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Maintaining Values: Institutional Work in the Social Services

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Maintaining Values: Institutional Work in the Social Services

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Abstract

This study investigates how front-line employees engage in institutional work to maintain their ‘client-focused’ value. By conducting a single-case study of a Social Service department within a Swedish middle-sized municipality, we find both individual and collective efforts to be successful in maintaining the value. The study also shows how value contestations on the micro-level have a negative impact on value maintenance, by making collective efforts more difficult to align. By finding how values can be agentic and give legitimacy to actions, our study also adds new insights to the debate on agency and institutional change, demonstrating how values can help less resourceful actors to overcome institutional constraints. Our use of the theoretical combination of institutional work and values work contributes to a holistic understanding of value maintenance, by allowing us to investigate both practices and processes involved in these efforts. Additionally, the study adds to the understanding of how efforts of less resourceful actors can contribute to institutional maintenance.

Key words

Values, Institutional work, Values work, Maintaining values, Less resourceful actors, Front-line employees

Introduction

Within organizational studies, attention has been given to the notion of values within several research fields. As defined by Reamer (2013, p.14) values are “generalized, emotionally charged conceptions of what is desirable; historically created and derived from experience; shared by a population or group within it; and they provide the means for organizing and structuring patterns of behaviour”. Since values affect attitudes and evoke behaviour (Dempsey 2009), the concept has been studied within research areas such as strategy, leadership and recruitment, where it has been found how values can be used to create a sustained competitive advantage (Barney 1986), develop effective leadership (e.g. Copeland 2014) and establish individual-organizational fit (e.g. O’Reilly et al. 1991). Values have also been argued to be

important within organizational change efforts, where value congruence between the individual and organization has been found to lead to more successful change efforts, by reducing resistance (Amis et al. 2002; Burnes & Jackson 2011). Because of its' positive impact on employee motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Rioux & Penner 2001; Andersen et al. 2013; Organ 1988), values have become associated with improved performance outcomes. Despite scholars' consensus on the fundamental role of values in shaping organizational life, we find how little attention has yet been given to how values can be maintained in organizations.

Public organizations are often depicted as being especially value-infused, and scholars have found how values such as honesty and accountability, as well as the general altruistic commitment of serving the citizens, have a strong motivating effect on public employees' drive to perform their work (Andersen et al. 2013; Perry 1997). Common subjects of motivation studies are public front-line employees, such as nurses and social workers, which are professional groups found to be infused with a strong public ethos, driven by a client-centred view and a strong commitment to respect the individual (Abbot & Meerabeau 1998; Ravari et al. 2013; Dempsey 2009; Bisman 2004). Scholars have found how the dedication to these values affect behaviour, with social workers often taking on extra hours, more responsibility and engage in innovative practices (Hopkins 2002). Studies have however pointed to several obstacles faced by social workers in their strive to fulfil these values. Apart from limited resources and a high workload (Gonzalez et al. 2009), their position as the transmitters of institutional rules and policies into client services often forces them to have to make difficult prioritizations between client cases, sometimes compromising their professional values (Lipsky 2010).

The multiple tensions faced by public front-line employees in their value attainment highlights the need for investigating how values can be maintained in complex environments. Previous studies investigating value maintenance have found how values can be safeguarded on different systemic and organizational levels. A large strand of literature has focused on how 'public values' (Jørgensen & Bozeman 2007) such as 'quality of service' and 'consumer protection' can be maintained through different modes of governance, such as hierarchical-, network-, or market mechanisms (Bruijn & Dicke 2006; Ouchi 1980). On an organizational level, studies have highlighted how leaders can serve to maintain employee values through encouragement and 'leading by example' (Grojean et al. 2004) and how strategic documents, such as value statements, can serve to integrate values in the processes and structures of organizations, thereby encouraging employees to maintain the values through their behaviour (Kernaghan 2003). Studies have also argued on how values are dependent on the support from the right administrative and social structures (Selznick 1957; Kraatz et al. 2010), making it crucial to not disrupt these if wishing to maintain the normative order.

While values have previously been seen as a centralized process, transmitted in organizations through leaders and 'elite' actors (Selznick 1957; Brown & Treviño 2009), more recent studies have begun to see them as a distributed activity, resulting in a surge of scholars investigating how values can be maintained through everyday actions on the micro-level (Gehman et al. 2013). These actions have been documented by scholars investigating public front-line workers (Carey & Foster 2011; O'Brien 2010; Smith 2007), but also by scholars of institutional work, which have found how values can be maintained by doctors advocating for

their patients' rights (Wright et al. 2017), or by chefs of haute-cuisine threatening their employees to ensure the delivery of excellent cooking (Gill & Burrow 2018). The studies of institutional work have also shed light to how the strive to maintain values can become destructive, by causing the legitimization of violent actions or the maintenance of systems of inequality (Gill & Burrow 2018; Dacin et al. 2010). While all of these studies have advanced the knowledge of how individuals' everyday practices can serve to maintain values, they have been limited to focusing on actions undertaken by privileged professional actors. Hence, little is still known about how actors with varying status and access to resources work to maintain values in organizations.

In this case study, we investigate the practices undertaken by front-line employees within the Social Services to maintain their 'client-focused' value. The aim of this study is thus to create an understanding of what efforts are undertaken by 'less resourceful actors' (Ghaffari et al. 2019) to maintain their professional values. The study's sole focus on institutional maintenance, rather than creation or disruption, stems from an interest in investigating how an organization's normative values can remain while operating in a complex and changing environment. This is important since the provision of high-quality public services relies on public servants' dedication to act in the interest of others rather than themselves (Abbot & Meerbau 1998).

The contribution of our study is twofold. First, by combining the theoretical frameworks of institutional work and values work, our study provides a novel approach to the study of values. This integrated perspective allows us not only to investigate the efforts aimed to maintain the institution's value, but also to give insight into the processes in which these efforts are mobilized and values become understood. Second, we contribute to the literature on institutional work by providing developed insights into the possibilities and ways for less resourceful actors to maintain values. The research question is formulated as follows: *How do front-line employees maintain their values through everyday work?*

In order to fulfil the aim of our paper, the report will be structured as follows. The theoretical perspectives of institutional work and values work will be described as a framework for understanding the efforts of maintaining values. Thereafter, the methodology section will present the research design and analytical strategy along with limitations and ethical considerations. This section will be followed by empirical findings and a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion will include a description of our main contributions, as well as suggestions for further research within the area of values and institutional work.

Theoretical framework

Agency and Institutional work

To understand how values can be maintained within an organization over time, we must turn to literature describing actors' ability to affect the institutional arrangements. Institutions can be described as collective social forms, manifested in more or less taken-for granted social behaviour, underpinned by both normative systems and cognitive understandings (Greenwood et al. 2008). They provide meaning (Thornton & Ocasio 1999) and serve to "shape the rules of

the game” (Dunn & Jones 2010, p.114). Within institutional theory, an increasing amount of attention has been given to the discussion of actors and agency. While early work on institutional theory mainly focused on investigating institutional stability (DiMaggio & Powell 1983), attributing little power to individuals’ ability to change institutions, later developments have acknowledged how organizations and its’ actors have the agency to alter institutions (Giddens 1984; Dacin et al. 2002; Beckert 1999). An early contribution to this discussion was made by DiMaggio (1988), who describes how powerful organizational actors, termed ‘institutional entrepreneurs’, can mobilize resources in order to shape institutions and create institutional change. Scholars have however questioned the degree of agency that is to be attributed to organizational actors, emphasizing how they are still embedded within an institutional field, subject to cognitive and normative pressures and framed by the constraints of structures and the context (Hardy & Maguire 2017; Abdelnour et al. 2017). The ‘paradox of embedded agency’ (Seo & Creed 2002) highlights how while dominant actors within a field may have the power to change, they are often too institutionally embedded and lacks the motivation (Garud et al. 2007, Battilana & D’ahunno, 2009). In contrast, the peripheral actors which may have the motivation, lacks the necessary power (Garud et al. 2007). Thereby, the paradox highlights the important role which power and status have for actors’ ability to create change.

In an attempt to broaden the view of agency, Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) and Lawrence et al. (2009) developed the theoretical framework of institutional work. Institutional work refers to the “purposive actions aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006, p.215), and describes how individuals in the periphery, through their everyday efforts and intentions, have the agency to create change (ibid). By seeing agency as distributed (Lawrence et al. 2011; Suddaby & Viale 2011), the framework moves away from the view of the heroic ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ as the only institutional change agents (DiMaggio 1988). The concept of institutional work addresses both the visible and dramatic actions, as well as the “nearly invisible and often mundane, as in the day-to-day adjustments, adaptations and compromises of actors attempting to maintain institutional arrangements” (Lawrence et al. 2009, p.1). Thereby, the perspective helps to avoid painting a polarized picture of actors as either completely embedded within the institution, or as hyper muscular institutional entrepreneurs. By studying what people actually do rather than the outcomes, the efforts leading up to either success, failure and unintended consequences all comes in to focus, further contributing to a shift away from the successful and heroic conception of institutional agency (ibid).

