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Dilemmas and conflicting pressures in social work practice

Dilemma og krysspress i sosialt arbeids praksis

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of 102 texts in which social workers describe their experiences from and reflections on their own practice, we identify and analyse a number of conflicting pressures and dilemmas social workers often encounter in their practice. The social workers describe how they have to balance between providing care and implementing policy, while also helping people, exercising control, and being loyal to both clients, colleagues and authorities. The article sheds light on how ideological, organisational and economic factors affect social work practice, and how social workers' relations and collaboration with different actors often lead to conflicting loyalties. By exploring the contradictions and dilemmas that arise in and influence social work, this article can provide insight into the factors that cause conflicting pressures.

ABSTRAKT

Med utgangspunkt i 102 tekster der sosialarbeidere beskriver erfaringer og refleksjoner fra egen praksis, identifiserer og analyserer vi krysspress og dilemmaer sosialarbeidere ofte erfarer. Å skulle balansere mellom å utøve omsorg og iverksette politikk, og samtidig hjelpe og utføre kontroll og være lojal mot både klienter, kolleger og myndigheter, beskrives som konfliktfylt. Artikkelen belyser hvordan ideologiske, organisatoriske og økonomiske rammer påvirker sosialt arbeids og hvordan sosialarbeideres relasjoner til og samarbeid med ulike aktører mange ganger utløser lojalitetskonflikter. Gjennom å undersøke motsetninger og dilemmaer som oppstår gjennom og påvirker sosialt arbeid kan artikkelen bidra til å skape innsikt i forhold som utløser ulike dilemmaer.

KEYWORDS

Dilemmas in social work; Norwegian welfare state; neoliberalism; critical reflection; conflicting pressures

NYKELORD

Dilemma i sosialt arbeid; den norske velferdsstaten; neoliberalisme; kritisk refleksjon; krysspress

Introduction

Social work is practised in various contexts, within specific organisational and economical frameworks. The Norwegian welfare state's ideological principles influence the development of policy and legislation, as well as the development and organisation of services, social workers' mandate and how they understand and approach social problems. The provision and administration of services depends on and is carried out in accordance with political guidelines and the budgetary framework decided by the central government. This triggers a range of conflicting pressures and dilemmas (Mik-Meyer, 2018; Vike, 2017). These arise when social workers experience contradictions between what they consider to be sound social work practice and what they can do within the constraints

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they are subject to. Examples of such constraints include systems governed by national and international laws and conventions, economy and social policy and guidelines, professional values and theories, and hegemonic social and cultural norms and values. The individual social worker may not be aware of and has limited opportunity to influence these constraints.

In this article, we wish to provide insight into constraints by discussing contradictions and dilemmas that arise in and affect social work. Social workers' descriptions of and reflections on their own practice form our empirical basis. The context comprises welfare institutions and the services they deliver on behalf of the Norwegian welfare state and how this influences the institutional framework for social workers' practice, both with respect to how services are organised and access to resources. Through the article, we aim to contribute to understanding the situations and problems social workers encounter and are tasked with solving. Such knowledge can help social workers to understand, deal with and act in the complex situations and organisations in which they work.

We will first describe factors that affect social work practice in the context of the Norwegian welfare state from a theoretical perspective. Then we will describe and analyse our empirical data and discuss conflicting pressures that arise in social work.

Conflicting pressures and dilemmas

Social workers find themselves in different relationships of power and responsibilities and must always weigh up a number of considerations and take into account the potential consequences their choices will have. Through their exercise of discretion and the possibility of imposing sanctions on clients, social workers influence the distribution and allocation of the welfare state's services and benefits, and are thereby able to influence people's everyday lives. Professional discretion and judgement are being increasingly challenged by political and administrative control (Eide, 2012). This can put social workers' professional ethics to the test, as they may find it difficult to balance professional ethics with political requirements (Cuadra & Staaf, 2014; Kjørstad, 2019). Although social workers are subject to structures and guidelines that they have little control over, their professional practice nonetheless entails individual responsibility, whereby social workers are accountable for their actions and their consequences. Social workers' individual responsibility for their actions is explicitly expressed in modern professional ethical codes (FO, 2019).

