

Problems of Professional Disempowerment: An Initial Study of Social Work Conditions in Greenland

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Abstract

This study explores social workers' experiences in a social service department in Greenland. The social workers described limiting factors, such as an absence of management and a dysfunctional interdisciplinary network. They described feelings of frustration and individualization, which are known stressors. We found that the social workers were in a disempowered position that hindered their management of key welfare services. Serious problems were found that could have consequences for professional social work with clients. By drawing upon the traditions behind critical social work in our discussion of the findings, we have furthered our understanding of the workers' conditions. We point to issues at local, interdisciplinary, and societal levels. One solution will be to work collaboratively with social workers by using empowerment strategies to strengthen a critical consciousness within the profession. The development of a critical capacity is essential if social workers are to organize anti-oppressive practices and interdisciplinary co-operation, and to engage proactively in the future development of the Greenlandic welfare system. This can be accomplished by working with educated social workers in a union and by introducing more critical understandings at the student level.

Keywords: empowerment, Greenland, critical social work, disempowerment

During the fall of 2010, we studied how social workers in Greenland's largest municipal social service department experienced their work and working conditions.

Firstly, we present theoretical factors that help to qualify our understanding of the empirical findings. This is done by way of a critical paradigm and by applying empowerment theory. The theoretical approach reflects our desire to apply a more critical approach to the Greenlandic welfare system. This field has been described as highly problematic and containing a wide range of severe social problems (Kristensen, Christensen, & Baviskar, 2008; Pedersen & Bjerregaard, 2012; Skatteog Velfærdskommissionens betænkning [Tax and Welfare Commission report], 2011). These descriptions point to the project's underlying hypothesis that the social workers in Greenland were in a position of powerlessness (Arnfjord & Hounsgaard, 2013).

Secondly, we analyze the empirical findings from a series of interviews with social workers about their views on the functionality of the welfare system and their own position as a professional group. They raised problems with casework, lack of professional unionization, and issues with managerial and interdisciplinary recognition. This study presents a first look at the Greenlandic welfare system from the point of view of the professionals. No prior analysis has been undertaken from this perspective; the majority of welfare research until now has principally been concerned with measurable items, such as substance abuse, household violence, domestic abuse, abortions, suicides, etc.

Background

Since 1721, Greenland has been under Danish rule. Since obtaining home rule in 1979, Greenland has been able to conduct independent social policies and form social legislation. Social policy in Greenland is founded upon a Scandinavian model of welfare and is historically linked to the colonial relationship. In 2009, Greenland took one step closer to independence by obtaining internationally recognized status as a self-rule government. The new status is immensely important because now Greenlanders (Kalaallit/Inuit) are, for the first time, recognized as a people by the United Nations. The entire population numbers approximately 56,000. A total of 16,000 people live in Nuuk, the capital and educational hub—and the location of this study. The political climate in Greenland has traditionally been social democratic (the current ruling party is the social democratic Siumut), tending to the middle-left of the political spectrum. In recent years, a new, neo-liberal party (the Democrats) has emerged. Greenland has, thus far avoided the new public management wave—or managerialism, as Baines called it (Baines, 2011).

The first professional training of Greenlandic social workers began in 1966 (Heckscher, 1974). Then and currently social workers are typically Greenlandic (Inuit). The training was in the form of short courses, and Greenland did not offer comprehensive social work education until 1987. Between 1966 and 1987, students had to travel to Denmark to be fully educated as social workers. Currently, social workers graduate from the University of Greenland–Ililimatusarfik, where they receive a bachelor's degree in social work.

Social workers are the only one of the four main welfare professions (teachers, pedagogues, nurses, and social workers) without a labour union. Typical job opportunities involve working within the public municipal system and the government, where social workers carry out case management and human services management. This has earlier been characterized as bureaucratic social work (Scott, 1969). Social work is principally associated with a public office, in contrast to street-level work, such as like community work or social mobilization.

