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Coping with tensions between standardization and individualization in social assistance

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ABSTRACT

Today's ambition to adapt and individualize welfare delivery poses a challenge to human service organizations at the same time seeking to standardize clients, with consequences for street-level bureaucrats. In this article, the implementation of an instrument for standardized assessment of income support (IA) in Swedish social services is used to investigate what strategies street-level bureaucrats use to cope with tensions between standardization and individualization. Results from six focus groups in two organizations show how job coaches cope by individualizing their practice towards the client, while caseworkers equally often cope through standardization, which could work towards or against the client, in order to keep their discretion and handle organizational demands. Results point to a loose coupling between IA as an organizational tool for legitimacy, and as a pragmatically used questionnaire. Conflicts and contradictions are left to street-level bureaucrats to deal with.

Introduction

Individualization and standardization are two opposing trends within means-test systems, which create tensions for human service organizations. These systems are the last-safety-net of financial support and based on individual means-testing, although human needs in practice often are adapted to what the social services can offer (Panican and Ulmestig, 2016). Individualization is a basic characteristic of a society leaving the early stages of modernity (Bauman 2013; Beck 1992). On a societal level, individualization can be defined as a process in which an individual is given increased importance at the expense of the family, the state and the market (Abercrombie, Turner, and Hill 1994). A strong logic in favour of individualization has arisen both from the individual needs of service users and from the standpoint that individualized services are seen as efficient in reaching organizational goals (Rothstein 1994), especially for the long-term unemployed and other people with complex problems (Rice 2017). But individualization can also break down collective values and expose people to social risks, and the individual must take responsibility for social problems like poverty, unemployment and poor health (Bonoli 2007; Sennett 1998; Taylor-Gooby 2004).

The increasing standardization of welfare bureaucracies in recent decades is an opposing trend and challenges individualization. Standardization regulates and calibrates social life by rendering the modern world equivalent across cultures, time, and geography (Timmermans and Epstein 2010). Standards are explicit, written, and formal and connected to the norms of a certain practice and therefore have a certain authority (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). Standardization has been

discussed as the end of professional discretion (Ponnert and Svensson 2016) since it may decrease the possibilities for professionals to adapt and individualize service delivery. For example, evidence-based practice (EBP) has led to an increase in structured assessment instruments and also to treatment methods requiring core components not to change in order to be effective. Such top-down applications of evidence may 'invite the cynical rejection of evidence' (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019, 245). Pressures of standardization have also intensified through information and communication technology (ICT) although the effects on discretion are open to debate (Buffat 2015).

Human service organizations need to standardize service users through categorization of individuals due to the problem of handling the complexity of human needs (Hasenfeld 1983). The implementation of different forms of standardization may further reduce discretion and the possibilities to individualize service delivery. Standardization may thus impose a pressure and restrictions on individualization and create tensions between the opposing trends that are left to street-level bureaucrats to cope with (Brodkin and Marston 2013; Lipsky 2010).

Little is known about how street-level bureaucrats adapt to and cope with management strategies such as standardization in service delivery (cf. Tummers et al. 2015). In this article, we explore how street-level bureaucrats in social assistance use coping strategies to deal with tensions between standardization and individualization when using a new standardized assessment tool. Depicting such strategies is important for understanding how street-level bureaucrats affect public service delivery and give life to policy through interactions with clients (Tummers et al. 2015), and how welfare professionals manage the imbalance between work demands and resources in their work environment (cf. Astvik and Melin 2013). Also, as strategies may move towards or against clients' interests, they are significant for clients' well-being.

Individualized assessments have a long history dating back to the poor-relief era, where needs are individually assessed in each case, never becoming a right (Ulmestig 2007; Johansson 2001). On the one hand, street-level bureaucrats with wide discretionary powers aim to support the client and individualize services by establishing a relationship from which to assess the unique situation. On the other hand, they must meet society's demands and ensure that support never becomes an unconditional right. Between these functions of support and control, street-level bureaucrats informally construct (and reconstruct) social policy through everyday organizational life serve as de facto policymakers for the poorest in society (Brodkin 1990; Lipsky 2010).

Our research question is: what strategies do street-level bureaucrats use to cope with tensions between standardization and individualization that can arise from the implementation of a standardized assessment instrument in Stockholm City's social welfare system in the delivery of welfare services?

Our empirical case is the implementation of an instrument for handling applications in social assistance, initial assessment (Initial bedömning, IA), in Stockholm, Sweden. The instrument aims to match clients with work and ensure equality in methods citywide. Data is from group interviews with street-level bureaucrats in two organizations – social assistance units and job centres – who have different roles in the different segments of the same instrument.