Despite these intentions, scholars of institutional work have not completely escaped the tendency to focus on the work undertaken by more privileged actors. As discussed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), what actors engages in institutional work, what type of work they undertake, and for what purpose, is all influenced by an actor’s position within a field (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Battilana & D’ahunno 2009). Since the original conception of institutional work emphasizes the awareness, knowledge and creativity required by actors who engages in institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006), it may be unsurprising that studies have tended to focus on the more dramatic accounts of institutional work and how resourceful actors, who have the possibility to mobilize their efforts, can accomplish change. For example, studies have found how professional groups can use their existing networks to achieve greater

hearing for their protest against institutional practices (Micelotta & Washington 2013; Currie et al. 2012) and how institutional entrepreneurs working collectively can take advantage of their different skills to accomplish durable institutional change (Perkmann & Spicer 2008). Dorado (2013) similarly emphasizes the power of collectives in institutional work, suggesting that institutional actors who join group efforts can gain greater access to resources and support, thereby making them more willing and successful.

An increasing amount of studies have however begun to address the constraining effect which the institutional environment can have on what type of work actors are able to perform (Hwang & Colyvas 2011; Smets & Jarzabowski 2013). By finding how some environments can reduce actors' ability to undertake collective work, making individual efforts more likely, these studies' focus on actors with limited resources can also broaden the view of what efforts constitutes 'work'. Ghaffari et al. (2019) finds how an oppressive regime result in actors performing mainly individual, mundane, and less visible acts of institutional work, leading to the maintenance of current institutional practices while simultaneously conforming to the new. Similarly, Martí and Fernández's (2013) study of the holocaust shows how, while only small and mundane acts of institutional work was available to the Jewish population, these had an important role in contributing to the disruption of institutional arrangements. Both of these studies demonstrate how the nature of the institutional order comes to shape actors' options of how to engage in institutional work, and also show how mundane acts can have an influence on the future evolvement of the institution.

Institutional maintenance work

Central to the study of how values can be maintained within organizations, is the strand of institutional work literature that examines institutional maintenance. Similar to studies focusing on the creation and disruption of institutions, scholars have begun to emphasize how institutional maintenance is not done without effort but requires purposeful work (Oliver 1992; Gill & Burrow 2018). As argued by Lawrence et al. (2009), the study of institutional maintenance is important, since "even powerful institutions require maintenance so that those institutions remain relevant and effective" (p.8). Studies on institutional work have found how maintenance work can help achieve various types of objectives, such as to repair broken institutions (Micelotta & Washington 2013), recreate professionals' power (Currie et al. 2012) and uphold normative practices (Gill & Burrow 2018). As first presented by Lawrence & Suddaby (2006), common forms of institutional maintenance work include actors 'valorizing' the institution's normative pillars (e.g. Gill and Burrow 2018), performing 'enabling work' by creating rules that support the institution (e.g. Suddaby & Viale 2011) and 'embedding and routinizing' normative foundations into the actors' and organizations' everyday practices (e.g. Wright et al. 2017).

Studies of institutional maintenance have however also found other examples of practices performed by organizational members, which plays an important part in maintaining the institutional order. In the study by Currie et al. (2012), geneticist doctors performed maintenance work when their privileged position as professionals was threatened by role changes. These maintenance efforts took the subtle form of 'defining' work roles, 'adjusting' new practices to fit with established norms or 'delegating' tasks to nurses. Ultimately, by

enabling nurses autonomy in their work instead of imposing tight controls, geneticist could free up more time to focus on expert work and thereby maintained their professional power and expertise. Other types of maintenance work are presented in the study by Dacin et al. (2010), where the authors break down the ritual of formal dining at Cambridge University. They find how symbols and acts of monitoring during the dinner serves to ‘socialize’ newcomers into desired behaviours, ultimately leading to the maintenance of the British class system. In the same university setting, Lok and De Rond (2013) describes how actors undertake ‘reflexive normalization work’, involving actions to ‘ignore’ or ‘tolerate’ minor institutional breakdowns, which enables for a temporary maintenance of the institutional order. The normalization work also contains efforts to legitimize practices which severely contradicts institutional norms and rules, by depicting them as necessary exceptions in order to fulfil the overarching goal of the organization. Thereby, the authors show how the institution can be maintained despite engagement in divergent actions. The above mentioned studies contribute to the literature on institutional work and maintenance by demonstrating how everyday micro-practices can serve to maintain the institution. This draws attention to the micro dynamics of institutional work, as well as highlights how individual actions connects to structures on the macro level.

Institutional maintenance work and values

While early studies of institutional work mainly focused on how a cognitive understanding of the institution being suboptimal served as a motivator to engage in institutional work, a more recent strand of studies have begun to argue how emotional aspects also needs to be acknowledged (Voronov & Vince 2012; Voronov & Weber 2016). While engagement in institutional creation and disruption is associated with a decreasing emotional investment in the current institution, maintenance work has instead been found to be enabled by a strong emotional attachment (Voronov & Vince 2012). The emotional turn within institutional theory have caused scholars to become increasingly interested also in the study of value maintenance, through its’ link to emotions. In their study of haute-cuisine, Gill and Burrow (2018) shows how the value of delivering excellent food is maintained by actors performing ‘fear work’, involving threats and violence towards members of the institution. The authors find how the experience and expression of a fear of failing is not only a part of the regulative institutional pressure, but something which also lies in the normative pillar, being a traditional element of haute cuisine. Their study contributes to the literature on institutional work and values by showing how the chefs’ fear of not being good enough serves to maintain the institution’s value, and also demonstrates how a strong commitment towards sustaining the value legitimizes violent behaviour. Similarly, in Wright et al.’s (2017) study of doctors’ professional values, the authors show how the experience of either an episodic or systemic value-threatening problem evokes moral emotions, causing actors to engage in individual or collective efforts to maintain the normative values. A type of maintenance work commonly used by the doctors are ‘advocacy’, involving the use of persuasive stories or justifications to advocate for the patient’s interest, when experiencing it as being threatened. Their study demonstrates how threatened values can be maintained through both individual and collective efforts, and contribute to the literature on institutional maintenance work by demonstrating how it is only through collective

efforts which systemic problems can be solved, changing practices to better embed the normative values of the institution.

Values work

An emerging area of research is ‘values work’, which investigates how values are performed within organizations (Gehman et al. 2013; Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015; Espedal & Carlsen 2019). By seeing values as actions rather than as abstract principles (e.g. Rohan 2000) or symbolic artefacts (e.g. Harrison & Beyer 1984), this line of research can complement the theory of institutional work in the understanding of value maintenance, by studying how values practices are performed over time (Gehman et al. 2013). Introducing the concept, Gehman et al. (2013) defines values practices as “the sayings and doings in organizations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right or wrong, good or bad, for its own sake” (p.84). Drawing from a process perspective, the values work literature explains how value practices emerge and become performed through a distributed and interactive process, thereby highlighting how values can become contested within organizations (ibid). By viewing values as enacted in networks of practices, it adopts a post-heroic view of institutional change, finding how even actors with limited resources and power can create institutional change “bottom-up” through the formation of coalitions (Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015). Thereby, the literature on values work can be seen to link the performative nature of values to agency (Espedal & Carlsen 2019).

Several studies on values work have focused on studying the value process in itself, investigating how value practices emerge and become transformed over time (Gehman et al. 2013; Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015; Perkmann & Spicer 2014). Gehman et al. (2013) studies the emergence of a university honour code, finding how value practices appear and becomes enacted through the “enrollment” (Callon 1984) of both social and material actors. Similarly, Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) finds how, by using values work strategically to unite and engage critical stakeholders around a change initiative, even highly resistant institutional environments can be altered. Another strand of studies is those focusing on how value practices can accomplish institutional maintenance or change (Gutierrez et al. 2010; Espedal & Carlsen 2019). The study by Gutierrez et al. (2010) finds how value practices such as “split identification” and value-infused education were used by a catholic member organization as a way to justify and legitimize their efforts to change the governance structure of the US catholic church. Their study nuances the discrepancy between institutional maintenance and change, by showing how the same value practices used to maintain the normative pillar of the institution, can also be used to change the regulative. In the study by Espedal and Carlsen (2019), the authors similarly study how values discourse and values practices can be used to maintain threatened organizational values. In their example of a faith-based healthcare organization, they find how organizational members’ dedication to sacred values such as quality patient care and compassion, becomes enacted both through stories and in practice. When the institutional environment changes in ways that put increasing pressures on efficiency and a ‘desacralising’ of the hospital’s practices, the stories and practices becomes adjusted to better fit a secular context. The study addresses institutional maintenance by showing how a renewing of deeply held values allows for their perseverance.