The field of social work in Norway is largely governed by social policy and is subject to a state regulatory regime where professional expertise and methods are important components (Aamodt, 2019; Øvrelid, 2018). Social work has gone from a position with considerable freedom of action to becoming more technologically governed, among other things through the use of information systems and budgets, as forms of detailed management that leave limited freedom to manoeuvre (Kjørstad, 2019; Røysum, 2017). Standardised methods and manuals for targeted areas of work have increasingly been developed in the public sector with the goal of rationalising and streamlining work. This also applies to social work, which is increasingly subject to documentation and evaluation requirements, and to control (Caswell & Innjord, 2011; Damsgaard & Eide, 2012). Social work has become more oriented towards workfare and governmentality and less user-influenced and cooperation-oriented (Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Larsen et al., 2017; Terum & Jessen, 2015).

Critical scholarship within sociology and social work has for decades raised concerns about how public issues are being framed as private problems by social workers and other human service professionals (Margolin, 1997; Sennett, 2017). Scandinavian social workers have been disciplined by political regimes, budgetary cutbacks, market demands and media stereotyping (Blom, 1998; Kroken & Madsen, 2016; Stjernø, 1982). Such processes have been further strengthened by the increasing prominence of neoliberalism, that contributes to a depoliticisation and individualisation of social work (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Foundations in rational choice models and marked-oriented behaviour promotes focus on people's individual empowerment and performance-based work plans (Steger & Roy, 2010). Neoliberalism has increasingly permeated the Nordic welfare state and impacted on social work in such ways since the 1970s (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). This has, in turn, exposed

social workers to increasing uncertainty in organisational contexts, where practice is defined and regulated more by political and administrative requirements than by professional values, theories, skills and methods (Skjefstad et al., 2018). The social problems they are tasked with addressing are increasingly presented to them as resulting from individual shortcomings (Kojan et al., 2018). Moreover, following neoliberal management structures, social workers are held individually responsible for organisations' goal attainment. This means continuously to document and report progress and results in accordance with the organisations' requirements. Inadequate reporting might have negative consequences for individual social workers (Vetlesen, 2018) in that colleagues and their superiors will criticise them or impose sanctions. Consequently, social workers might experience that political and administrative regulations create dilemmas for their professional practice: dilemmas that can affect their professional identity and aspirations (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018; Vitus, 2018). As argued by Kamali and Jönsson (2018), this can lead to social workers making compromises, becoming resigned or indifferent. This, in turn, can result in the marginalisation of essential social work values. Through overarching control, politicians and managers influence social workers' ability to act (Kjørstad, 2019) and professional autonomy. There is a potential conflict between providing care and exercising control that has always been associated with the role of social worker (Healy, 2014). A duality that has been reinforced by neoliberalism.

In their role as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), social workers are responsible for implementing welfare policy in practice. They must address requirements and expectations outside their control, determined by political agendas or legislation (Lipsky, 1980) which they may disagree with. As recipients of the welfare state's services, clients' encounters with the authorities take place through the street-level bureaucrats, and they often experience these meetings as personal (Herzfeld, 1993; Zacka, 2017). In such situations social workers at the same time have to deal with conflicting pressures between a client-centred and bureaucratic practice, involving dealing with what the clients say they need, what the social workers believe is in the client's best interest, and implementing political goals. A lack of time, sufficient resources, or competence can also make it difficult to comply with professional ideals and ethics (Damsgaard & Eide, 2012; Larsen et al., 2017). Such conflicting pressures regarding autonomy will, of course, vary depending on the social workers professional roles and context' (Evans & Harris, 2004).

Taken to its logical conclusion, all of this could be to the detriment of clients' needs if the social worker is more loyal to the system and the organisation or management's expectations than to the clients, for example if a social worker prioritises saving money rather than addressing clients' needs for help (Kroken & Madsen, 2016; Rugkåsa, 2012; Vike, 2004). One consequence can therefore be that social workers legitimise and justify actions by referring to their role and organisational affiliation, and/or to legislation and guidelines. Organisational interests can thereby influence how social workers act and how they legitimise their actions (Ahrne, 1993; Zacka, 2017).