Literature on standardization and coping

Standardization promotes accountability, legal security, transparency and effective and uniform services. An example is the state's ambition to support the development of evidence-based methods for social work due to the difficulty in measuring its outputs. (Bergmark, Bergmark, and Lundström 2011). Research has debated whether standardization is decreasing and even ending discretion (e.g. Nordesjö 2020; Skillmark et al. 2019; Barfoed and Jacobsson 2012; Evetts 2009; Munro 2004; Ponnert and Svensson 2016). An increase in rules and routines may reduce the professional's possibilities to be flexible to the variation in client characteristics and changes in the organizational environment. But an increase may also create contradictions between rules and a need for

professional assessments (Evans and Harris 2004). In the area of ICT, computerization is both suggested to relocate discretion to other actors (Bovens and Zouridis 2002), or to be only one among several factors shaping discretion, where both street-level bureaucrats and clients may use ICT as an enabling tool (Buffat 2015), collectively across organizational levels (Rutz et al. 2017). Tools of decision-making, such as standardized forms, may similarly impact discretion depending on their theoretical foundation and the room for interpretation (Høybye-Mortensen 2015). Whether standardization increases or decreases street-level bureaucrats' discretion, and thus possibilities for individualizing client services, is thus an open-ended question.

Coping has been used to identify street-level ways to manage the imbalance between work demands and resources, such as compensatory and quality-reducing, voice and support seeking and self-supporting strategies. Street-level bureaucrats are forced into strategies that either endanger their own health or threaten the quality of service (Astvik and Melin 2013; Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014). Coping has also been widely used in the field of public administration, although operationalized and classified in different ways. Tummers et al. (2015) classify coping behaviour in three categories: moving towards, away from or against clients. Social workers most often cope through the first two, although strategies may vary depending on e.g. attitudes towards client groups (Baviskar and Winter 2017).

However, little is known about how street-level bureaucrats adapt to and cope with managerial strategies such as standardization in the delivery of welfare services (cf. Tummers et al. 2015). Research on decision-making tools has shown how they can be found supportive (Gillingham et al. 2017) but also time-consuming (Høybye-Mortensen 2015) and result in short cuts (Broadhurst et al. 2009) and significant differences between the informal and formal practice, prompting caution in the development and implementation of tools (Gillingham and Humphreys 2010). They would benefit from being fitted to the users' relationship with their clients (Skillmark and Oscarsson 2020) and it may be possible to preserve discretion through a relational approach, although this decreases the possibility for accountability (De Witte et al. 2016).

In this article, our contribution is to shed light on how to cope with managerial strategies such as standardization in the delivery of welfare services, by investigating what strategies street-level bureaucrats use to cope with tensions between individualization and standardization in the delivery of welfare services that may arise in the implementation of standardization. Also, as the concept of coping is seldom used in social work literature, we contribute by demonstrating its application within social work organizations.

Setting

Caseworkers in the Swedish social assistance are supposed to offer support beyond financial matters. They may use their discretion within a frame law (The Social Services Act) to grant demands outside local guidelines and support paths to self-sufficiency with the participation of the client, but they may also control and sanction the clients arbitrarily (Thorén 2008). The frame law does not give much support in individual cases.

The municipal labour market policy and the job centres lack knowledge of what kind of activation interventions are efficient (Thorén 2008). The job centres target unemployed clients who have not yet established themselves in the labour market. They are mainly young people or newly arrived immigrants who are not eligible for unemployment insurance and forced to apply for social assistance. There are more sanctions, and more wide-ranging possibilities to apply them, in the municipalities in comparison to the national labour market policy and the Public Employment Service. Also, the municipal job centres have a variety of activities and it is almost random what service the unemployed are given (Forslund et al., 2019).

IA is new among standardized tools and questionnaires intended for working with persons seeking social assistance and has unexplored consequences for professionals. The IA project was developed with extensive participation from professionals and implemented citywide from 2012.
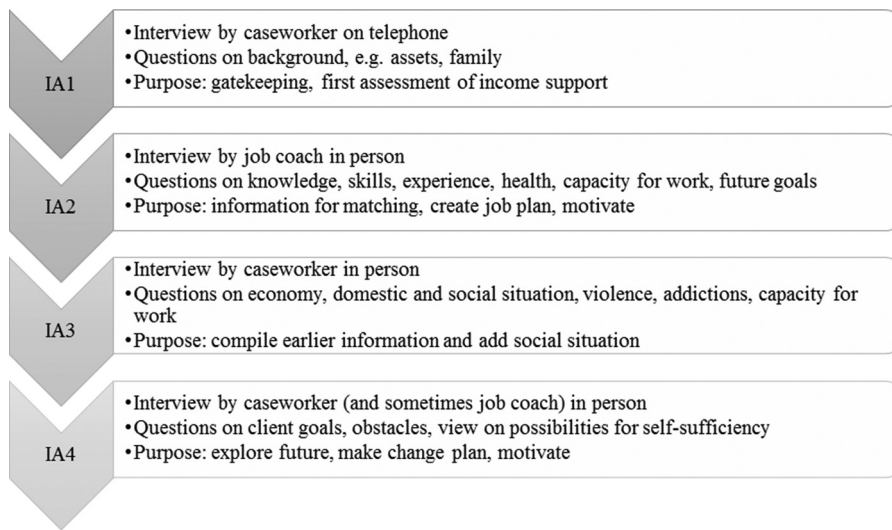
Figure 1. The four segments of the IA process.