Current Research into the Working Conditions of Social Workers in Remote Northern Areas of Canada

Because little research has been conducted on social work in Greenland, we sought inspiration from research on social work in northern Canada, a region with

similarities in terms of its social system, Inuit culture, post-colonialism, and geography. Canadian social workers working beyond urban areas describe issues similar to those raised by Greenlandic social workers.

Research about social workers in rural areas faces challenges concerning the closeness and the remoteness of rural communities (Zapf, 1993). In general, the challenges are linked to the demands of handling difficult and complex social cases during the workday and then having to risk interaction with the clients outside of work, because of the close living conditions (Schmidt, 2005). One Canadian social worker wrote about how close it could get: “There have been many instances and a myriad of ways in which I have been previously connected with my clients in my personal life. Either my siblings or I attended school or worked with some clients” (Ginter, 2005, p. 101). Even in Canada, topics such as rural social work and Indigenous social work can be overlooked. In a review of *One Hundred Years of Social Work: A History of the Profession in English Canada, 1900–2000*, Schmidt (2012) comments that the book does not cover social work in remote areas of Canada and does not focus on social work with Canada’s Indigenous population.

Theoretical Framework—

Empowerment as a Critical Strategy to Claim a Voice of Social Justice

In this study, we used empowerment as the theoretical frame to counter the lack of attention toward the social work profession in previous social research in Greenland. Empowerment gives a perspective on the way in which we view social workers, on how social workers interact with their clients and society at large, and on how they view themselves and their position in the welfare system. Empowerment theories have traditionally focused on the disadvantaged groups in society (Freire, 2007); and empowerment is, thus, a central concept in social work (Adams, 2008). Empowerment was applied during the fieldwork; a symmetrical and participatory relationship was established with the social workers in the study.

A classical reference to the social workers’ autonomous position in society is found in Lipsky’s (1980) work on what he called “street-level bureaucrats.” Lipsky portrayed the often unchallenged position of the social worker as the sole representative of the system for the client: “The poorer people are, the greater the influence the street-level bureaucrats tend to have over them” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 6). Other studies of frontline personnel, however, describe social workers as being disempowered due to their position as employees who are ordered to implement social policies by politicians and management who sit higher up in the bureaucratic hierarchy (Riffe & Kondrat, 1997). This description was also apparent in Lipsky’s work.

In our theoretical context, empowerment is linked to the works of the young Marx, which focus on the emancipation of the proletariat from the slave-like working conditions in industrialized production. Empowerment, for Marx, was about establishing a sense of strong solidarity within the working class (Marx & Mandel, 1990). This is a horizontal solidarity: worker-to-worker. In our research we also work with vertical empowerment: how the struggle of oppressed groups

(professional and civil) can influence basic life circumstances and overall national policies. The main focus in this empowerment perspective is collective capacity building. The sociologist Fals Borda, a colleague of Freire's, talked about the need to focus on the horizontal, subject-to-subject relation and to remember to include a vertical, ideological obligation to strengthen collective practice (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

In placing empowerment within a critical paradigm, we stress the need for real empowerment that leaves a true space for negotiation in an otherwise asymmetrical relation, which in this case means between both citizens and social workers, and between the social workers as employees and the public system as the employer. The critical tradition of social work has developed both in the postmodernist school (Leonard, 1995) and in contemporary, anti-oppressive social work, which has its roots in Marxist social work (Campbell, 2005). Mullaly and Keating use the term *radical social work* and show a progression from critical social work via progressive social work to socialist social work—"ending up" with structural social work (Mullaly & Keating, 1991). The general concept, which we have adopted here, takes a critical stand toward structurally produced social injustice and the ideological importance of the existence of a profession that is equipped to oppose silencing, oppressive, and unjust social policies. In Greenland, social work can be characterized, with a reference to Lundy, as "the otherness" of the semi-professions (Dominelli, 1998). The professionals have been without political and social rights. Because of this, Greenlandic social workers have not fulfilled their role as human rights workers (Lundy, 2011). The social workers' recent moves toward establishing a labour union in Greenland have been concerned mainly with fundamental workers' rights (sufficient salaries, sick benefits, pensions, etc.). Baines has called this "business unionism" (Baines, 2011), which seems problematic and instrumental. In the Greenlandic context, however, one must accept that this can be the path to Baines' opposing term, "social unionism." Baines links the latter term to the social responsibilities of a union and points to an empowered group of professionals with the capacity to speak up against social injustice. The theoretical framework consists of an empowerment perspective embedded in critical pedagogy and social work. In this part of the research project we focused on how union building can grow into social unionism and become a vehicle for social justice.