In our study, the combination of the theories on institutional work and values work creates a holistic framework to the study of value maintenance. The integration of the two concepts provides an analytical lens which is not constrained by neither of the two definitions, allowing us to study both the practices and the negotiation of the practices aimed at maintaining values. At the same time, the combination of the two frameworks serves to delimit our study. In line with Alvesson and Spicer's (2019) call for a more narrowed focus among scholars of institutional theory, we focus on values as a specific normative element of the institution. This avoids a vague study of 'institutions' and contributes to sharpen our theoretical lens.

Methodology

Empirical Setting

The empirical setting for this study is the Social Services department within a Swedish, middle-sized municipality, which inhabits approximately 140 000 citizens. The Social Services employs 986 people, consisting of 18 front-line managers and 132 social workers. Within the organization, each front-line manager is responsible for approximately 20-40 employees, and each of the social workers handle around ten cases simultaneously.

The role of the social worker is complex, and involves investigating citizens' need for care, taking official decisions regarding what support or treatment should be offered, as well as performing the treatment which have been decided upon. Examples of support and treatments provided are family counselling, economic assistance, being a mediator between relevant authorities or placing clients in rehabilitation centers. These services are directed towards all groups in the municipality, such as children, youths and adults. The social workers' daily work therefore involves meetings with the client in need of social assistance, as well as meetings with relevant stakeholders close to the person. The social workers' job is highly affected by laws, regulations and the local politicians' goal formulations and resource allocation. Their work is practiced in accordance with the Social Services Act (2001:453) and the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (1990:52), which describes the Social Services' goals and the boundaries of their mission. The Social Services Act states how the Social Services, in interferences involving children, should always act in the best interest of the child. Because of the strong influence by laws and regulations, much of the social workers' time is also devoted to performing administrative work, documenting the social conditions of the child, youth or adult. For children, this documentation is done in accordance with the National Board of Health and Welfare's guidelines 'Children's need in focus' (BBIC), which stipulates a number of aspects regarding the child's situation which should be included in all investigations. This environment serves as the setting for the social workers and their front-line managers, making it necessary for them to account for both regulatory and political demands, while at the same time seeing to the best interest of their clients.

Research design

Since our study is set to investigate front-line employees' experiences of how values are maintained within an organization, a qualitative research method was chosen (Silverman 2013;

Barriball & While 1994). The study was conducted according to a single-case study design, where the case of the Social Service department was selected since it represents a ‘common’ case (Yin 2018), allowing us to capture the circumstances and conditions of everyday life for the front-line employees. This case was also chosen because of the value-driven nature of public organizations (Andersen et al. 2013), making the Social Service department an appropriate object of study to fulfil the aim of our research. As discussed by Yin (2018), case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations. Thereby, the goal of this study is to achieve analytical generalization based on the advancing of theoretical concepts, rather than to achieve statistical generalization (ibid).

In order to gain an understanding of front-line employees’ experiences of value maintenance, interview data was collected (Table 1). This methodology was chosen since interviews are well suited in order to study subjects’ experiences, perceptions and opinions (Silverman 2013; Barriball & While 1994). In total, 24 interviews were conducted, were 22 were conducted with front-line employees (front-line managers and social workers) and two with actors on senior levels (Head of Social Services and HR-specialist). This sampling strategy was used since recent studies have found how values emerges and are enacted within organizations through distributed rather than centralized activities (Gehman et al. 2013), making front-line employees an interesting subject of study. The sampling was also done in accordance with Marshall’s (1996) description of ‘judgement sampling’, since the choice of sampling front-line employees from the Social Services department was based upon previous research having found social workers to be particularly value-driven (Abbot & Meerabeau 1998). The interviews held with the Head of the Social Services and the strategic HR-specialist where conducted because of their ‘special expertise’ (Marshall 1996). Since both of these interview subjects have a responsibility to develop the organization and possess great knowledge of the public decision-making structure, interviewing these actors provided us with a better understanding of the systemic issues facing the front-line employees.

| Role | Number of interviews | Notes |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Social workers | 8 | |
| Front-line managers | 14 | Including 1 pilot interview |
| Head of Social Services | 1 | |
| HR-specialist | 1 | |

Table 1. Interview data

After having constructed a literature review, and thereby having obtained knowledge from previous research covering the topics of public organizations and front-line employees, a preliminary interview guide was designed. In order to gain valuable insights and test the relevance of the formulated interview questions (Barriball & While 1994; Kallio et al. 2016), this guide was used in a pilot-interview held on the 22nd of November 2019. This allowed us

to make changes to the interview questions in order to improve the quality of the data collection. The final interview questions were structured to be flexible and open-ended, in order to allow a dialogue between us as interviewers and the respondents (Cridland et al. 2015). The questions were related to broader themes, such as the front-line employees' experience of their daily work, their relationship to their managers, employees, clients and what they find important in their work. The interviews were held using a semi-structured approach, in order to allow the interviewees to discuss freely about topics which were meaningful to them (Cridland et al. 2015), while at the same time ensuring that the majority of the predetermined themes were covered (Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen 1994). The questions were carefully formulated as to not include any theoretical terminology, in order to avoid any of the authors' preconceived notions being imposed on the interviewees' responses (Gioia et al. 2013). While initially, several questions were related to an organizational change effort within the organization, the respondents' interest in discussing value-laden aspects of their work caused us to modify the interview guide as the interviews proceeded.

The interviews were conducted between the 11th-13th of February 2020 and two additional interviews were complemented a week after. In between interview sessions, we discussed insights gained from the interviews and wrote down memos to consider in the later stages of coding and analysis of the material (Martin & Turner 1986). The interviews lasted between 35-56 minutes, which ultimately resulted in recordings of 1040,26 minutes and 264 pages of transcribed material. To complement the material collected through interviews, a document analysis was undertaken to get an improved understanding of the context in which our research subjects operate (Bowen 2009). The documents studied were the Social Services Act (2001:453) and the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (1990:52), which both strongly influence the front-line employees' daily work. We were also provided with the Social Service department's internal steering document, which stated the guiding principles of the organization. The document analysis provided a better understanding of both the regulative and normative environment which the front-line employees act within, and enabled a deeper analysis of the interviewees' responses. It also allowed us to triangulate the data (Bowen 2009), finding how the interviewees' expressions of their value strongly correlated with stipulations in the Social Services Act and the value descriptions in the organization's internal steering document.

Analytical strategy

Beginning our analytical process, we transcribed all the interview material in full and read through the data for an initial overview. Thereafter, we initiated a four-stage analysis of the gathered data. First, we began a coding process inspired by a grounded theory approach, where particular quotes from the transcribed interviews was compared to each other in order to identify terms and concepts, resulting in first-order codes (Gioia & Thomas 1996; Merriam 1998). An example of a first-order code is the term 'the frame', which was frequently used by the front-line employees as an expression of their restricted possibilities to create change in their workplace. Each code was illustrated by a number of quotes from the interviews, and was assigned a short description, consisting of a few words or a phrase close to the respondents' own language (Clark et al. 2010). The first coding process resulted in 20 overspanning codes,

which describes different activities of the front-line employees' daily work, as well as what they find important in their job. We discovered the majority of the first order codes to be value-laden, since they were all related to the employees' desire to help the client. For example, when discussing their daily work, the employees tended to describe how their actions were performed with the purpose of serving the clients in the best way possible. Similarly, when discussing changes in the workplace, this involved reflections on how the changes were either a threat to the quality of treatment, or undertaken as a way to improve it. Because of the distinct themes which had emerged already during the interview phase, the first-order codes remained relatively few. All quotes assigned to these codes were discussed in-depth between the authors, until having reached consensus on all placements of quotes. During the coding process, we engaged in simultaneous discussion and analysis of the material we had gathered. This entailed that when a theme was found, theoretical memoranda was written down, containing freely written ideas about what these codes have in common conceptually (Martin & Turner 1986).

After having completed this first stage, we began to compare the codes to find patterns and relationships, trying to capture the meaning of the seemingly disconnected codes. This resulted in the creation of first-order concepts (Figure 1). These constructs were later compiled into four non-theoretical concepts, containing perceptions and activities: 1) Desire to maintain the 'client-focused' value 2) Threats against the 'client-focused' value, 3) Efforts to maintain the 'client-focused' value, and 4) Going beyond the organizational "frames". The non-theoretical concept of 'Desire to maintain the 'client-focused' value was constructed by clustering all statements where the interviewees motivated an action or decision with how it was done with the clients best in mind, finding how serving the client was something they all desired. While we identified several different values in the material, such as professionalism, efficiency and innovation, the value of doing what is best for the client was the most prominent one, and was labelled by us as the 'client-focused' value.