Being the largest city in Sweden and a big employer, Stockholm's new assessment tool could inspire social work practice and subsequently clients elsewhere. According to city documents, the formal purpose of IA was to find a uniform way to assess who was available for the labour market by matching clients with the right intervention faster and to give the city's clients the same opportunities to describe their situation and needs of support. Other purposes were to use evidence-based practice and be transparent in documentation and decisions in social work practice (Nordesjö et al. 2016).

IA consists of four interconnected interview segments with over 100 closed and open-ended questions (see Figure 1). They should be asked within two months from the first client contact. Caseworkers in social assistance units deal with three segments, while job coaches in job centres primarily deal with the second segment. Caseworkers have an authoritative role, being formally responsible for the handling of the application. The job coach spends more time with the client at job centres and has a supportive role. Questions about domestic violence, criminal record, psychological health and abuse of drugs and alcohol are mandatory for all clients. Many questions are fashioned with Motivational Interviewing in mind (MI). Client data is stored digitally and is intended to be shared between segments so that more information is available to the street-level bureaucrat the further the client proceeds in the IA process. In terms of standardization, IA primarily consists of procedural standards, where segments and steps are ordered and defined, and design standards, where client characteristics are specified (Timmermans and Epstein 2010).

Although it is described as a standardized assessment tool, street-level bureaucrats are encouraged to use their professional competency to adapt, reformulate and pose follow-up questions (Nordesjö et al. 2016). This opens up for variation in use and may give street-level bureaucrats discretion in assessing the applicants. However, all questions in IA have to be posed.

Coping with tensions between standardization and individualization

We refer to tensions as conflicting demands between organizational values of standardization and individualization that street-level bureaucrats experience when using IA. Although the opposing trends of standardization and individualization occur in parallel on societal and organizational level, they are ultimately delegated to street-level bureaucrats to cope with in practice (Brodkin and Marston 2013; Lipsky 2010)

We use Lipsky's (2010, 75) four ways of alienation as a structure to locate where street-level bureaucrats may experience these tensions. Alienation is an implication of the conditions of street-level bureaucracies, e.g. a lack of resources, increasing client demands and conflicting organizational goals. It refers to the extent to which the worker has control over and can make decisions about the work, thereby controlling what product is made and how it is fashioned. Alienation is thus closely related to the relationship between clients and workers (Loyens 2015).

The four ways of alienation are themes where street-level work is particularly challenging due to contradictions between organizational and professional practice. Standardized tools that are implemented from a managerial level may challenge professionals' attempts to individualize service delivery and thereby result in tensions. For example, an increased emphasis on legal security and equal treatment through standardized questionnaires may stand in contrast with the social services act's demand for an individual needs assessment, thus leaving the professional to deal with the tension between standardization and individualization. The four ways of alienation are not used to infer whether informants become alienated by IA. They are presented below and related to potential tensions between standardization and individualization:

(1) Controlling the input: Street-level bureaucrats cannot control the nature of clients, or use skills effectively, since the conditions of work prohibit effective interaction with clients, and because they do not have control over clients' circumstances (Lipsky 2010, 78). This theme may involve tensions between standardized ways of getting and categorizing information about clients and interacting with clients individually.

(2) Working on segments of the process and/or product: Specialization means that a street-level bureaucrat cannot take full responsibility for the client in all segments of the process. Interviews and fact gathering may have to be repeated by professionals in other segments (Lipsky 2010, 76–78). Here, standardization may contribute to segments by focusing on parts of the process or person, thus hindering a holistic and individualized response in client relations.

(3) Controlling the outcome of the work: Street-level bureaucrats do not participate in the whole process and may process clients for other agencies. Clients' problems do not end, and the social services' solutions may not be adequate. (Lipsky 2010, 78). This theme may show tensions between professionals' expected individualized outcomes in relation to what is actually accomplished through standardization.