Method

Fifteen social workers participated in the study, all of whom were Greenlandic. The participants ranged in age from late twenties to early sixties with a mean age of mid-forties. Consent for the interviews to be used in research was obtained via email prior to the interviews and again, orally, on the day of the interview. We have included the latest reflections on the issue and are aware of the ethical obligations not to cause any distress during data collection (Bryman, 2012, chapter 6). For ethical reasons, we have used pseudonyms for direct quotations. We respected the social workers' wishes concerning how we recorded the interviews. A few were uneasy with being recorded digitally; however, they agreed to handwritten

notes. The collective interviews have only been seen in full by us and by the individual social workers whom we quoted directly.

At the time of the interviews, the social service department was divided into teams according to type of case: early interference, disabilities, acute cases, children placed in foster care, and foster families.¹ A notable observation was that five years was the longest any of the social workers had worked in the department.² At the time of the interviews, the department manager position had not been filled for four months.

The data material was based on individual, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. To approach our hypothesis of possible disempowerment of the profession, participants were asked to assess how their social work training related to their daily work, opportunities for psychological support, and the collegial and managerial environment. The questions were, in a figurative sense, designed like a funnel, beginning with easy, everyday questions, such as: “How long have you been with this department?” and moving on to more detailed ones, such as: “How would you describe the work you do here?” and “What does a good work process mean to you?” Finally, the questions asked about the social workers’ perceptions of their own role and the role of the profession in the welfare system.

The questions were open-ended and required long and in-depth answers. The challenge of open-ended questions is that subsequent analysis is at risk of containing a myriad of categories that could clutter the general view (Kvale, 2007). All data were transcribed and coded using QDA Miner. We used classical grounded theory (GT) to create an analytical structure (Charmaz, 2006). We diverged from the classical GT approach by working with an underlying thesis of disempowerment, whereas in the GT method, the objective is to be as open as possible while engaging in fieldwork. This approach of using different paths with the GT method is fully accepted within the GT community: “We know that readers will treat the material in this book as items on a smorgasbord table from which they can choose, reject, and ignore—and rightly so” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 8–9). We were inspired by the way the GT process described the analytical process and used a line-by-line initial coding of the interviews to identify categories in the empirical material (see Table 1). After the initial coding, we met with the social workers again and presented the initial categories with a view to achieving respondent validation; this also served to reconfirm their consent to take part in the research project (Bloor, 1978; Kvale, 2007). By going back to the field we kept in touch and sought to create a more participatory and democratic research setting, as opposed to the alternative of just ending the contact after the individual interviews. This was in line with a Marxist, dualistic tradition of practice (methodology) and theory.

¹ The teams no longer exist due to a later restructuring in the department.

² At time of writing, only 2 of the 15 social workers who participated in the study, still work in the department.

Findings

At the following meeting, the social workers confirmed the 12 initial codes. Table 1 shows the condensation of codes into four broad categories: “being a professional,” “office work vs. client work,” “professional support system,” and “social work in practice.” In this section, the final categories with supported references to transcripts are explored, followed by a discussion.³ The order of the categories is as follows: the social workers’ descriptions of their role as professionals in the welfare system; a focus on the type of work they do; and different types of support in connection with their work. Finally, we returned to a theme of social work in practice, where the social workers themselves could point to different initiatives that could improve the working environment.