Method, empirical data and analysis

This article is based on 102 texts in which social workers, enrolled in a post-graduate course on child welfare and ethnic minorities, at Oslo Metropolitan University during the period 2012 – 2017, described and reflected on cases from their own practice. The rich empirical material illustrates a range of dilemmas and problems social workers encounter in their day-to-day work and form the basis for our analysis.

Using social workers' reflections from their own practice is an approach that is little used in social work research (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). While there is a rich theoretical basis that sets out ideals for practice, much less is known about social workers' actual interaction with clients and the challenges they face in their workplaces (Gordon, 2017). Social workers' voices from and about practice are only to a small extent recognised or listened to, which is problematic if social work is to be understood as something that is 'done' (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Hall, 1997). The texts in our empirical material are about what the social workers do, what they do not do, what they want to do, cannot

do, and what they think and feel. Even though our data is not a direct observation of interactions with clients, it illustrates how social workers describe, experience and reflect on practice. The cases represent actual interactions with clients, colleagues, managers and the different systems social workers work in.

At the beginning of the course, the social workers were given an assignment to hand in descriptions from a concrete case from work with an ethnic minority family they had experienced as challenging. The descriptions were critically reflected on and discussed during the course and formed the basis for each participant's final exam. The length of the exam papers was approx. 5000 words. Even though the cases specifically addressed social work with minority ethnic families, the topics raised did not relate to issues of cultural differences, but to dilemmas with relevance to social work in general.

Critical reflection was a pedagogical tool used in seminars in the post graduate course (see Ylvisaker & Rugkåsa, 2020). Critical reflection is a theory-based educational model for exploring and understanding complex structures, actions and relationships in social work (Fook & Gardner, 2007; White et al., 2006). It involves exploring professional practice within current framework and conditions and can increase understanding of the complexity of categorisation processes and power relations. One important component of critical reflection is to examine how power is exercised and what consequences the exercise of power has for actors in different situations and contexts. Critical reflection enables social workers to see themselves and their positions more clearly in the complex contexts in which social work is practised, and thereby uncover and understand the conditions that govern what they can and cannot do (Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2018). Exploring cases that involve this is therefore a good point of departure for analysing conflicting pressures and dilemmas that arise in social work.

The goal was to stimulate the social workers reflections on their everyday practice and how contextual factors and relations influence their work. We experienced critical reflection as a useful teaching tool for examining theories, concepts and language, allowing social workers to gain new perspectives in their practice. As we have described elsewhere it also enabled them to reflect on how assumptions and unexamined power relationships might influence practice (Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2018). While the written texts functioned well as a means for integrating practice and theory in the educational setting, we also came to realise that these experiences, covering a range of dilemmas in social work in Norway, could contribute to knowledge beyond the classroom. We therefore obtained the participants' consent to use their exam papers in research. We were unable to establish contact with 11 of the 102 social workers, and they were therefore unable to give active consent. These 11 social workers are included in the thematic categorisation of the material but are not referred to otherwise.

We assume that the educational context, which included assignment texts and theoretical sources, such as lectures and syllabus theory, guided which cases the social workers chose to present and how they described them. It is reasonable to assume that the social workers selected complex cases they found difficult to handle. As such, the cases do not necessarily represent common child welfare cases. However, since the social workers were experienced professionals, there is reason to believe their descriptions represents issues regularly encountered in practice. The analysis of the texts will therefore give a picture of challenges and dilemmas social workers face, and thereby may have transfer value to other social work contexts. The cases have been anonymised.

The social workers in our study work with children and families in a range of different institutions. Well over half are employed in the Child Welfare Service (44) or work with children, young people and families living in welfare institutions (34). Other workplaces represented are the National Refugee Service, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and schools/kindergartens. Of the 102 social workers, 86 were women.

From taking part in critical reflection seminars, reading and assessing the exams, we were familiar with the texts and the social workers' challenges. The study's first analytic step was to reread the 102

texts with an open mind. We then became further aware of the complexity and crossing pressures impacting on social workers. In the next analytical step, we identified and selected those texts that best described these dilemmas and pressures. In the proceeding analysis of the selected texts, key topics that we have identified during our extensive research and teaching experience in this field (Rugkåsa, Ylvisaker & Eide, 2017; Ylvisaker & Rugkåsa, 2020) were linked to our categorisation of overarching topics. This can be characterised as open coding, (Nilssen, 2012), and entails reading descriptions of informants' perspectives on practices, which are often expressed as shared rules, norms and values in specific areas in a given context. During this process, we also discovered topics that were more evident than during the first read-through. The chosen excerpts from the texts quoted in this article, illustrate and validate our analysis and discussion.