After having constructed the non-theoretical concepts, we went to the theoretical literature numerous times to find if previous studies could explain the appearing themes. In this stage, the research process could be seen as evolving from inductive to abductive research, since we in the following considered the data and existing theory simultaneously (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The value-laden efforts which had appeared in our data caused us to consider both institutional work and values work as useful in order to explain the phenomena. Drawing from this literature, we constructed four theory-centric concepts: 1) Individual maintenance work 2) Collective maintenance work, 3) Contested values, 4) The legitimizing function of values. While these concepts have appeared in the literature previously, we found how some of them had not been described in depth, thereby lacking the ability to fully explain our findings. This resulted in an alternative route of interpretation, exploring new ways in which the combination of institutional work and values work could be used to advance the literature on how values can be maintained by less resourceful actors.

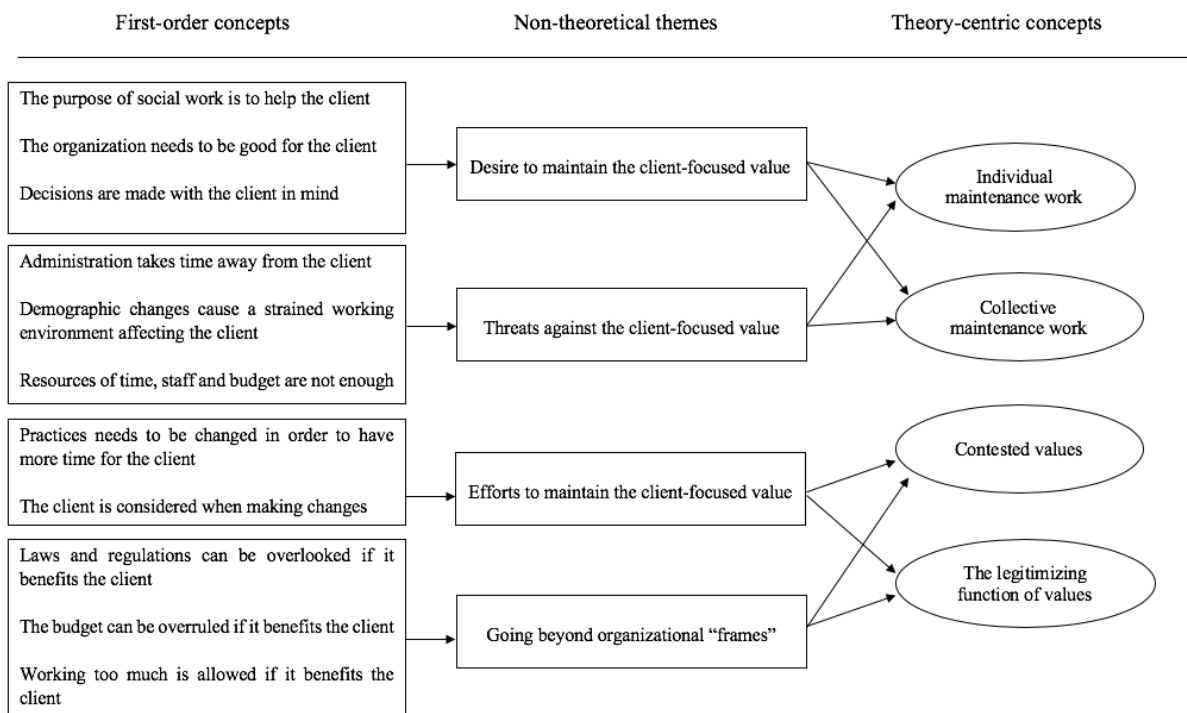


Figure 1. The analytical process of constructing theory-centric concepts

Limitations and ethical considerations

As with any single-case study, a limitation is that the results may lack generalizability to other settings (Flyvberg 2006). While the findings of our study are specific to its' context, many of the circumstances facing the social workers, as well as their experiences, transcend the boundaries of our specific case. Therefore, we believe that our research may contribute with both theoretical and practical insights, which can be of relevance to other public organizations and front-line employees. As argued by some authors, using a mixed-method case study design could have resulted in a richer and stronger array of evidence than by using a single interview methodology (Yin 2018). However, by limiting the sources of our empirical findings to interviews and complementary document analysis, more time could be allocated to a deeper and more thorough analysis of the material collected (Silverman 2013).

Ethical considerations were taken when conducting the interviews and handling the data. As discussed by Kvale (2006), asymmetrical power dynamics often exist between the interviewer and respondent, and can affect what information the respondent chooses to share or withhold. In order to overcome this, the interviewees were clearly informed of how their responses would be anonymized in the final report. When collecting the data and presenting the findings, we have only included information which is needed for the research, in order to protect the anonymity of the respondents (Gibbs et al. 2007). While demographics of participants are commonly presented in the methodological section of qualitative studies, this does not necessarily imply the diversity of the sample that indicates a well-conducted study (ibid). Therefore, this type of information, as well as the name of the municipality where the front-line employees work, is not included since it is deemed irrelevant for the analysis. Since

respondents may sometimes share more information than what they had originally intended (Kvale 2006), we have not included information which could cause harm to the respondent, and all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings reveal how actors within the Social Services engages in individual, mundane efforts of institutional work, as well as collective efforts, in order to maintain their professional value. The findings section is structured according to three parts which explore the social workers' and front-line managers' experiences. The first part demonstrates how the 'client-focused' value is normatively embedded in their profession, motivating and guiding the employees' in their everyday practices. The second part examines how two separate changes; a change in demographics leading to budget restrictions, and an increase in documentation and administrative work, threatens the value and triggers the social workers to engage in institutional work. This part sheds light to the complex institutional environment in which the actors' institutional work takes place, and shows how the meaning of the value is contested among the employees. Finally, the third part investigates the individual and collective practices undertaken by the employees to maintain the values. It also highlights how values provides legitimacy to actions, and show how the contested value affect practice, potentially leading to problems in the maintenance work.

The 'client-focused' value

While one could identify several different values being expressed by the social workers and front-line managers in their discussions of their everyday work, the most prominent is the one labelled by us as the 'client-focused' value. This value can be defined as the front-line employees strive to always do what is best for the client. This value can be found in the Social Services' internal steering document, where the organization's guiding principles are expressed as "putting the client first", and "working for those we are here to serve". For the unit working with children and youths, these principles mean to always put the need of the children before any other stakeholders' interest, as well as not staring blind at things which are not relevant in their mission to help the child. Additionally, it is emphasized how the focus should be on meeting the clients and establishing good relationships, rather than on writing meticulous action plans. According to one of the front-line managers, these principles are explained to all social workers who are applying for a position within the organization, in order to ensure that those who work there are all willing to stand behind them. The 'client-focused' value is also strongly infused in the interviewees' answers, and can for example be seen in the discussion about what they consider to be the most important task of their work. Here, several social workers express how the physical meeting with the client is of highest priority, since it is during meetings they get to perform the social work they have been educated for. It is also evident how meeting and helping the client gives the social workers a sense of fulfilment. One of the social workers describes:

“The best part of this job is to meet all these children and make an impact and earn their trust and hear their stories. Success is first seeing what a child's need is, then ordering the right support, and then see something good coming out of it [...] And when the parents also feel it, and when you feel during the process that “this turned out good”. That is the best part”. - Kajsa, Social worker

Since the organization is tax-funded, several of the employees also expresses how it is their responsibility to ensure that the services provided lives up to high quality standards for those in need of care. Therefore, a fundamental part of their work involves efforts aimed at utilising the resources they are given in the best way. A front-line manager describes how this responsibility is at the core of his work:

“We are tax-funded, so really, I serve the citizens of the municipality. And from the mission that I as a manager are given from the politicians, I break it down and turn it into contributions or offerings to our municipal citizens. That is what I consider to be the core of my work”. - Hans, Front-line manager

From the various topics discussed during the interviews with social workers and front-line managers, it is evident how the citizens and their needs are the ultimate focus of everything they do. When it comes to developing the organization, it is done with the clients in mind. This is for example seen when it comes to discussions about the working environment, which a front-line manager states needs to be improved in order for the social workers to be able to perform their work in the best way, for the children they are there to serve. It can also be seen in more general discussions about organizational development, where several of the front-line managers expresses how they always have a client focus when consider implementing changes within the organization. One of the front-line managers states:

“The most important is to make sure to create the conditions for a having a good organization. And a good organization is one that meets the clients in a way that is good for them”. - Britta, Front-line manager

These statements reveal how a general ‘client-focused’ value is shared among the social workers and the front-line managers. While this value is expressed in different ways by the different actors, for example by emphasizing a good use of tax money or the need for developing the organization, it all stems from a desire to accomplish what is best for the client. This section also demonstrates how the ‘client-focused’ value is instilled into the employees through internal steering documents, as well as by emphasizing the organization’s guiding principles during the recruitment phase. By considering the needs of the client when making decisions about the organization, it becomes evident how this value come to guide the actors in their everyday practices.