Table 1 The Condensed Categories

Examples of coded transcripts	Initial codes	Final categories
a) If I get somebody to start treatment for alcohol, it will benefit him or her for the rest of his or her life.	a) Being a social worker	1) Being a professional
b) I think my professional ballast is enough.	b) Professionalism	
c) It is also good to hear what other professionals have to say.	c) Interdisciplinary co-operation	
d+e) I would rather spend more time doing something and go see this family.	d) Time e) Case amounts and workload	2) Office work vs. client work
f) The day I'm dreaming about case numbers in my sleep, then it is time to quit.	f) Personal coping strategy	3) Professional support system
g) The professional supervision is fine, it's all I need.	g) Supervision	
h) I prefer to discuss cases with my colleagues.	h) Professional backup	
i) We need to be listened to.	i) Recognition	
j) Now I'm fantasizing. It should be a place where we could refer a pregnant mother and her 2-year-old child	j) Reference to help	4) Social work in practice
k) No, management is not here enough. If I'm able to catch them, they will help me, though.	k) Supervisory needs	
l) We need procedures. We have them, but nobody is using them.	l) Individual case assessment	

³ The quotations have been translated from Danish to English for the purpose of this article.

1) Being a Professional

In the interviews, we asked the social workers how they related to concepts of professionalism and the professional environment around social work. This resulted in philosophical talks about being a social worker, what it meant to them, and whether it had any significant meaning or if it was “just a job” (none of them considered it to be just a job). The initial codes “being a social worker,” “professionalism,” and “interdisciplinary co-operation” were all linked to the concept of the professional and their functions in the public social service sector. When talking about being a social worker and professionalism, the participants often related to how they utilized their education and practical training.⁴ It is through professions that a society institutionalizes the concept of expertise (Smeby, 2013). It was, therefore, very relevant to look at how the social workers in this study related to the concept of professionalism. One social worker described how she understood the concept:

I know how to conduct my casework. I have my professionalism and my competence. If I have a case like this [points to a case file], I know the costs and then I pass it on. It is all standardized; it no longer feels new. (Berit)

None of the social workers had a hard time describing what professionalism meant to them; and while they felt confident in their individual professional ability, they also described the challenges of not being recognized for their professionalism by those in their surrounding professional environment.

We are a force that can handle a lot of things, but we also have a need to be seen and understood in a way. Yes, this way we can be equal with our fellow professionals in the surrounding interdisciplinary areas, when it comes to salaries and improvements of our work life as well. (Mary)

Mary’s description of being a resource but feeling invisible was common during the interviews. The experience of being disempowered was exemplified by situations such as not being consulted prior to the implementation of changes to local social policy. The example given was when local politicians revised the municipal social policy and subsequently issued a statement saying that the municipality must actively work toward fewer child placements. The social workers were not in disagreement with such policies, but they had a sense of misalignment. Did the new policy imply that they had done their job wrong before? Would the new policy come with extra resources or initiatives to establish further professional institutions or hire more professionals so that the policies could actually be implemented? These questions went unanswered because of the lack of communication between politicians and the social workers. It led to mistrust and ambivalence toward municipal social policies, which were considered to be merely symbolic. This attitude could be summed up by this professional’s view of the situation:

⁴ To qualify as a social worker in Greenland, a bachelor’s degree in social work is required.

How then do we approach this [new social welfare policy]? What, in our opinion and based on experience, is the right, practical way to handle this in our municipality? (Ivalo)

Ivalo was talking about a lack of communication between the political and the practical levels in the municipality—the local politicians generally overlooked the social workers, who were the ones with the expertise. Weeks passed before the social workers were introduced to the new policy and received guidance on how to proceed. At one point during the interviews, it was implied that the high level of forced removal was due to the lack of family counsellors and family institutions.

