paperwork, forms and all those things ... Yes, we have to do it, but the paperwork is not the most important part of my job.

[Manager, Counselor]

Although this manager experienced the ad-hoc nature of these interactions as tiresome, unnecessary, and largely an excuse for employees to be acknowledged, employees found these management clarifications to be motivational and influential, in other words, characteristics of leadership. The importance of these interactions to employees suggest that leadership was mediated through planned or ad-hoc chats during the day as employees needed them, thus providing an arena for leadership. A manager's ability to deliver leadership was also here contingent on the workers' need for such interactions and the manager's possessing the necessary characteristics and ability.

Standardization of tasks and leadership

In the area of professional knowledge, counselors perceived managers as exercising leadership when they standardized the work, whereas caseworkers perceived leadership as “ensuring performance” and viewed structuring behaviors as controlling (see Table 2). This difference could be explained by the fact that caseworkers’ tasks are already relatively standardized compared with those of counselors, and therefore, counselors appeared to exhibit a greater need for an intervening manager in their work. Consequently, counselor-managers had more arenas for displaying leadership characteristics through facilitating, developing, and providing feedback. Reflecting their need for structure, counselors clearly emphasized the importance of having a manager with the professional knowledge to make decisions in cases of uncertainty or to assist with a heavy workload:

If there is a lot to do, I need [managers] who say: “I’ll take it, I can help with, I’m in” because managers who cannot have no credibility with me. They should not know everything, but they have to get involved in it. Otherwise, they do not have the opportunity to know where the issues are. As a result, they could be adding many tasks on a department that may already have challenges from having too much to do. Being able to lean on your manager is very important to me. To be able to ask for help, and that the manager can go in front and just: “You know what, I’m doing this, I’ll take that.” I think it’s good, I think that’s leadership, to also be like one of the staff. You must be clear, and you should be a leader, but being a leader is not to point your finger and just “this is not good enough, this is not good enough, and this has to be done.”

[Counselor]

Unstandardized tasks appeared to increase the counselors’ need for managers who could intervene with the work in some capacity. This increased need provided counselor managers with more opportunities to display leadership behaviors, such as creating a feeling of security

and a trust, and may explain the differences in how employees experienced managers as leaders. Counselors described their intervening managers as integrating management and leadership, which was markedly different from caseworkers, who described their managers as taking a more traditional, passive management role in creating goals behind the scenes:

(Managers) should cut-through, let us see, when there is disagreement between colleagues. They should make decisions on how we are to do things, and not, instead of making everyone happy. I had a very free position in a previous job with very little contact with management, but with contact with a supervisor who were in charge of me. Eh, but management were always present as we started projects, projects to finish cases [that] were overdue, targeted projects were we, yes, accomplished to finish cases. Moreover, the manager was clear and concise and—yes, more hidden behind the scenes, but entered when needed and governed us. [Caseworker]

In using the word for governed, “styring,” the caseworker clarified that he viewed the manager not as a leader, but as an administrator who could intervene when needed, ensuring that employees performed well. In contrast, the following quote illustrates how counselors perceived leadership behaviors as connected to managers’ ability to handle challenges and questions actively and decisively but with caring and understanding:

This is relevant to some of what I miss. Eh—leadership for me is to—for me—what I need from a leader is that it is a person who has that control, that awareness, who can pull us in the right directions if we are drifting. And who can speak up if there is anything—who can challenge us a little too, but in a way—it is important for me that the leader has my back and—eh—yes—I realize that leaders must make some decisions that are not popular, that is the role—eh—but [manager] is at the least very understanding. That is important to me, to have that. Because being a leader to me is

that you—not looking down from above, but that you understand each other.

[Counselor]

Although caseworkers shared the understanding of leadership as an interpersonal activity performed through talking and interacting, they did not experience leadership as integrated with managerial aspects of the work. As illustration of this understanding, the following caseworker indicated a distinction between the role of manager—to control and administer—and that of caseworkers—to perform the work:

In the end, we do the job, not the managers. They control the budgets and look after the sick-leave rate, they make sure to conduct employee appraisals. They look after such administrative things, but they do not do the job in a way. [Caseworker]

This distinction between work tasks illustrates the understanding among caseworkers that managers could only do so much. In the end, caseworkers had to “deliver the goods.” They coupled this understanding of a limited manager with a narrow view of their own capabilities, emphasizing a heavily regulated organization with little room for leadership activities:

There are so many regulations and tariffs and, terribly many things that must be considered. They become more of an administrator, not leaders. That is what I see when I look at the managers. They just walk around and—manage. And that—yes, it’s safe and fine, but it’s going to be hard to take—to take your business further. It gets very rigid and static. Very little changes. [Caseworker]

A comparison of these quotations shows striking differences between how counselors and caseworkers experienced their managers as performing leadership. For caseworkers, managers performed management—taking a more passive role in facilitating the work and controlling and ensuring performance—and they did not perceive these behaviors as

especially motivating or enabling. For counselors, on the other hand, managers' standardizing management activities were arenas for enabling and motivating leadership behaviors.

Discussion

The findings indicate that both caseworkers and counselors viewed leadership as interpersonal, but their differing job duties seemed to result in different views of their managers' leadership activities. Caseworkers did not perceive management and leadership as integrated to the same degree as counselors, perhaps because caseworkers did not have a need for standardization, and therefore, viewed their manager as an overseer and performance-enabler. Therefore, to answer my research questions, these results indicate that (1) interpersonal characteristics and behaviors are an essential part of leadership in public human service organizations such as Nav, and that (2) less standardized work tasks tend to require more managerial input, influencing how leadership is experienced by creating arenas for interpersonal leadership.

The first finding supports the importance of interpersonal leadership in non-profit human service work (Silard, 2018) and social work (Peters, 2018; Rønningstad, 2018). As an addition to the literature, this finding shows that interpersonal leadership is important in public welfare organizations where pressing managerial tasks can potentially limit leadership (Fossestøl, Breit, & Borg, 2016a; Shanks, 2016). Although managers may experience managerial tasks as taking time away from leadership activities, this research from the employee's perspective suggests that employees can experience management behaviors as leadership. Therefore, management behaviors can be arenas for leadership rather than hindrances to it. This finding could mean that employees are better able than managers to withstand the perceived consequences of organizational limitations on leadership.

The interaction of needs, characteristics, and behaviors in workers' experiences of leadership challenges the importance of status in managing knowledge intensive workers.

Previous research has indicated that leadership in knowledge-intensive work is contingent on the status and authority a manager receives as being the “best among equals” (Empson & Langley, 2015; Mintzberg, 1979). However, my findings indicate that managers are perceived as leaders when they use their knowledge to perform managerial behaviors that aid their employees in their work, especially among workers with less standardized tasks, such as counselors. In other words, leadership is not solely contingent on the status of being the most knowledgeable, but rather depends on the characteristics managers exhibit as they provide support from their formal position, such as answering questions.

Leadership and work tasks

The second finding identifies how workers’ tasks and need for managerial support impact their experience of leadership. The comparison between counselors and caseworkers suggests that workers who depend on their managers in order to do their work are more likely to understand their managers’ behaviors as leadership. Caseworkers, who performed more standardized tasks that required less managerial input, perceived leadership as less integrated with management behaviors. On the other hand, the nature of counselors’ work required more managerial input, and thus, counselors experienced such management behaviors as leadership. This finding answers a call for research on how contextual factors such as work tasks may influence leadership from the employee’s perspective (Oc, 2017).

The greater integration between management and leadership behaviors that counselors experienced suggests that management and leadership are not necessarily a zero-sum game. Rather, management could increase experiences of leadership. Unstandardized work tasks appear to create a need for managerial intervention, which again, provides arenas for leadership. Managers, then, are perceived as leaders through such behaviors as acknowledging the quality and contribution of employees’ work, which aids development and motivation. For example, when managers commented or made decisions on employees’ work,

they had an opportunity to display leadership as they demonstrated that they recognized their employees and cared about them.

However, counselors, who had a greater need for managers' input, were more perceptive to opportunities in which managers could display leadership than caseworkers, who had less need to seek out their manager's involvement. Thus, caseworkers experienced their managers as performing less leadership in their management. This finding suggests that a need for management could affect how workers perceive leadership. A high degree of standardization—such as with casework—demands less from the manager in regard to standardizing and controlling the work (Mintzberg, 1979), and therefore, counselors, whose work is less standardized than casework and required more managerial support, perceived their active managers as leaders.