Changes threatening the value

Demographic changes: Resource restraints as a threat to the value

During recent years, the Social Services has experienced budget reductions as a consequence of the overall worsening economic situation within the municipality. The reason for the weakened financials is demographic changes in society, stemming from the projected increase in the share of the population of elderly and youths in the upcoming ten years. This trend has already now resulted in a smaller share of the population participating in the workforce, leading to less tax-revenues to finance those in need of public services. The front-line managers describe how this decrease in economic resources have caused them to have to lay off employees, leading the social workers to having to handle a larger workload than earlier. The demographic change has thus led to a strained everyday working environment for the social workers. One of the front-line managers explain:

“My social workers have never had this many cases per social workers as during 2019. And this is a result of the change in the Swedish demography, more children are born and the entire population have grown so much in Sweden”. - Katrin, Front-line manager

The employees are also expressing how the client cases they handle have become more complex over time, in terms of the social issues the client faces, and how they are thereby forced to down-prioritize simpler cases because of time and budget constraints. Overall, the working situation described by the social workers and their managers are one where they are pressured to handle an increasingly larger stream of cases, in an equally efficient way and with an equally high quality, but with fewer resources. While the employees have previously been able to keep their head above the water, the lack of resources have started to become a threat to the ‘client-focused’ value of always doing what is best for the client.

Common for the majority of the social workers interviewed is the opinion that lack of time is the biggest obstacle to performing their work according to the standards they would like. While their overall description of their working environment is positive; they have a good manager, the possibility to express their opinions, as well as a varying and fulfilling work, the time-pressure have reached a point where it is close to affect the work with the clients. One of the social workers describes the situation:

“That is something I would want more of, time. Everybody knows that we can’t continue in this way for so many more weeks [...] Sometimes I believe things might get neglected. Not the children who needs help but, it may drag out on time. A child might be waiting for a foster home, but we don’t have the time to investigate the home as quick as possible. Perhaps it could have been a contact home from the beginning, but time goes by and the need gets bigger and therefore it needs to be a foster home.”

- Per, Social worker

The statement reflects how, while all the children who need help still receive it, the high workload have come to affect the timeliness of the support, and in extension, what type of support is given. As time goes by, the situation might change for the client which could then be in need of more extensive care than what was initially required. One of the social workers

also emphasize how they would like to have more time to actually meet the client, since it is in the meeting they can determine whether or not the support that has been given has resulted in the positive effects they wished for. It is also during the meeting where a trusting relationship between the social worker and the client takes form. One social worker says:

“If you meet a child once you can’t expect them to open up and tell me about what is happening in their family. That wouldn’t be natural. I wish I could have more time for the children so they know that I am here [to help] and that this is for their best. And that is not something you explain in five minutes”. - Hanna, Social worker

The statement demonstrates how if the time to meet the client is constrained, it may affect whether or not the child chooses to confide in the social workers and tell them information about their situation at home. This is information which is crucial in order to be able to help the child in the best way, and the lack of time could thereby be seen as a threat to the ‘client-focused’ value.

Recurrent in the conversations with the social workers are the reference to them performing ‘social work’ and their opinions of what they believe is important in order to do this work in the best way. It is evident how a good job involves doing more than what might be strictly required for the investigation, and how this way of working has become normalized within the organisation. The increasing number of cases in combination with a lack of employees have however become an obstacle for them in performing the job according to the standards they would like, since the periods with less workload gets fewer and fewer. One of the social workers express:

“It starts to affect us now in the sense that we don’t have the time to do these little things that are not essential but that are still very important in order to do a good social work [...] Before we have had these down periods when we have had the time... And this can be things like meeting a child one extra time or applying for a fund on their behalf, which may not really be needed for the investigation but it's just something that you would like to do.” - Sally, Social worker

From these statements, it is evident how the demographic changes have contributed to a strained and complex working environment, where the social workers are forced to handle an increasing workload with less resources. While the general opinion among the employees are that they still are able to perform a high-quality work for the citizens living in the municipality, it is visible how the high workload affects them in ways which have already begun to impact how they serve their clients.

Documentation: Increased administration as a threat to the value

Apart from the demographic change, the employees’ experience of an increase in administration and documentation work have come to be an additional factor threatening the value of their work. Social workers and front-line managers which have worked within the municipality for several years, all witness of how there have been an increase in the written

documentation of the client cases, as well as an increase in the general administrative tasks performed by the managers. The social workers' experience of the documentation taking too much time can be attributed to several factors, one being the introduction of 'BBIC', which demands that certain information should always be included in the investigations. According to the social workers, the extensive documentation is an obstacle to performing the social work which they are meant to be doing, since more time is allocated to writing than meeting with the clients. One of the social workers explain:

“We put so much time on the writing. And that time is taken from actually meeting the children that we work for. So there becomes less time with the children and the families that we meet, because we write so much”. - Hanna, Social worker

The documentation has become too long and too extensive, according to some of the social workers and front-line managers. For the social workers, this has caused the allocation of time to be almost equally distributed between meeting the clients and sitting at their office writing, which may risk affecting the work with the client negatively.

Apart from BBIC, the employees express how contributing factors to the overly extensive documentation are the demands directed towards the client documentation to fulfil the quality requirements specified in laws and regulation. Since the Social Services are under scrutiny of the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), the Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) and the National Board of Health and Welfare, the documentation is evaluated according to formalities, routines and prescribed action plans. These regulative pressures contribute to the complex working environment of the social workers, since it puts them in a difficult position when having to prioritize between meeting the client or allocating time to the writing. Since the client documentation also serve as the basis for court decisions, they need to be of particularly good quality in order to hold in court. Thereby, many social workers express a tendency of documenting too much, especially when you are new in the role, since you are afraid to exclude something important for the case. As expressed by one of the social workers, the documentation may sometimes become prioritized over meeting the client one additional time, since there is a pressure to finish it at a certain deadline. Thereby, it can be seen as a threat to the 'client-focused' value.

The social worker's relationship towards the documenting part of their work is however complex, highlighting an underlying plurality in the interpretations of what the 'client-focused' value actually means for the social workers. Some of them expresses how they are satisfied with the ratio of time being allocated between meeting the client and writing the investigations, and that what is needed is instead more time for both of the tasks. Others also express how the documentation is a central part in fulfilling the value, since the investigation is more than just 'factory work'. One social worker state:

“The investigation work and the people that we meet, it's not like factory work on an assembly line. I think that we need to have our own style of writing [...] Our writing should hold up in court, but also as a story for someone who needs to go over their life again, as a social investigation.” - Maria, Social worker

This saying demonstrates of how the documentation by some social workers are viewed as having its own part in fulfilling the 'client-focused' value, since it is a personal story of someone's life. Thereby, the social worker does not seem to consider the investigation work only as a formality in order to fulfil the requirements stipulated in law, but as a social testimony which may provide value to the client who can go back and review their life. The views upon whether or not the documentation has its own important part in fulfilling the value thereby comes across as contested. From one perspective, the extensive documentation practices are seen as a threat to the value by taking time away from meeting the clients. From another, it is seen as having its own essential part in providing the best possible care for the clients.

Apart from the social workers' client case documentation, the front-line managers also express how their administrative tasks, stemming from the need to demonstrate goal fulfilment to middle-managers and politicians within the organisation, has increased. This is seen in the increasing amount of statistics and reports which they are ordered to produce. One of the front-line managers explain:

"I think that it often becomes too much focus on reporting results and following up on statistics and writing plans, which not so many people are interested in reading anyways." - Mohammed, Front-line manager

Several of the front-line managers explains how the focus on administration is built into the organization, something which lies within in the overall structure and can't be affected. Many of them refers to this as 'the frame', consisting of laws, political demands, routines and budget restrictions, which they all need to act in accordance with. One of the difficulties of performing their work within the frame of a politically driven organization is that the front-line employees have to adapt to what is prioritized and demanded from the local politicians. This, according to the Head of the Social services, means that the politicians and the front-line employees have a differing understanding of what measurements should be used to evaluate the organization's performance, and serves as an additional example of an underlying discrepancy regarding what the 'client-focused' value means in practice. The head of the Social Services explains how her role then becomes to remind the politicians of that what they choose to measure, will affect the work at the Social Service units. She explains:

"So it is my role to try to get the politics to understand that if they measure certain things, it will get the organization to focus on the wrong things. Often they measure us by formalities, routines and action plans. They don't judge us by how many of our children in foster homes actually succeed or graduate from school. They have never asked that question, but they should". - Elisabeth, Head of Social Services

This statement can be seen to highlight how value contestations do not only exist between individuals, but also between different organizational functions within the municipality. While the politicians are trying to prove the organization's efficiency by measuring the number of closed client-cases, the head of the Social Services expresses the need for more qualitative measurements, focusing instead on the citizens' experience of meeting the organization. According to her, focusing on the number of closed cases is something which affects the entire

organization, and can cause the front-line managers and social workers to engage in the wrong type of practices. This shows how while the members of the municipality may share the same overall value of providing best possible service to the citizen, differences in the interpretation may lead to a disagreement on what practices should be undertaken to uphold it.