When talking about professionalism, the social workers only rarely considered the general state of social work in society. They became aware of the professional world outside the welfare department when they engaged in interdisciplinary work with other sectors, such as schools and the health care system. When we asked them about this work, they revealed some imbalances in interdisciplinary co-operation. Ivalo pointed out that co-operation with some children's homes was a mixed experience:

Some institutions do not have any limitations or boundaries. That is very frustrating. But other places ... have a stable staff situation with a low rate of new people coming and going. That is good for the children, and they do good therapy. (Ivalo)

Niviaq supported this:

Even though we have a plan of action, they [the institutions] do not follow the plan of action.... Then we do not meet up for a long time, because we need a new date for a meeting with all parties—the school, the institutions, and the parents, and in the meantime, we do not know how the child is doing. (Niviaq)

Sometimes, situations became problematic for the social workers when those with whom they worked jointly became irritated with them because they were representatives of the social welfare system. Petra described how the cross-sectorial working climate could sometimes get very heated:

There are a lot of frustrations toward the municipality.... The expectation toward the municipality is that we are the acting authority.... We really have very few possibilities to take any action, and the different co-operating partners, for instance, the health care system, find it difficult to understand that we cannot immediately offer housing, or cannot see to it that a child is placed in a day care institution—the reasons why we cannot do such things. It is like an accusation. And that makes working together difficult. (Petra)

Petra uses the term “frustration” explicitly in relation to situations such as the following. In this case, the social service department was notified about an issue with a school pupil. The school had not fulfilled its duties to report suspicions of neglect. In answer to a question about interdisciplinary relationships, Maja replied:

Some schools are really good at contacting us. They know the pupils. But others ... they have changes in the staff, just like us. I was at a school once

because one of their pupils, a boy, had not attended class for half a year. And we had not received any report about this. The school counsellor did not know the pupil and the class teacher had seen him [only] twice. The school deputy did not know that the child even existed. It was like, “Um, well then, what do we do?” (Maja)

Maja continued talking about the case and later revealed that she eventually located the pupil, who was sleeping at home on his mother’s couch. The mother did not care whether he went to school, so he had decided not to go.

2) Office Work vs. Client Work

This category could have included “time” as a more central concept. It was linked with “case amounts and workload” because the participants talked about these concepts as symptoms of what they found difficult in carrying out their daily tasks. The social workers wanted to do social work. To them, this meant working with clients in a social context. A lot of their time was spent in the office staring at a computer monitor. Some of the participants were divided between what they called “help” and what they referred to as “bureaucracy.” To some social workers, help or care meant interaction with clients, whether this took place in the social service department or during home visits. They pointed to the issue of constantly having to document what they did. In this regard, Niviaq said:

If I just make a phone call to a family and talk to them, then I have to write it down [in the case file] and call them in for a meeting and collect information, and then I have to write to whoever notified us about the family. There is so much administrative paper work where we are—a bit too much, I think. I would rather spend more time doing something and go see a family, which I can do some actual things for.

Prioritizing time in front of the computer feels like time away from the actual task: interacting with clients. When asked about what a good day felt like, Susan answered: “Succeeding at something, completing something. To be there for somebody.” To her, it was all about the clients, and the computer took away time that could be spent being there for somebody that needed help.

The office work was considered unavoidable, but sometimes felt very insufficient. The issue was not only the amount of work, but also the pressure of determining which cases were urgent, such as severe domestic abuse, and which cases could wait.

With this pile I have here, there has to be time to decide which cases are urgent. It gives me a guilty conscience. But I can’t continue to live with a guilty conscience, I have to talk to the manager ... It looks awful and it is.
(Mary)

3) Professional Support System

Professional support was described by the social workers as different ways of getting support in a job that from time to time required an extraordinary effort. The social workers talked about their own personal coping mechanisms. One topic to

which they continually returned was the problem of not being recognized by peers outside the department. The participants were pleased with the internal professional support system, which was described as being important when critical situations occurred. Professional support involved attending group counselling twice a month with a psychologist. A recurring theme, however, was the fact that they had no floor manager in the department who could support them. They had been almost without any daily management for four months. In this context, the role of management was viewed more as a support resource in connection to casework rather than offering leadership in a disciplinary sense. In the following interview, Maja directly named what she saw as absence of management as the reason why many of her colleagues were seeking employment elsewhere:

Interviewer: Do you have sparring with others at this place?

Maja: What do you mean, “sparring”?

Interviewer: Do you receive the support you need?