(4) Controlling the work pace: Street-level bureaucrats do not control the amount of time spent on individual clients, or the number of clients requiring attention. (Lipsky 2010, 78–79). Here, tensions may arise between an efficient and standardized response to clients and an individual response to each situation.

We define coping as 'behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis' (cf. Folkman and Lazarus 1980; Tummers et al. 2015, 1100). This definition highlights the interactional aspect of coping, as opposed to being an individual process (cf. Astvik and Melin 2013). We use Tummers et al.'s (2015) ways of coping to guide our analysis. First, *moving towards clients* includes strategies such as rule bending and rule breaking, where street-level bureaucrats adjust or neglect IA to meet a client's demands. Instrumental action is where the street-level bureaucrat executes long-lasting solutions to overcome stressful situations. Second, *moving away from clients* refers to routinizing, dealing with clients in a standard way, or rationing, to decrease the service availability. Third, *moving against clients* refers to rigid rule following, where the street-level bureaucrat sticks to IA in an inflexible way.

In sum, we look for tensions in the use of IA, relate them to the different themes of alienation and finally investigate the coping strategies used to handle the tension. The strategies are analytical tools aimed to simplify and illustrate street-level bureaucrats' behaviour when facing tensions in the use

of IA. Coping strategies may be related to both individualization and standardization. Any single user of IA may use a combination of strategies in practice.

Methods

IA as a case embodies values of standardization (as an assessment tool), individualization (as the professional adaptation to clients' situations) and successful implementation (as applied throughout the organization). In this way, the case could correspond to what Flyvbjerg (2006) describes as a critical case in that it is reasonable that these conditions could occur in other similar contexts. 31 street-level bureaucrats in Stockholm City using IA in their daily work were interviewed in six focus groups (see Table 1). This sample was strategic insofar as the informants represent an overall IA practice, i.e. the different street-level bureaucrats (caseworker, job coach, manager) and different city districts and workplaces (social assistance units, job centres) that worked with one or more segments of IA. They had at least six months' experience of IA in order to reflect on the use of IA.

Caseworkers (10 informants) meet and handle clients' applications for social assistance on a daily basis. Job coaches (9) work at job centres with clients sent from caseworkers in the second IA segment. Managers (12) are first-line managers of either caseworkers or job coaches and supervise and implement IA locally. They are street-level bureaucrats since they have 'a certain leeway in defining the organizational conditions of policy work achieved by street-level workers' (Hupe and Hill 2015, 325).

Two focus groups were held with each professional group. They were carried out in 2015, three years after the initial decision and one year after the implementation of the final version of IA. They were intended to contribute to joint reflections and discussions on a possibly abstract subject that may differ citywide. To facilitate the expression of honest opinions, informants were invited to sign up voluntarily, and caseworkers and job coaches were separated from their managers. The separation of caseworkers and job coaches was intended to clarify potential differences between them. Also, the focus groups were part of an evaluation of IA where critical reflection was encouraged. The research project was subject to ethical review and approved by a Swedish Regional Ethical Review Board (ref 2015/265-31).

Two of the authors were present in each focus group. They lasted 90 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions concerned the informants' conceptions and experiences of the formulation, implementation and everyday use of IA.

We used abduction in a reflective dialogue between the researcher, earlier research, theory, and the empirical material as proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009). In the first of a six-step process using the Nvivo software, the empirical data gave us an initial perception that coping strategies were present, thus turning our attention to research on coping and street-level bureaucracy. In a second step, we identified situations and problems experienced by street-level bureaucrats when using IA. In a reflective dialogue with the theory, the situations and problems were grouped and labelled according to characteristics. Third, the situations and problems were conceptualized as tensions between standardization and individualization. For example, not being able to pose all questions to all clients is seen as

Table 1. Informants.

	Caseworkers	Job coaches	Managers
Number of Informants	10	9	12
Focus groups	2	2	2
Educational background	Social work	Social work, pedagogics, behavioural science	Social work, pedagogics, behavioural science
Organization	Social assistance units in Stockholm City districts	Job centres in Stockholm City districts	Social assistance units and job centres in Stockholm City districts

a tension between standardized questions and the complexity of individual clients. The fourth step was to organize the tensions according to the four themes of alienation, again going back to the theory. Ten groups of tensions were reduced to six after amalgamation, when it became clear that they were examples of the same tension. In a fifth step, the coping strategies of Tummers et al. (2015) were used to make sense of how tensions were dealt with, i.e. how informants describe their behaviour in the interaction with clients to handle the demands of the tension in question. For example, the tension between posing many questions and individualizing the client meeting within a certain time frame may be coped with by rapidly posing all questions (rigid rule following) or by neglecting IA (rule breaking). The sixth and last step was for the co-authors to challenge the analysis from the written version. The themes and tensions were not changed but the results were to some extent rewritten and made more distinct.