In the following section we will describe and analyse how social work practice is influenced by several ideological discourses explicitly and implicitly embedded in the Norwegian welfare state, and how organisational conditions and loyalties impact. Drawing from our empirical material we demonstrate how politics and policies regulating welfare institutions and subsequent can affect social workers' relationships with clients, colleagues, partners and leaders.

Social workers' experiences of conflicting pressures and dilemmas

Ideological guidelines and discourses in the Norwegian welfare state

In our empirical material we have identified how hegemonic values and discourses such as gender equality, the Norwegian workfare policy, the best interests of the child and zero tolerance of violence are crucial values that constitute both an implicit basis for understanding and an explicit basis for action in the social work context. These values are at the same time manifested as political guidelines, for example as regards to workfare, in school and education, family life and integration policy. In the following we will empirically explore how dominant values and discourses influence social workers' interpretations and actions.

Gender equality

In many of the texts, norms for gender and gender relations influence encounters between social workers and clients. The following example concerns a conflict between a female Norwegian social worker and a 14-year-old boy over a dinner situation in a care institution for unaccompanied minor refugees. The example illustrates how the conflict was interpreted based on gender relations:

On the boy's initiative, the social worker and the boy were going to make food from the boy's country of origin. The boy and the social worker had planned the meal and bought the ingredients together. When preparing the food, the boy did not take part, but stayed in the living room playing on his mobile phone. When the food was almost ready, he came into the kitchen and started criticising how the social worker had prepared the food. The social worker was annoyed and said that they should have made the food together and that the boy could have helped rather than criticise her. She asked the boy to leave the kitchen, which he did.

When the social worker later told her colleagues about the conflict, they interpreted the boy's behaviour related to assumed gender norms in the boy's country of origin. Attitudes to women were often an issue when 'setting limits' for the minority youths at the care centre. The social worker doubted her colleagues' understanding that the situation was related to attitudes to women. Her relationship with the boy, on the contrary, made her think the conflict was primarily about other matters.

This example illustrates how the gender equality discourse can shape how clients are understood and encountered. In the Norwegian discourse, gender equality is characterised as a fundamental ideal and is presented as something everyone agrees on. Most citizens regard equality as culturally meaningful and it is a value that few people are indifferent to (Berg et al., 2010; Rugkåsa, 2012). Everyone is expected to conform to the prevailing equality ideals and practices. The gender equality ideology is an important element in the Norwegian majority's self-presentation, and gender relations are generally associated with equality in the sense of 'sameness' (Gullestad, 1992). In the equality

discourse, Norway is referred to as 'developed' and 'modern' in contrast to societies in other parts of the world, as the boy in this case's country of origin.

Workfare

Norway's workfare policy is another overarching ideal that has a strong position in Norwegian welfare policy, and which is firmly rooted in Norwegian cultural history and politics (Stjernø & Øverby, 2012). The following example, which concerned follow-up of a woman who participated in the introduction programme for newly arrived refugees in a Norwegian municipality, highlights the importance of Norway's workfare policy.

The woman had sole parental responsibility for her three children. She had not attended school or been in employment in her country of origin and stated that she was happy to be taking part in the introduction programme. Her goal was to find work so she could support her family without public support. The woman had previously suffered considerable mental strain, which meant that she was often absent from the programme. This led to poor progress both in learning the language and in gaining work experience. The programme normally requires full participation. The woman asked to attend the programme part-time, so she could have more time to follow up her children. She was not allowed to do this and left the programme.

The social worker expressed that the introduction programme's rules prevented her from helping the woman in the manner she considered best. The social worker felt that she represented a paternalistic system, dominated by mistrust.