Efforts to maintain the value

In the upcoming sections, we find the organizational members to engage in both individual and collective maintenance work to uphold the ‘client-focused’ value. We also find how by invoking the value, this strive can involve going beyond ‘the frame’ of rules and routines, showing how values have a legitimizing effect on practices. Finally, the findings reveal how the contested value come to affect what practices are being performed.

Acting beyond ‘the frame’

The findings demonstrate how, in order to counteract the effects of the resource constraints, the front-line managers and the social workers engage in multiple efforts in order to deliver high quality services that protects the ‘client-focused’ value. The social workers all describe that what is really needed within the organization is more employees. Since these resources do not exist, they instead engage in individual work, adjusting their practices to cope with the strained working conditions, in order to not let the lack of resources affect the clients. An example of this type of work can be found in one social worker’s description of how she herself offered to drive a client to his therapist sessions, when the responsible authority was not willing to pay for an apartment close enough to the treatment center. It can also be seen in the amount of overtime all the social workers take on, in order to manage the high workload. Since the social workers have annual working time, some of them explain how this allows them to work more than what they are supposed to, having contributed to some employees getting burned out.

The social workers describe how their highly unpredictable working days cause them to have to re-prioritise their tasks as the day proceed. Often, this happens when they deem it necessary to meet with a client on a day when they had planned to write, causing investigations to become delayed. The deprioritization of the investigations reflects how some individual efforts involves going beyond ‘the frame’ of rules and routines in order to uphold the ‘client-focused’ value, and shows how values have a legitimizing effect on practices. One of the social workers states:

“We have to prioritize, everyone is important, but this needs to be considered right now. Then it doesn't matter if I have an investigation that needs to be done today or tomorrow, it has to wait”. - Maria, Social worker

When the employees are too few, and the demands on the quality of the investigations remains high, the front-line managers also permit the social workers to exceed the deadline of their investigation, if it benefits the client. One of the social workers repeats what their front-line manager usually says when the social workers asks her if it is allowed to push a deadline: “Will the child benefit from it? Yes. Then it is okay” (Dijana, Social worker). While it is stipulated

in law that a child investigation should not take more than four months, one of the front-line managers explains how exceeding this deadline do not have a negative impact on the investigated child's treatment. Instead, the deadline serves to increase the social workers' stress levels, which ultimately becomes an issue of the working environment.

Another example of how the front-line employees go beyond 'the frame' to uphold the value, is the front-line managers stating how they occasionally exceed their budget if it is necessary in order to help the client. Despite the strained economic situation within the municipality, they express that if they can prove to their managers that a cost is needed for a client, they can get it approved. How the front-line managers always put the clients' wellbeing above budget considerations, is also described by one of the social workers, who says:

“In the end I believe that the managers always look to the support that needs to be given [to clients]. I have never experienced a manager saying that “No, we can't give this support because it is too expensive””. - Sam, Social worker

These statements demonstrate how the social workers perform individual efforts aimed at upholding the value, such as working overtime, doing 'extra' work and prioritizing. They also reveal how sometimes; this may involve overlooking budgets constraints and regulations in order to serve the client in the way they consider to be the best. By motivating a practice by claiming it to be in the best interest of the client, the findings indicate that this makes them legitimate to pursue, and can thereby be used in the efforts to uphold the value.

Efforts to make documentation & administration more efficient

In order to counteract the threats stemming from both the demographic changes and the extensive documentation and administration, collective efforts have been taken to change the documentation processes in order to make them more efficient and thereby free more time. This has resulted in the employees being given the opportunity to attend an educational program provided by SKR (Swedish Municipalities and Regions), aimed at learning how to write shorter and remove unnecessary details from the investigations. The issue of too much time being allocated to the writing is something that has been brought up by the employees continuously during their 'workplace meetings'. One of the social workers says:

“Everyone is stressed and think that it is tough to keep up [with administrative tasks]. Then we got the opportunity to participate in an educational program in order to learn how to write shorter and now all the social workers are going to participate. And that is something which was first initiated by the social workers, those who are doing the writing all day”. - Dijana, Social worker

In the interviews, the social workers express how they have good possibilities to affect their workplace, and claim that they often use this possibility during the regularly scheduled meetings they have together with their front-line manager. There, they often voice their opinion about things that needs to be improved in the workplace, one such thing being the documentation. While the need for changing documentation practices was originally brought

up by the social workers, it has been supported by the front-line managers, who all share a view upon the social workers as being the experts on their own work and valuable in questions regarding how to improve the everyday work. One manager describes how she decided to create a working group of employees specifically focusing on how to improve the documentation routines. She says:

“How to improve the documentation and write shorter investigations, this is something that I need their help in doing. Because they are the ones who are doing the writing every day. And therefore we have created working groups for this. I have one group who is only focused on how to reduce the total number of words, pages in our investigation, without it affecting the quality of the child investigations”. - Katrin, Front-line manager

The majority of the employees are positive about the educational program, and those who have participated believes that it has had a positive effect on their work, leading to more time with the client. While previously, most of their time was allocated to the writing, they have now begun to write less detailed and focus more on describing the overall purpose of holding a client meeting. The employees voicing their concerns about the burden of administrative tasks, and the front-line managers responding by enabling them to participate in how to solve the issue, can both be seen as efforts taken to uphold the client focus. The statements show how engaging in these collective efforts have resulted in a change in the practices, which was previously seen as a threat to the value.

While the social workers express how they in general are satisfied with the efforts taken to improve and make the documentation more efficient, the initiatives have also been met with resistance. As previously mentioned, the view upon whether or not the extensive documentation is valuable for the client in other ways than for the investigation itself differs, highlighting how the practical meaning of the value is contested among the organization's members. The findings demonstrate how the disagreement on how the value should be upheld also comes to affect practices. As one social worker expresses, all people and clients are unique and make different impressions on her. Therefore, she describes how she refuses to write in a standardized way since it will remove the individual from the work:

“I don't just write as BBIC says that I should. I follow their guidelines of course, but for me every person is unique and I am writing the investigations differently depending on how it affects me. I can't... I will never be able to, or want to, write in the same way as everybody else just because. [...] Here they come and tell us that vi all should write in the same way. I refuse to do it, I tell them”. - Maria, Social Worker

An additional measure which has also been met with scepticism, is the introduction of laptops during the client meetings. The laptops were introduced with the intention to reduce the time of writing the investigations, since it allows for notes to be taken directly onto the computer, instead of writing them by hand. However, a front-line manager describes how it was initially difficult to get all the social workers onboard with the idea, since they saw it as a hinder in their meeting with the client:

”We received laptops which we were supposed to use during client meetings to write the investigation. But it was not entirely easy to get social workers to have a computer screen in between them and a client, which could be a crying mom” - Katrin, Front-line manager

Both of these statements highlight how, while all organizational members wish to fulfil the same ‘client-focused’ value, the view on what practices best serve this value differs. In the case of the use of laptops, both the front-line manager and the Head of the Social Services expresses how this effort is important in order to make more efficient use of the social workers’ time and thereby create more time for the client meeting. While this is something the social workers all wants to achieve, they see the use of laptops as something which could have a negative effect on the actual meeting. Both the changes made to the documentation and the introduction of the laptop can thereby be seen as examples of how different value interpretations come to affect practice, causing some social workers to resist working according to the changed routines. Based on one’s own interpretation of what the ‘client-focused’ value means in practice, the efforts to change the established routines, as well as some of the social worker’s resistance to adapt to them, can both be interpreted as two different ways to maintain the same value. These tensions reflect a difficulty which may arise during efforts to maintain values, since it shows how value contestations can make it hard to align the organizational members in their efforts.