Results

We present our findings in relation to the four themes of alienation. Under each theme, specific tensions have been identified for which street-level bureaucrats use coping strategies. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Controlling the input

In the first theme, users of IA cannot control the input of their work, i.e. the clients. Two tensions were found which street-level bureaucrats cope with in different ways, depending on the segment of IA.

Tension 1 – extensive initial standardization provokes clients
An often-mentioned advantage of the first segment of IA is the way caseworkers can collect plentiful and crucial information about the family and economic situation at an early stage. Although it takes time (15–45 minutes), caseworkers perceive it as obligatory and ultimately contributing to efficiency. Still, the large number of questions may provoke clients:

> What I find problematic with IA part one is that clients think they'll get a meeting with us. Many get provoked by 'I'll just ask these 30–40 questions on the phone', and the person does not really understand Swedish. It is problematic that there are so many questions before they even get a meeting. (I: What do they say?) They get provoked. 'Why can't I meet you so I can tell you? I don't want to talk about it over the phone!' Then I say 'I'm sorry … that's how it works'. (Caseworker)

Table 2. Summary of results.

Theme	Tension between individualization and standardization	Coping strategy
Controlling the input	1. Long fact gathering on the telephone	Rigid rule following: Pose questions to process correctly
	2. Inability to handle client complexity	Rule breaking: avoid Rule bending: translate, rearrange, explain; Separate IA and 'real' dialogue
Working on segments of the process and/or product	3. Lack of discretional control separates segments	Instrumental action: Connect segments; Job coaches establish relationship with clients Rule breaking: Caseworkers guard discretion
Controlling the outcome of the work	4. Balancing formal and material legal security	Rule breaking: Caseworkers and managers separate IA from individual assessment
	5. Client participation within predetermined goals	Rigid rule following: Caseworkers adapt IA to the rules of social assistance
Controlling the work pace	6. Lack of control over time consumption affects possibilities to help clients	Rule breaking: avoid Rule bending: translate Routinizing: Pose all questions

Although caseworkers find the first IA segment time-consuming and provocations unnecessary, they also find it valuable for gatekeeping and for processing clients. This tension between an individualized first contact and an extensive initial standardization is generally coped with by rigid rule following. 'There are no short cuts' a caseworker says, 'It's rare to meet someone before IA part one is done'.

Tension 2 – IA cannot handle the complexity of clients

Some clients are not fit for the more comprehensive IA segment three or four, either because the questions are too narrow, too general, too difficult to understand due to language barriers, or too far from their everyday life. For example, the question 'how do you rate your possibilities to become self-supporting in the next three months?' (IA segment four) is viewed by caseworkers as insulting to a client who has been on sick leave for fifteen years. Also, the idea of posing every question to everyone can produce difficult answers that don't have follow-up questions:

> I've been in meetings where I've asked, how are you psychologically, and got the answer 'I've attempted suicide three times this year.' Then, I don't think you can say, 'OK, that's a 1, let's move on, what is your work experience?' Huh? How do you deal with that? (Caseworker)

According to a caseworker, while every client is entitled to an individual assessment according to their own capacities and skills, it is contradictory that everyone must answer IA. Street-level bureaucrats mostly coped with this tension between the rigidity of questions (standardization) and the complexity of clients (individualization) through rule bending: translating questions to their own and the client's way of speaking, rearranging questions in relation to the conversation, and explaining and elaborating on the meaning of the question: 'You learn to explain why you ask the questions. Because if you don't know why you ask the questions … it's hard to defend to the client if you don't know [why] yourself' (Job coach). Another way to bend rules is to go through IA quickly in order to begin the 'real,' 'free' and 'fluid' dialogue, leading to separate assessments and double documentation:

> In that case, it's difficult to relate to IA and I tend to use it quite strictly. Because I think it's more important that they recognize their answers in the assessment. I fill it out and put it aside, and then I have the usual conversation that I document in the journal in some way … a bit more traditional. So there are two assessments. (Caseworker)

Finally, there are also examples of rule breaking by not using IA for all clients. As one caseworker puts it, 'we can't do things that don't lead anywhere for the client or for us.'