This example shows how overarching political guidelines affect social workers and clients. In a survey among social workers, Skjefstad et al. (2018) found that social workers experience the strong focus on the workfare policy an obstacle to do what they perceive as good social work. Implementing a consistent and restrictive workfare policy can be difficult when social workers assess that clients have other needs to resolve before work can be addressed (Kjørstad, 2019). Norway's workfare policy reflects the idea that work is crucial for individuals' integration in society and for their personal, social and financial welfare. Citizens both have duty and right to work and support themselves, and work is regarded as important to people's identity and self-respect (Stjernø & Øverby, 2012). The Norwegian welfare state has a proactive labour market policy, and extensive measures are implemented to encourage groups outside the labour market to work. Participation in the labour market has been regarded as vital to the development and sustainability of the welfare state, and as a tool for promoting equality, emancipation, independence and integration (Rugkåsa, 2012).

Best interest of the child

Children have a strong legal position in the Norwegian welfare state, and there are clear overarching political and cultural guidelines with respect to children's participation and their right to participate (Aamodt, 2019). The best interest of the child is a guiding principle. In our empirical data social workers describe how decisions and measures that they considered not to be in the best interests of the child were nonetheless implemented, as illustrated by the following example:

A family with a small child was staying at a closed detention centre for foreign nationals pending expulsion from Norway. There was great concern about the child's care situation. The child was described as under-stimulated and the parents as depressed and unable to attend to the child's needs in the specific situation. The social worker's attempt to organise better follow-up of the boy was stopped, because the Immigration Act took precedence over the Child Welfare Act. The social worker felt he was forced to go against his professional values and act in ways that was not in the best interests of the child and its needs, as prescribed by child welfare legislation.

In this example, different laws, guidelines and procedures led the social worker to act in contravention of what he believed to be the best interests of the child and what he considered to be professionally and ethically correct. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Norwegian law and is therefore a guiding principle for the Norwegian authorities' work on cases involving children. The Convention states that the best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle in all actions that involve children, and that the child's interests shall be the decisive

factor when a choice has to be made between different alternatives. However, social workers often experience this to be complicated to achieve in practice where the principle of the best interest of the child often becomes subordinated.

Zero tolerance of violence

Zero tolerance of violence against children is another strong normative discourse in Norway. Using violence against children as part of their upbringing is considered totally unacceptable in the Norwegian discourse and affects social workers' work with children and families. Zero tolerance of violence have a direct impact on the interaction between social workers and families, as the following example illustrates:

A social worker is following up an immigrant family, where a notification of concern had been received about possible violence against the children and a lack of structure and routine in the home. The social worker established good relations with the family, and the measures that were implemented worked. The family's day-to-day life improved and the concern about violence was proved wrong. The parents said that they had previously used violence in child-rearing, but that they had stopped when they understood that it was prohibited in Norway.

The father later nonetheless said in a meeting he thought using violence was appropriate when raising children because children need discipline. The social worker was shocked and upset and as a response started to talk about Norwegian legislation as well as referring to research on the harmful effects of using violence. The father did not agree. The social worker felt that this discussion ruined their relationship. She experienced how the guidelines of zero tolerance of violence affected her work with the family and prevented her from meeting the family in open and exploratory ways to get the family's perspectives and maintain a cooperative relationship.

This example illustrates how the requirement to be loyal to national normative guidelines can clash with relationship building and thus be a hindrance to seeing the situation from other perspectives and implementing adequate help.

Uncovering and combating violence against children has attracted a great deal of attention, particularly in the Child Welfare Service, and is a focus area particularly with respect to immigrant families and their culture of origin (Aadnanes, 2017). This is a form of culturalization that reduce the many complexities related to child rearing (Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2019). Zero tolerance of violence is difficult to implement in practice. The cases often involve complex problems linked to factors such as finances, physical and mental health or substance abuse.

These examples demonstrate how hegemonic ideological norms and values in the Norwegian society influence social workers' interpretations and actions and make them sometimes act in ways they deem not to be best for the clients. As we have seen, overall norms also influence political guidelines, which may clash with professional ethics and where the best interest of the client become subordinated. Social workers, as in our examples, sometimes found themselves in situations acting in ways they assessed not beneficial for the clients. We will further discuss how economic and organisational conditions influence social work practice and may constrain possible measures.