Maja: From whom?

Interviewer: Your colleagues and from your management.

Maja: From my colleagues. We support each other. Management ... right now it doesn't work as it's supposed to. A lot of people are on their way out of here. It is like there is no understanding of what we need.

Maja seems to directly link the degree of turnover with a dysfunctional management situation. Recognition in the form of support from management was not forthcoming. Not being able to get a second opinion or consult about a case with someone in a managerial position was the cause of some frustration:

From time to time, it is a little frustrating, when you are in a situation where you need advice and counselling on something that you question. I need it, if I have to say it, a lot of times. (Susan)

The cases to which Susan was referring were not simple or easily solvable ones that might just need a fresh pair of eyes. These were cases about serious child abuse, child removal, visitation involving a child seeing a parent in prison, etc. This type of decision could weigh heavily on the mind of a social worker and become a burden if they were not shared and supported collectively. It was in relation to these situations that the social workers sought some form of recognition. Experiences of similar situations had led some of the social workers to take sick leave. Jane said:

It is like ... you get hit. You are not a robot. You do all that you can to make it work in your everyday life. “I'm ok, I'm ok.”

Interviewer: So you tell yourself that, even though it isn't true?

Jane: [Nods] I needed fresh air and then at last I could see it.... Now I avoid situations where assignments pile up.... I have done that before. Now there is room for me. That is what I learned from that. (Jane)

Jane took a “hit,” which involved her going on sick leave due to stress. The issue of stress emerged in the interviews, but was not part of the original interview design.

The social workers were asked about work–life balance. The question resulted in answers that fell into a category called “coping strategies.” Each social worker had developed personal strategies for coping with their work. These included small mental techniques, like “When I go to work, I put my working jacket on, and then I hang it up when I return home” (Sif). Others were explicit about avoiding negative thoughts: “For me, it is about how you think. You shouldn’t focus on the negative, because you will burn out quickly” (Ketty). Social work with families and children was occasionally described as tough work that could lead to burnout and stress.

4) Social Work in Practice

This final category is comprised of initial categories related to questions around how the participants carried out their daily tasks. A key task was referral of clients to various forms of support—access to a range of social services, such as home visits, therapy, or admittance to specialist institutions. Referrals and discretionary decisions at times required management supervision, and this was not always available. The social workers were left with “supervisory needs” from the initial codes therefore related directly to problems of having to do “individual case assessment.”

They were far from passive when it came to suggestions about transformations that would improve their work environment. A limiting factor was the political system. Some regarded it as being parallel to social work, while others blamed the system for restrictions on the level of service they would like to provide. Greenland is still a young welfare society with a lack of resources to provide highly specialized social services. As an example of this, the participants talked about a need for institutions with 24-hour staff for mothers and their infants. They also mentioned the need for an infant foster home. The lack of resources became a personal and professional problem for some of the social workers:

Because we do not have an infant foster home, we do not have anywhere to place the children. There are no foster families for infants. So, in some sense, I am a part of the neglect. (Maja)

Petra’s statement concurred with Maja’s:

It is like we have a list covering what the purpose of our department is. The purpose is this and that. We are going to do this and solve that. But then we end up with only the possibilities of doing and acting upon the intentions.

Interviewer: So it looks good on paper, but it is not possible?...

Petra: No, not at all, and that is very tiresome. You want to help, but you just don’t have the possibility. I can do a lot to convince and motivate and so on, but there is also so much that I cannot do.

The social workers either internalized their frustrations surrounding the limitations to the services they could offer, or described “on-paper services” that did not really exist. There was no channel for their ideas, such as an idea bank or a forum where they could put forward suggestions and discuss possible implementation. They longed for a sense of common ground, clear structures in the department, and visible

management. Almost all of the social workers correlated the absence of management with withdrawal and isolation. When it came to discussing casework with colleagues, Arnaq said:

I have noticed that we work in our own little world. We could use each other a lot more, our differences and professionalism.