Comment

The two identified tensions are coped with differently, seemingly because they are related to different segments of IA. The first tension is coped with through rigid rule following where professionals take a gate-keeping stance even though caseworkers find IA time-consuming and provocative for clients. This coping strategy seems to be related to a high workload and a focus on efficiency (Tummers et al. 2015, 1110). Conversely, the second tension, between the rigidity of questions and the complexity of clients, is coped with through rule bending and rule breaking strategies in ways that correspond to their own professional practice or clients' needs.

Working on segments of the product and/or process

The second theme concerns the segmented product or process that street-level bureaucrats may work on. One tension dominates this theme, namely that the computerization and sharing of IA information between segments (standardization) is hindered by caseworkers' need for discretion (individualization).

Tension 3 – lack of discretional control separates segments

Caseworkers and job coaches process clients for each other in the IA process. In general, caseworkers feel that job coaches work too closely with clients and become co-dependent. 'We want them to focus on job creation and leave the rest to us,' a caseworker says. Job coaches claim to see the long-term perspective, where caseworkers who deny clients social assistance due to formalities are counterproductive and generate more costs in the end. Job coaches also criticize the lack of information from caseworkers in IA segments one or three. Although it may be advantageous to have no information about the client, a 'clean sheet', the general perception among job coaches is that they are missing valuable information. This prevents them from working effectively, resulting in frustration:

> It feels like we always have to inform the social services, but it feels like we never get anything back. We always have to chase them. And it's a shame, because we could work more effectively if we had closer cooperation. [...] Usually when a client arrives I can work with him or her for a while and find out things, and then I communicate it to the social services. 'Did you know that ... ?', 'Yes, we knew,' they say. 'Then why didn't you tell me ... ?' It's very divided. We don't really know what's happening in part 1, and we don't really know what's happening in part 3. (Job coach)

The intended sharing of IA information is thus hindered by caseworkers' need for professional discretion. Caseworkers and job coaches cope in different ways. If a caseworker is unwilling to cooperate, job coaches cope by establishing closer relationships with clients, a form of instrumental action, where job coaches develop long-term solutions to overcome stressful situations and meet clients' demands (cf. Tummers et al. 2015, 1108). Clients spend most of their time at job centres and turn to job coaches with questions, who see this as an opportunity to support and create relations with the client. 'Since caseworkers are hard to get a hold of, who else can clients turn to?', a job coach asks rhetorically.

Caseworkers, on the other hand, often cope by not sharing the first or third segment of IA with job coaches. Caseworkers explain that the first segment of IA is not seen as relevant for job coaches, who should focus on work in IA segment two, that job coaches don't have the competence to deal with the sensitive information that caseworkers collect, or that it is unclear whether client information is classified or not and therefore should not be sent around between organizations: 'Does everyone have to know everything?', a caseworker manager asks. In relation to IA, caseworkers cope through rule breaking by obstructing IA. In a context of public measurement in social work, rule breaking may be in favour of the client, the professional or the organization (cf. Groth Andersson and Denvall 2017).

Comment

The idea of a cumulative body of knowledge about the client is impeded by caseworkers' ambition to keep their discretion and meet the clients' demands. If the previous theme distinguished between segments of the IA process, this theme distinguishes between caseworkers and job coaches. Both use coping strategies that, according to informants, are to the benefit of the client. However, caseworkers and job coaches have different ideas of what these benefits represent.

Controlling the outcome of the work

The third theme focuses on how street-level bureaucrats may lack control of the outcome of their work. Two tensions are described.

Tension 4 – formal vs material legal security

An important intention of IA is the legal security that is supposed to come from street-level bureaucrats posing the same questions, ensuring that all clients get a chance to communicate the same thing. Difficult questions can be posed more easily, signalling that drug abuse or domestic

violence are not accepted and something caseworkers should have knowledge about. Clients are more likely to be treated in the same way, regardless of street-level bureaucrats' prejudices. These intentions represent a *formal* legal security and support standardization, since there is an incentive to follow IA precisely. However, it has unclear ties to the client's situation:

> For the client, I think there is absolutely legal security in this … then again, a client who has a job plan, an action plan and a change plan maybe doesn't care if you make another plan. They have so many plans these people, I don't think they put it up on their walls at home. It's a bit absurd and bureaucratic that we constantly … we are going to make a plan, the employment office makes a plan, the job centre makes a plan, then another plan from me, where it basically says that my plan represents the other plans. I don't know if the plans are helpful in those cases, for those who are clients. (Caseworker)

The quotation highlights that caseworkers must also support the client individually. This task can be related to the idea of achieving *material* legal security, where in this case, individual assessments also should be ethically acceptable (cf. Mattsson 2015). Caseworkers and managers cope with this tension by viewing IA as a minimal set of questions to be posed, but without direct relationship to the individual assessment process. This is a form of rule breaking, since IA is partly neglected. By decoupling IA from the individual assessment, caseworkers achieve both formal and material legal security to avoid criticism from the organization. The individual assessment process is instead tied to parameters such as professional judgement and managers' interpretations of city district guidelines and norms of income support. 'Two different city districts can decide on different assessments on the basis of the same IA,' a caseworker concludes.