Organisational conditions and conflicting loyalties

The social workers in our study describe how legislation and procedures, financial frames, resources, competence and cooperation procedures affect their possibilities of working in the ways they consider best for the clients. This guides what social workers can and cannot do, for example when measures they regard as most suitable or professionally sound cannot be implemented. The following example shows how financial frames, resources and priorities at the state and local level can affect clients' situations:

Reza, an 18-year-old unaccompanied minor refugee, was in danger of his education being cut short due to a lack of financial resources and the municipality's priorities. He wanted to go to school in a neighbouring town because the type of school he wanted to attend was not available where he lived. There was opposition to this in the municipality and his application for financial support to continue his schooling was rejected.

In the social worker's opinion, the municipality's priorities were based on financial considerations and not on what was best for the unaccompanied minor refugees in the municipality, which led to measures that she believed were not professionally acceptable. The social worker helped the boy to appeal the decision, which led to it being reversed.

However, it is not just a question of resources but also institutional norms and procedures that set requirements for and influence social work, which the following example illustrates:

A social worker at a family centre was tasked with guiding a mother who was putting her toddler to bed. The child did not want to sleep in his own bed, which the mother had been told he should. The mother was exhausted and uncertain about what to do, she knew that the child would fall asleep if he was allowed to sleep in her bed. The social worker was also aware of this but was reluctant to support the mother's suggestion, even though it would enable both the child and mother to sleep.

The family centre had procedures in place for keeping records after each shift. Knowing that she would have to write a report about the child's bedtime routine, affected the social worker's interaction with and guidance of the mother: 'I knew my colleagues would read what I had done and that I had to be professional. It's scary how much power writing reports has over employees. In this situation, I felt that the report controlled me'. The established norms and procedures at the family centre influenced her to act in accordance with these and not act according to alternative approaches.

The social worker complied with the institutional procedures and did not act in the way she considered would be best for the child and mother because she knew her colleagues would later read in the report how she had handled the bedtime routine.

Social workers must sometimes take on roles and perform tasks they consider inexpedient for those they are trying to help. They also have to do things that go against their professional assessments. They may experience a sense of powerlessness and of being passive spectators in situations where clients' rights are not sufficiently safeguarded. Many situations require rapid action, particularly in cases that are regarded as emergencies. There may be little opportunity in such situations to investigate and take account of the complexity of the case. This can lead to decisions being made on an insufficient basis, with the result that social workers may subsequently question whether they did the right thing. In the following example, a social worker from the Child Welfare Service wondered if the decision had been made on an insufficient basis, and she blamed herself:

A social worker made an emergency placement of a little girl whose mother one day was reported acting aggressively in public. Communicating with the mother about the decision to remove the child was difficult as interpreting was only provided by phone. This led to the emergency situation escalating, and the mother becoming psychotic.

The social worker reflected later on how she had not taken sufficient account of the fact that the mother was mentally imbalanced and that they did not share the same language. She also reflected on the decision to remove the child solely on the basis of the information provided by the Refugee Service.

In many situations, social workers experience conflicts of loyalty between what they consider to be professionally sound practice, the needs of clients' and what colleagues, managers, organisations and/or superior authorities expect of them. This often leads to the client perspective being challenged by the system perspective. In the situation from the family centre described above, the social worker described how she felt that what she considered best for the mother and child in the bedtime situation did not correspond with the institution's family guidance norms. This triggered a conflict of loyalty; should she be loyal to her colleagues and the institution's practice, or should she be loyal to her own professional assessment about what was best for the mother and child? In the case with Reza the social worker helped him to appeal the decision rejecting his application to change schools, the municipal case officer accused her of being disloyal and made it clear that she was expected to be loyal to her colleagues and superior authorities. The social worker found the accusation unpleasant, even though she felt that she had done the right thing, and that her loyalty was first and foremost to her clients. The other examples analysed here also demonstrate how social workers experience conflicting loyalties between clients and colleagues, managers and

superior organisational structures. Social workers find that it is often not possible to reconcile different considerations and that they have to choose who they are going to be loyal to. Pursuant to the Code of Ethics, in situations where they have to make a choice, 'their primary loyalty should be to the most vulnerable party' (FO, 2019). Loyalty to clients takes precedence over loyalty to colleagues and employers. Although action is ordered by a superior authority, it is the individual social worker who must assess the ethics of the situation and answer for the consequences. If most weight is given to consideration for the child, this will be incompatible with the efficiency requirement, while if the latter carries most weight, this will be to the detriment of the child (Vetlesen, 2018). Vetlesen states, as we also find in our study, that there is an expectation that loyalty to clients is handled in a way that ensures that child welfare workers are also loyal to the institutional requirements (Vetlesen, 2018). However, it takes courage to stand up for the ideals of social work when this goes against bureaucratic systems and political guidelines. Social workers risk being regarded as disloyal, as not fully understanding their role, and incompetent to carry out the tasks they have been assigned.