Sascha added:

It is like we are 15 social workers here that might have individual ways of doing things. And I think that is a mess ... but I definitely notice some visionary thoughts from our department head and from the level above that. But, I do not see that they are carried out.

Discussion

The following discussion is structured around the four themes from the findings. The first is “professionalism,” which is linked to findings about the social workers’ relation to their job, education, and profession. “Disempowerment” is the second theme, relating to descriptions of not always feeling useful, as well as to an absence of references to a shared understanding among the social workers. The third is “stress,” described by the social workers as periods of despair and doubts about their role and function, also including periods of sick leave due to work pressures.

The fourth and final theme is “claiming a voice,” which relates to descriptions of not being recognized by management and having to defend municipal politics in interdisciplinary collaboration while having a sense of failing a professional mandate to fight social injustice.

Professionalism

The concept of professionalism was addressed in an individualized sense, but was not mentioned as a social concept. At the beginning of this article, we briefly presented some of Greenland’s critical welfare issues. If these challenges are to be met to the standards of a welfare society, they will need to be taken on by well-trained social workers. In a welfare society, social workers are usually considered to represent one of the strongholds of professionalism, and social work has a long professional history (McNutt, 2008). The social work profession as an expert group is in a position to advocate for social rights in society (Wilks, 2012). This may occur under conditions where the purpose of an organization is more to go beyond the business union level and strive toward being a social union, as discussed earlier. The social workers in this study had a clear understanding of their own individual capabilities, but only rarely referred to the responsibilities of the profession. A study from Canada points to this exact problem. The social workers wanted to work professionally, but did not see evidence that the results of their work were reflected in a recognition that they were working in what some described as a tough professional field (Baines, Davis, & Saini, 2009). Another important aspect, which deserves further attention, is the potential situation of having social workers with an Indigenous background, Greenlandic (Inuit), managing a welfare system based on Scandinavian (western) ways of thought. This aspect did not come up during the

interviews. In the social work literature one usually finds that Indigenous social work relates to western social workers working with Indigenous clients. In Greenland it is a western system represented by Greenlandic (Inuit) social workers working with Greenlandic (Inuit) clients. So far the cultural aspect of this paradox has not been fully addressed in Greenland. One way of doing this would be to go through a union or some form of empowered social forum in order to look further into this aspect.

A professional union of social workers would help draw attention to the important role of the social worker outside the municipal office. If we look back at Maja's case of the missing pupil who was found sleeping on his mother's couch at home, we have a sound example of the social function of this profession. Social workers have a mandate to operate within civil society. This mandate cannot be activated, so to speak, if no one is aware of the option to alert a social worker about a possible social issue. The pupil could have been located much sooner had the school known about the possibility of contacting a social worker, thereby avoiding a half-year gap in the child's statutory schooling. Civil society is usually an area where the other welfare professions cannot reach a child without a more formal appointment. Problems like this occur when welfare professions do not communicate well together, or are unaware of each other's mandates and competencies. In general they will have a hard time of serving citizens with social problems because sustainable solutions to social problems typically calls for an interdisciplinary action.

Disempowerment

Disempowerment is a feeling of powerlessness and a sense of being unable to act. McDermott and Garofalo (2004) described disempowerment as the experience of a limit to one's influence. In our study, it was the professionals who felt disempowered, expressed in the form of frustration. They were without management support, which left them alone in their decision making. They had a reduced sense of belonging to a group of colleagues. They could not rely on the interdisciplinary network to alert them to social problems. On top of that, they experienced a misalignment between the ideologies expressed in the municipal social policies and their implementation in practice.