A complementary explanation for the greater integration between management and leadership among counselors could be the influence of their professional background. While not identified directly in the interviews or reflected by the degree of professionals in the respective departments, a stronger professional habitus among caseworkers (Freidson, 1986; Witman, Smid, Meurs, & Willems, 2011), the sum of what they know and what they know to do in their work, could tend to standardize their tasks to a greater degree than for counselors. Therefore, professional habitus could contribute to less need for management and leadership. Another possible, but not observed explanation, is that caseworkers believed themselves to be more competent than their managers. If so, they would not need to seek out their managers for support to the same degree as counselors. The age and experience of managers did not appear to impact the differences in experiences of leadership. Caseworker managers with less experience or fewer competences could be viewed as showing less leadership. However, as shown in Table 1, the percentage of professionally educated managers with considerable years of experience in the organization was higher for casework.

Another difference between casework and counseling tasks could offer an explanation for differences in experiences of leadership. Whereas caseworkers work in a “production environment,” counselors work directly with clients, which could necessitate more follow-up with managers to debrief and discuss experiences. Long-term follow-up with clients could create different managerial and leadership needs than the short-term process of assessing eligibility. While related to standardization, this difference in the nature of tasks should be explored on its own in future studies.

Practitioners should be aware that managers with knowledge of the field and a good relationship with their employees have great potential for being recognized as leaders. However, management as an arena for leadership describes an opportunity, not a necessity. Individuals who do not have a need to seek out their managers, either because they already know what to do or they experience such interactions as unnecessary or dreadful, would not be expected to perceive or accept their managers as leaders. We also must bear in mind that employees’ seeking out their manager for all kinds of questions can be inefficient, distracting for the manager, and an erosion of the employees’ discretion. That being said, this study suggests that employees perceive the combination of a professional background with a managerial position as fruitful for delivering leadership, although achieving such a combination can be challenging (Hurst & Hurst, 2017). As leadership can be unintentional, practitioners should be aware of the potential for leadership that lies in mundane management tasks.

Caseworkers’ lesser need for management should not be confused with a lesser need for leadership. Caseworkers may want or need leadership, but because fewer direct interactions with between caseworkers and managers occur, fewer arenas for leadership are available.

Employees appear to read situations differently from managers, and therefore, managers could perform more leadership than they think, challenging previous findings that managers perform less leadership than they believe (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b). Divergent views between managers and employees suggest that there is not necessarily a strong connection between managers' perceptions of performing leadership and employees' experience of being led. Because understandings of leadership differ within the diverse set of human services tasks, employees and managers should be aware of how work tasks might create or reduce arenas for leadership. When highly standardized work limits leadership opportunities, managers may need to actively create other arenas to provide leadership. Consequently, managers could benefit as leaders through supervision of the content of the work, allocation of time to provide comments, or acknowledgment of the quality as well as the quantity of employees' work.

Limitations

The Norwegian public welfare setting might not represent the majority of human service organizations, and therefore, this study's generalizability could be limited outside the national and cultural setting of the Scandinavian public welfare system. Future studies should aim to explore these findings across the span of private, public, and nonprofit organizations globally. Also, this study was limited to counselors and caseworkers, and future studies should consider the impact of various work tasks performed across human service organizations. For instance, it would be interesting to explore employees working with more or less demanding groups of clients over time which might influence the degree of standardization and experiences of leadership. Researchers should be aware that factors other than an organization's status as private, public, or nonprofit can influence leadership. In addition to the overreaching organizational context as an important contingency, researchers should be concerned with the specific influence work tasks have on experiences of leadership.

Several factors that may influence results were beyond this study's scope and remain unknown. This research focused on perceptions of managers and employees, and the needs of other stakeholders, such as clients and taxpayers, are unknown. Whether the identified experiences of leadership had an impact on performance is also unknown. Although I did not identify any patterns regarding age, professional degree, or work experience that might explain the differences between counselors' and caseworkers' experience, the lack of a pattern does not preclude the influence of these factors. Consequently, the study does not refute the notion that the combination of less experienced and fewer professionally educated managers may have influenced the counselors' leadership experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that interpersonal leadership is essential in the more controlled public human service setting. Interpersonal leadership occurs through management behaviors that provide arenas for displaying leadership characteristics. Standardization of work tasks, either alone or in combination with other suggested factors, is a likely explanation for differences in leadership experiences between counselors and caseworkers. For human service managers and practitioners, the findings suggest that:

- Interpersonal leadership persists as important in public human service organizations.
- Standardization of tasks influences how employees and managers perceive leadership.
- Managers should be aware that management could be an essential arena for providing leadership.

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