Discussion

As shown, our participants experience a number of dilemmas and conflicting pressures. These play out in various ways and affect how social work is practiced, creating and maintaining power structures and relations and triggers conflicting loyalties. Social workers have to comply with overall structures and guidelines and sometimes act contrary to what they consider to be just and most helpful. They are socialised into and influenced by overarching hegemonic norms and values, even though, as we have seen in the cases, they may wish to act differently. Political guidelines have a similar effect, and they can clash with what social workers consider to be professional practice. Financial conditions and allocations also place constraints on the type of measures that can be implemented, and social workers often find that the measures they regard as right cannot be implemented due to insufficient funding. How they are able to work and what measures they are free to implement, is also related to other available resources such as employees, competence, methods and measures.

Institutional procedures and norms influence social workers' freedom of manoeuvre (Kjørstad, 2019) and may conflict with social work ideals and trigger cross-pressures. When preconditions for helping clients are not in place, this may be harmful to the client's needs (Rugkåsa, 2012). If social workers are unable to help people in the way they consider best, this might negatively affect the relationship between the social worker and the client. This is evident in our study, for example when social workers experience they both have to provide help and exercise control, both provide care and implement policy, when they find that the best interests of the child are set aside in favour of immigration policy, or when taking action in emergency situations is perceived as an exercise of power and a humiliation.

Social workers have power to control certain resources and to accept or reject clients' own definitions of their needs (Juhila et al., 2010; Lipsky, 1980; Prottas, 1979). Power is also expressed through social practices and discourses, for example defining what constitutes 'normality' (Bourdieu, 1979; Hennum, 2011), as discussed according to our findings related to hegemonic values such as gender equality, workfare, best interest of the child and zero tolerance of violence. Despite the power that is inherent in the role of social worker, social workers nonetheless often experience a sense of powerlessness in their interactions with clients, colleagues, managers and legislative authorities (Ylvisaker, 2014; 2013). Social problems and dealing with them are often perceived and defined as social workers' responsibility and as clients' individual problems rather than structural problems in society (Kojan et al., 2018). Social workers describe feelings of discomfort and self-reproach and a personal responsibility for dealing with and solving clients' problems (Vike, 2004). The dilemmas they give rise to are bodily manifested as 'bad conscience' and 'sense of inadequacy' (Vabø, 2002). They blame themselves, even in situations where they cannot be expected to have responsibility. This can make it challenging for them to help clients in ways they consider best

from a professional point of view and they may find that there is little correlation between clients' needs, social work theories and the systems' procedures and practices.

Individualisation of responsibility aligns with how neoliberalism during the last decades has influenced social work's professional autonomy and identity, depoliticised social work and marginalised both social workers and clients (Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2018). A consequence of such governance is social workers acting more loyal to the system than to the clients due to the unawareness of and/or in avoidance of embedded complex conflicts and dilemmas.

Exploring how practice can be understood in relation to complex ideological, structural, cultural and individual relationships, as in our study, can help social workers to discover how power relations influence upon practice. As we have shown previously, our participants reported that engaging in critical reflection seminars provided them with tools to deconstruct discourses and power relations in social work practice and theory (Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2018). To facilitate arenas for social workers to critically reflect on their practice and provide regular supervision is crucial for strengthening social work practice in accordance with professional ideals and values. This may enable them to recognise and address what is within and what is outside their area of responsibility, and consequently what they can be expected to do or not to do.

Addressing and channelling responsibility for insufficient resources, conflicting legislation and organisational conditions to political and administrative authorities, may relieve social workers of the individualised sense of powerlessness they often experience. It can also help them to live with dilemmas that cannot be resolved and enable them to handle crossing pressures. Acquiring insights into complex forces influencing social work practice, can further empower social workers to develop strategies for resisting or fighting conditions they identify as necessary to change.

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