Tension 5 – client participation within a predetermined goal

Client participation is another IA goal. However, there is a tension regarding whether client participation and individualization is possible to achieve in means-testing in social assistance, where applicants' needs often are adapted to the organization. Job coaches perceive IA as a way to contribute to a dialogue about life goals and thereby gives the client influence towards self-sufficiency. However, caseworkers and managers seem to see the outcome of the IA process as symbolic and predetermined, leaving little room for real client participation. 'Your goal is to get a job, so it's really a bit unnecessary for me to ask,' a caseworker says, making IA a question of closing in on this 'right' answer. A manager argues similarly:

> We make certain demands. And if you don't meet the demands then there's a risk of a rejection. So the question is what you can call participation then. Participation, I think, is more that you shape the interventions and try to see which resources are appropriate and try to listen if the client thinks it's OK or not. Still, there are requirements that can't be sidestepped. (Manager)

Caseworkers and managers thus cope through rigid rule following since IA is aligned to the rules of their organization.

Comment

Caseworkers' and managers' partial negligence and rule breaking separate IA from the individual assessment and reduce it to a list of questions. This is a step towards individualization where caseworkers gain the legitimacy that comes with an assessment tool, while still guarding their discretion. Only caseworkers experience the fifth tension of client participation within IA. However, this time, they cope by rigid rule following, by interpreting IA in relation to the rules and constraints of social assistance.

Controlling the work pace

The fourth and last theme concerns work pace. Street-level bureaucrats must cope with the increased time consumption that IA brings, which may hinder individualization.

Tension 6 – lack of control over time consumption challenges individualization

According to most informants, IA has resulted in increased time consumption and caseloads. Apart from the many questions, which means that more data has to be transcribed and registered in the data system, couples need to be interviewed separately due to questions of domestic violence, doubling the work. Clients with language barriers require interpreters, which means an IA segment three can last for two hours. The increased time consumption leads to a lack of control over the work pace, which challenges the ambition of individualization, since possibilities to deal with clients' needs diminish with a growing workload.

Most informants feel pressured to pose questions rapidly and mechanically in order to perform IA to all clients, resulting in routinization. 'You ask a question, you get an answer … then you move on … in part to get through them all, in part because you don't know what to do with the answers' (Caseworker). Similarly, a caseworker asks questions and fills out the form from her computer:

> The meeting becomes less MI-inspired because you sit there with your papers and you sit there at your computer to save time, you can't write by hand and then fill out the form … our work situation is not like that. (I: Then you are behind a screen?) Yes, I am. And still I've worked in social work for ten years, I'm used to client meetings. But I can't imagine how long it must take for a new caseworker to get any kind of human interaction in the meetings. (Caseworker)

Still, there are examples of strategies where street-level bureaucrats try to do the client meetings justice. *Avoiding* IA is a rule breaking strategy where they calculate whether the time spent on IA is meaningful to progress the case: 'If your time is limited, then your efforts must have a purpose', a caseworker says, and another 'there is no intrinsic value to yet another client plan.' *Translating* is a rule bending strategy that means using IA in a way that suits the client, professional practice and the time constraints. A typical quotation comes from a job coach: 'You have to make the form your own.' Informants who translate are often experienced job coaches who are able to handle time constraints by not rigidly asking questions in order, filling out the form afterwards, doing it discreetly during the meeting or partly before the meeting from IA segment one.

Comment

Informants show different strategies when trying to control the consequences of time constraints that IA brings. Rule bending and rule breaking strategies are common, but most informants seem to prioritize IA through time-saving routinization. In relation to the second tension regarding client complexity, where street-level bureaucrats primarily used coping strategies to move towards clients, this implies that there are two counteracting coping strategies at work: individualizing IA to meet the complexity of clients, and getting through IA to make sure you get everything done.

Discussion

Our results suggest that many tensions are dealt with by moving towards clients and pragmatically adjusting to clients' needs. Adapting IA to your own professional practice and the client's situation by bending and breaking rules seems to be the established thing to do. In particular, job coaches utilize IA as a flexible tool rather than a structured interview guide. Still, there are several examples of how caseworkers use rigid rule following and routinization strategies in the use of IA in order to fulfil the goals of the organization. These strategies, such as routinely posing all questions rapidly in order to cope with time constraints, or rigidly holding lengthy telephone interviews before an initial human contact, correspond to moving away from or against clients. This resonates with the findings of Tummers et al. (2015) where professional groups' coping strategies relate to either towards, away from or against clients. There, social workers move towards clients as much as away from them, and not seldom against them. Instead, teachers, who in a pedagogic and motivational perspective share characteristics with job coaches, mainly move towards clients and rarely against. One reason for such difference discussed by Tummers et al. (2015) that may be relevant for this case, is the

importance of the rule of law for caseworkers, who frequently draw on legal circumstances when explaining rigid rule-following.