Discussion

This paper examines how efforts of institutional work are undertaken by actors within the Social Service department to maintain the institution’s ‘client-focused’ value. When the value become threatened by demographic changes and increasing documentation, the findings indicate that the front-line employees become triggered to engage in different types of institutional work to maintain it (Wright et al. 2017; Espedal & Carlsen 2019; Currie et al. 2012). By combining the theoretical frameworks of institutional work and values works, and by focusing on the work performed by less resourceful actors, this study extends previous knowledge in the literature on institutional work and values.

First, we find how values can be maintained through both individual and collective efforts. While both individual and collective efforts can serve to uphold the value, our findings indicate how it is through collective work practices are changed. Second, we find how the meaning of the value is contested among the organizational actors, highlighting a difficulty when trying to mobilize collective efforts to uphold them. Third, we find how values have a legitimizing function on certain behaviour. This finding highlights the agentic power of values and indicates how values can help overcome institutional constraints.

In the forthcoming two sections, we will begin by discussing our finding of value maintenance work being undertaken both individually and collectively, as well as its potential implications to the maintenance of values. Thereafter, we will discuss the implications of value contestations. Finally, we will discuss the legitimizing function of values.

Individual maintenance work

By the social workers' descriptions of their everyday work, it is evident how they engage in several individual, mundane and near-invisible efforts to maintain the 'client-focused' value of doing what is best for the client (Smets & Jarzabowski 2013; Martí & Fernández 2013; Ghaffari et al. 2019). Examples of such practices are when a social worker chooses to prioritize the meeting with the client over writing journals, or when deciding to themselves drive a client to their treatment. These efforts of institutional work could be seen as the social workers doing 'adjustment work', by adapting their practices to the currently strained working situation, in order to continue to deliver high quality care to the citizens. The reason for the social workers' tendency to uphold the value through individual and subtle efforts such as prioritizing, working overtime and going 'the extra mile', and not by engaging in more dramatic accounts of institutional work (e.g. Micelotta & Washington 2013), could be explained by a combination of socialization and contextual factors. Our findings indicate how one type of value maintenance work undertaken within the organization is 'socialization' (Dacin et al. 2010), involving the constantly ongoing discussion about the clients' best, as well as the introduction of the organization's guiding principles when hiring new employees. By making the social workers aware of how they are expected to act according to the 'client-focused' value already during recruitment, this can be seen as a way to create a workforce motivated to its' maintenance. The social workers commitment to the value is likely to make them inclined to engage in individual efforts to meet the immediate needs of the clients, thereby resulting in individual adjustments to their own working days. Similar to the 'reflexive normalization work' identified by Lok and De Rond (2013), the social workers' adjustment work serve to 'smooth over' some of the negative effects of the resource constraints, contributing to the maintenance of the 'client-focused' value by not letting the difficult working situation affect the client.

Previous studies have also found certain institutional environments to have a constraining effect on what type of work actors are able to perform (Hwang & Colyvas 2011; Smets & Jarzabowski 2013; Battilana & D'ahunno 2009). As made evident in the studies by Ghaffari et al. (2019) and Martí and Fernández (2013), actors residing in environments which limits their resources are more likely to engage in individual, mundane efforts of institutional work, since they lack the power and ability to mobilize others. In the case of the Social Services, the contextual environment is characterized by resource constraints stemming from tight budgets, staff shortages and political demands for efficiency, leading to a highly stressful working environment. Additionally, several social workers witness of how working overtime is normatively embedded within the profession, strengthened by the policy of annual working time. This demanding institutional environment serves to shape the social workers' ability and interest in engaging in institutional work (Hwang & Colyvas 2011; Battilana & D'ahunno 2009), leaving them with limited resources to significantly alter the institution. This, in combination with the social workers strong motivation to fulfil the clients' immediate need of care, could thereby serve as an explanation to their engagement in acts of individual, mundane maintenance work.

The findings indicate that the practices undertaken by the social workers are not aimed at altering the institution, but rather serve as a way to uphold the value by engaging in acts which allows them to manage their everyday work (Ghaffari et al. 2019). While these efforts

are unlikely to result in significant institutional change, they are successful in upholding the value by ensuring that the clients receive a high-quality treatment. Therefore, our findings add to the ‘non-heroic’ literature on institutional work (Martí & Fernández 2013; Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015; Ceo & Creed 2002), by showing how small acts performed by less resourceful actors can contribute to the upholdment of institutional values. The subtle acts of institutional work could however be seen as problematic if wishing to maintain the value over time. Both the demographic change and the documentation practices, which threatens the value through reduced resources and less time with the client, can be seen as systemic rather than episodic problems (Wright et al. 2017). As discussed by Wright et al. (2017), both individual and collective efforts can be successful in maintaining values, but only collective efforts can mobilize enough support to change institutionalized practices. Our empirics support this notion, indicating how while the individual, subtle efforts are indeed successful in maintaining the value, they may be insufficient to change the budgetary restraints and documentation practices which lies at the root of the problem (Wright et al. 2017; Ghaffari et al. 2019). As further highlighted by Martí and Fernández (2013), actors’ indirect compliance with a sub-optimal institutional order may contribute to its continuation. As several social workers witness of, the lack of employees, high case load and extensive documentation, in combination with the will to do what is best for the client, have resulted in burnouts. In this case, when the social workers adjust their practices in order to maintain their ‘client-focused’ value, it may at the same time lead to the unintended consequence of reinforcing the institutional arrangements. By continuing to manage their everyday work by doing more than what is reasonable to expect, this signals to the steering politicians that the social workers’ working conditions are still manageable, resulting in its proceeding. As pointed out by one of the front-line managers, the working conditions need to be favourable in order for the social workers to be able to cope with their work and serve the clients also in the future. This calls to question whether or not the individual, mundane acts of adjustment work are the most effective to uphold the institution’s value in the long run.

Collective maintenance work

Our findings also demonstrate how collective acts of maintenance work are performed to maintain the value. Compared to the individual work discussed in the previous section, these actions can be seen as efforts to ‘reconstruct’ rather than ‘adjust’ the current value practices (Gehman et al. 2013; Espedal et al. 2019). One such example is the efforts taken to improve the documentation, where social workers and front-line managers share the same understanding of how these practices needs to be changed in order to create more time for the clients. The change in documentation can be seen to consist of multiple efforts of institutional work, such as employees voicing their concerns over the extensive documentation during meetings, front-line managers creating employee work groups to receive improvement ideas, and the managers facilitating employees’ participation in an educational program. As implied by scholars of both institutional theory (Currie et. al. 2012) and values work (Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015), collective efforts of institutional work have the potential to result in broad institutional change. This is since the mobilization of different actors provides access to additional resources and support, as well as allows the change initiative to gain momentum (Vaccaro & Palazzo

2015; Gehman et al. 2013). The individual efforts previously discussed are examples of actors engaging in separate processes to maintain the value, largely hidden from others. In contrast, when the social workers undertake 'reconstructing work', by for example advocating for the clients' interest (Wright et al. 2017) by voicing their concerns over documentation, this creates the possibility to engage both co-workers and their front-line manager. In line with previous studies, we find how enrolling this more resourceful actor is important in order to accomplishing a change in practices, since the front-line manager has the power to mobilize the individual efforts through the creation of working groups (Gehman et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2017). Through this act, they provide legitimacy to the social workers change efforts and facilitate a safe space for new ideas to emerge (Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015).

As expressed by several social workers, the collective institutional work has generated positive results, with less time being spent on the writing and more time being allocated to meeting the client, compared to previously. Additionally, the efforts could result in a less stressful situation for the social workers, enabling the client focus to be sustained over time. The altered documentation practices thus serve as an example of how a collective mobilization can result in a change in the practices which threatens the 'client-focused' value (Wright et al. 2017; Espedal & Carlsen 2019; Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015). We thereby find collective efforts to be more effective than individual, when trying to uphold the value over time. This implies that the social workers may need to reduce their individual, adjustment efforts in favour of more collective work. If the social workers for example would unite and refuse to work overtime, such a collective mobilization could give them greater leverage and possibly enable a more substantial change in practices. However, we are aware of how this might be difficult to accomplish. Since refusing to work overtime is likely to affect the client negatively in the short run, it is uncertain whether the social workers would all agree upon reducing such an individual effort. This creates a dilemma where upholding the value in the long run may involve compromising it in the short run.

Contested values

Another difficulty which may appear in the efforts to maintain values collectively, is how the interpretations of the value may not be aligned on the micro-level. By adopting the view of values as a distributed rather than centralized activity, this makes values naturally contested (Gehman et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2017). Even though our findings indicate how the front-line employees all share the same overarching value of providing the best possible care for their clients, it is evident how the understanding of what this means when enacted in practice differs. As apparent from our findings, there are disagreements on whether or not the value practices of introducing laptops and changing the documentation serves to uphold the value. While some of the front-line employees see the use of laptops as a means to create more time for the client, others see it as compromising the direct value created during the meeting. In line with previous studies on values work, we thereby find how the surface level agreement of the value hides an underlying plurality regarding its' meaning (Gehman et al. 2013).

Finding how values are contested is important in the discussion of value maintenance, since the interpretation of their meaning affects practices and thereby the future evolvement of the institution (Ghaffari et al. 2019). In our case, the contested value led to a few of the

organizational members resisting the collective ‘reconstructing work’, which were aimed towards value maintenance. While the acts of resistance could be seen as non-effective if wishing to maintain the value, they can still be seen as efforts of institutional maintenance work in their own right, since they were undertaken with the intention to maintain the ‘client-focused’ value. Similar to the case of Currie et al. (2012), where the doctors’ professional power could be maintained through the contrary acts of tight controls or enabling nurses autonomy in their work, both the acts of resistance and the involvement in reconstructing work could help maintain the value, however the latter may lead to a more sustainable development and maintenance. The value misalignment on the micro-level can thus result in problems when trying to maintain values over time, by making aligned efforts to change the current value practices more difficult to undertake (Wright et al. 2017).

Our findings also highlight the institutional complexities (Smets & Jarzabowski 2013) which may exist within public organizations, stemming from the tensions between claims for efficiency and client care, since value contestations are prevalent also between the steering politicians and the Social Services department. While the politicians see the quantitative measure of “number of closed cases” as indicating value-fulfilment, the head of the Social Services instead emphasizes a need for qualitative measurements in order to truly capture what impact their work have on the clients. As discussed by Gehman et al. (2013), even when invoking the same values, actors’ experiences and beliefs will result in different interpretations and assigned meaning, leading to different conclusions about what practices to pursue. Our findings indicate how it is not enough for the organizational members to be well aligned with the macro-level values in order to maintain it, since different micro-level interpretations causes different views on how to uphold them. While this finding goes well in line with a process perspective view on values (Espedal & Carlsen 2019; Espedal 2020), it differs from previous studies concluding how successful change efforts are accomplished by actors’ values being aligned with those of the change (Amis et al. 2002; Burnes & Jackson 2011). The realization of the plurality of value understandings can have significant practical implications, since it underlines the importance of engaging in continuous discussions about the meaning of values. Doing so could detect discrepancies on the micro-level early on, and thereby create more favourable conditions for performing well-aligned, collective efforts to maintain the value.

The legitimizing function of values

In line with previous literature on values, we find the ‘client-focused’ value to have a strong guiding effect on the front-line employees’ behaviour (Reamer 2013). As previously mentioned, doing the ‘extra’ to benefit the client have become normalized within the organization, and has also been found to have negative effects on employee wellbeing. Our findings demonstrate how, for the social workers and their front-line managers, the ‘client-focused’ value have a legitimizing effect (Gill & Burrow 2018; Espedal & Carlsen 2019) on what actions are considered as acceptable in the pursuit of the client’s best. Even though the deadlines for client documentation is regulated in law, we find how the value enables the social workers to engage in maintenance work which involves pushing deadlines if it is seen as necessary to prioritize other, more valuable activities for a client. Similarly, our findings indicate how despite resource constraints and downsizing, the front-line managers rarely

decline granting a client a certain treatment because of monetary reasons. These examples of the front-line employees going beyond ‘the frame’ of rules and routines could again be likened to ‘reflexive normalization work’ (Lok and De Rond 2013), since the divergence from institutional norms and rules are normalized by depicting them as necessary to maintain the ‘client-focused’ value. This finding also highlights the agentic ability of values to overcome institutional constraints (Hwang & Colyvas 2011), since invoking the shared client value enables the engagement in actions which would otherwise not be seen as legitimate (Gehman et al. 2013, Wright et al. 2017; Espedal & Carlsen 2019). Similar to the findings by Espedal and Carlsen (2019), we thus find how the pursuit to uphold the values can overrule other organizational norms, in this case, even those regulated by law.

The finding that values can provide agency can be seen as especially noteworthy in a public organization setting, which is commonly depicted as infused with a structural inertia (Lipsky 2010). In this case, values provide extended agency to the otherwise less resourceful front-line employees, showing the potential of values to help overcome the “paradox of embedded agency” (Ceo & Creed 2002; Garud et al. 2007) by providing legitimacy to actions. This insight may have implications for studies of institutional work, since it demonstrates how values may be used by organizational actors as a strategic tool. In the study by Vaccaro & Palazzo (2015), the authors find how the rhetorical use of shared values serves as a strategic way to mobilize actors to accomplish change. In our study, we find how the front-line employees invoke the ‘client-focused’ value to systematically bend the rules of the organization. This highlights the potential for values to be used by organizational actors to overcome organizational constraints and accomplish institutional change, maintenance or disruption (Lawrence et al. 2009).

Conclusions

Motivated by the important role which values play in organizational life, this study sets out to investigate how values are maintained by front-line employees through their everyday actions. By using a single case-study approach, interviewing employees within the Social Services department of a Swedish municipality, our study contributes to the existing literature on institutional work and values in two ways. First, by combining the theoretical frameworks of institutional work and values work, our study provides a novel approach to the study of values. Integrating these distinct but related research fields have allowed us to investigate the micro-level practices aimed to maintain the institution’s value, as well as to give insight into the processes in which these efforts are mobilized and values become understood. Supporting the findings of previous research, we find how both individual and collective institutional work are undertaken to maintain the ‘client-focused’ institutional value (Wright et al. 2017). While both are successful in maintaining the value, we find how only collective efforts are able to change practices, indicating that these are more effective in maintaining values over time. By combining the two frameworks, our study also provides new insights to the literature on institutional work and values. By finding how the surface level agreement of the value hides an underlying plurality of its meaning (Gehman et al. 2013), our study demonstrates how value contestations on the micro-level serves as a hinder for institutional maintenance work. Since we find actors’ alignment with the macro-level value to be insufficient in order to maintain it,

this highlights a need for practitioners to continuously engage in discussions about the meaning of organizational values in order to maintain them. As many organizations today create value statements (Kernaghan 2003), this also shows the importance of these documents being constructed 'bottom-up', if one wishes to create a workforce dedicated to their maintenance.

Secondly, this study contributes to the scarce literature of institutional work that have investigated less resourceful actors (Martí & Fernández 2013; Ghaffari et al. 2019). In particular, we add to the literature on institutional work and values, where these actors have not previously been in focus. We find how socialization and a constraining institutional environment contributes to front-line employees' engagement in individual, mundane efforts of institutional work. While the individual efforts are found to be successful in maintaining the institutions' value, they unintentionally contribute to the preservation of the difficult working conditions. This insight complements previous studies which have found how actors' compliance to a suboptimal institutional order may contribute to its continuation (Martí & Fernández 2013) and highlights the difficulties for actors in the organization's periphery to create broad institutional change. However, by finding how values can be agentic and thereby gives legitimacy to actions (Gill & Burrow 2018), our study also adds new insights to the long-lasting debate on actors' ability to alter the institutional order (Garud et al. 2007; Battilana & D'ahunno 2009). By showing how the invoking of values provides enough agency for the front-line employees to go beyond rules and norms of the institution, this highlights how values can help less resourceful actors to overcome institutional constraints. The finding that values provides agency may be of relevance to both practitioners and scholars of institutional work, since it highlights the potential for values to be used strategically to alter the institution (Vaccaro & Palazzo 2015).

By sharing the everyday experiences of social workers and their front-line managers, our study also sheds light to the difficult working conditions under which these actors perform their socially important work. The telling of these stories are important in order to raise policy makers attention, and to help secure a high-quality provision of their services in the future. Our study therefore highlights how, in order to maintain the value in the long run, there is a need for change which should not solely lie on the shoulders of front-line social workers, but instead on more senior and structural levels.

Suggestions for future research

The finding of how values can enable less resourceful actors to engage in actions which would otherwise not be seen as legitimate, opens up a new avenue for future research on institutional work and values. In order to fully understand the agentic power of values, and its potential to assist less resourceful actors to overcome the 'paradox of embedded agency' (Seo & Creed 2002), more research is needed. While this study has investigated the value of a public organization, it would be interesting to see whether values residing within private firms have the same abilities to help overcome institutional constraints.

While it has not been the focus of our study, our finding of how organizational practices may need to be changed in order to maintain the values, has diminished the common distinction between institutional maintenance and change. By adopting a view of institutional maintenance and change as interrelated rather than separate, this could assist scholars who wishes to study

how values can be maintained in organizations over longer time periods. Espedal and Carlsen (2019) finds how values may need to be reinterpreted in order to stay relevant, when facing changes in the environment. Future research could examine the processes in which values become altered, in order to adapt to changes in regulation or societal norms.

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