Put differently, and returning to our overarching tension between standardization and individualization, our findings suggest that caseworkers are *standardizers* in their determination to carry out IA and pose all questions. There is a widespread conception that IA contributes to legal security and fairness and they define client participation from the perspective of the organization. But they are also *individualizers* in the specific client situation – they avoid or bend the tool of IA to suit themselves and the client and treat it more as a guiding questionnaire than an assessment tool. This implies that caseworkers handle demands of the organization (getting through IA to make sure you get everything done) at the same time as the demands of the client (adapt IA) and the profession (separate IA from individual assessment, guard discretion of segment).

Job coaches act differently – they are *individualizers*. They adapt IA to the specific situation, do not experience the tension of client participation and do not guard the limits of their discretion as caseworkers do. Instead, they try to communicate and connect with caseworkers and establish client relationships. Managers are relatively invisible in our data. They become visible when caseworkers' managers support the division between IA and the individual assessment process, and where caseworkers' guarding of discretion is discussed. Overall, whereas caseworkers seem to be divided between individualization and standardization, job coaches are individualizers all through.

Conclusion

In this study, standardization does not end discretion (cf. Ponnert and Svensson 2016), although it challenges street-level bureaucrats to cope with it in different ways. Our central finding is that the tensions that have been left to street-level bureaucrats to cope with, together are manifested in a loose coupling between IA as an organizational tool for legitimacy, and IA as a pragmatically used questionnaire. There is thus a deliberate separation between organizational structures that enhance legitimacy, i.e. IA as formal demand, and the organizational practices that are believed within the organization to be technically efficient, i.e. the practice of IA (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2017, 90). This loose coupling supports street-level bureaucrats' adaptation of IA in an informal IA practice, since IA is carried out and all questions are formally answered. It is up to street-level bureaucrats, the Social Services Act and local guidelines to govern how policies play out in practice.

However, the loose coupling undermines the legitimacy of standardized assessment. Standardization cannot handle the complexity of human needs and obscures contradictions, which in turn creates new problems. Integrating individualization becomes an emergency exit resulting in the delegation of conflicts and contradictions to the individual caseworker. There is thus a risk that the clients get neither the potential legal rights that a rigid and standardized instrument may provide, nor the flexibility of the individual assessment.

The study has several limitations. Although the results are based on informants' experiences and views of the use of IA in an ongoing implementation process, they do not represent actual street-level behaviour. Also, interviews were carried out at one point in the implementation, preventing conclusions about how IA has affected the street-level bureaucrats' discretion. Another limitation concerns the analytical application of the concepts of individualization and standardization that have been used to identify problematic situations as tensions. Although they have been practical for exploring overarching tensions, they are nonetheless broad and imprecise, which led us to be cautious in applying them to coping strategies. Furthermore, the themes of alienation have been helpful in giving structure to tensions in street-level work, but they provide limited guidance when considering the strength of the themes.

In relation to research on how ICT affects street-level bureaucrats' discretion, our study seems to give some support to the *enablement thesis* (Buffat 2015), where technology and standardization are not the only contextual factors shaping discretion. Even though it is an instrument that increases

time consumption, in our case, street-level bureaucrats cope with tensions in several ways and mainly conform to rules to fulfil IA formally or to align it to the rules of the organization. Indeed, the coping strategies found in our study lie well within earlier research where street-level bureaucrats adapt their tool to their professional practice (Tummers et al. 2015). It also resonates with more general strategies and consequences related to decision-making tools such as quick categorization (Broadhurst et al. 2009), differences between informal and formal practice (Gillingham and Humphreys 2010) and the preservation of discretion (Dewitte et al. 2016). However, the width of strategies found in our case is also a result of the encouraged adaptation of the instrument to professional practice, and may reflect what Timmermans and Epstein (2010, 81) refer to as the balance between flexibility and rigidity, where users of standardization are entrusted with 'the right amount of agency to keep a standard sufficiently uniform for the task at hand'. To further explore such a balance, future research could explore clients' experiences of tensions in meetings with professionals, expanding the understanding of the interaction between standardization, street-level bureaucrats and client service delivery.

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