They talked about the social system as having an absence of structure. It was an issue described almost entirely one-sidedly without reflection on their own involvement in a state of disempowerment. During our study, we observed and heard frustrations about a stagnant situation, but did not hear about or witness the social workers take any action toward transformative processes coming from the professionals themselves. Over the four months of the study, the social workers appeared to be reactive and frustrated, which reflected feelings about injustice and was indicative of a belief that things could be different. This belief is an important base on which to build. While the social workers were capable of identifying problematic areas, they were not capable of handling the problems collectively as a group. A recent Canadian study of hospital social workers concluded that if the social workers could not overcome their own disempowerment, they could not be fully functional in their efforts to supply social services to others (Olonan, 2009). Empirically, we saw disempowerment expressed on both an individual and a group

level. It was a description of a lack of capacity to help clients, to act within the interdisciplinary network, and the social service system. Slee (2012) wrote about this in an Australian case in which the social system and school system were dysfunctional. Authorities in northern Australia did not pay attention to the fact that a huge number of Indigenous pupils did not attend school. Slee characterized this as systemic neglect. A collective group of disempowered social workers as described above may be at severe risk of causing systemic neglect within the municipality.

Stress

Sometimes dysfunctional management, individual casework, and work overload can lead to stress. One social worker summed it up by saying they “are not robots.” Heugten (2011) examined studies about stress and social work going back 30 years and illustrated that stress is a classic issue within the profession. Heugten refers to the work of Lloyd, McKenna, and King (2005), who documented that lack of resources and conflicts within the professional network were the most notable stressors. They found that indicators such as individualism, problems with management, and issues with recognition from the interdisciplinary network were known stressors and left social workers feeling hard pressed on several fronts. The professional environment was not strong enough to sustain an internal professional network, and the social workers found that there were in a state of collegial withdrawal. When the social workers in this study talked about the need to be seen and to rely on each other, they were referring to the closed community within the department. There was a lack of a sense of professional community beyond the social service department. This could explain why, when confronted with problems, their choices were to either withdraw into individualism or to seek employment elsewhere, which resulted in the problem of high turnover. A comparative study between British and Swedish social workers working in children’s services explained high turnover as the result of problems with collaboration within the interdisciplinary network (Tham & Meagher, 2009). A key point to add here, in our Greenlandic case, is that this problem included a lack of critical consciousness of the profession. The lack of this element apparently led to an additional stressor: further isolation in the workplace.

Claiming a Voice

A recent Swedish study found a positive correlation between commitment to one’s work, co-worker support, role clarity, and time spent interacting with management (Tafvelin, Hyvönen, & Westerberg, 2012). These elements would not address all of the social workers’ frustrations, but they are ideas that are worth further exploration. As in our study, the Swedish study also found stagnation in workplace dynamics, with very little management interaction. Without leadership, the social workers felt overlooked and withdrew into individualized and isolated work processes.

The social workers from our study had no straightforward solution to issues with management or for dealing with the feeling of individualization. Their calls for change came from a reactive group of professionals without a professional critical

consciousness. This is a democratic issue. A reactionary social worker does only what she or he is told. He/she is merely an employee of the system—a waiting, disempowered salary worker. To be reactionary is not part of the international ethics of the profession, where one statement reads: “Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). Admittedly, this is mostly possible in countries with highly developed unions. However, in Greenland we are proud of our right to form labour unions, as is the case in northwestern Europe, the United States, and Canada. The road to claiming a voice of social justice does not have to go through the process of developing a business union before becoming a social union. It can happen simultaneously. There is a need to bring the social back into social work. Kam (2014) commented on this and talks about a 6S framework: 1) Social concern and consciousness, 2) Socially disadvantaged groups as the priority, 3) Social context, 4) Social construction, 5) Social change, and 6) Social equality. Items 5 & 6 relate closely to a critical paradigm and to how important it is for social workers to become a profession and claim a voice, by focusing on transformative practices and navigating toward a more egalitarian society. There is a possibility for the social work profession in Greenland to become a just voice of positive change in the social political debate.

Limitations

The study was conducted in Nuuk, a town that, due to its size (16,000 inhabitants), has the best-qualified staff within the country’s social welfare system. It is difficult in Greenland’s second-, third-, and fourth-largest towns to find qualified social workers to fill vacant positions. The positions, if not left vacant, are occupied by people with lower level qualifications, such as social service assistants (with a one-year training after secondary school) or office clerks. We would not be able to transfer the results about experiences of management, turnover, and recognition between towns. This study’s findings are dependent on local variation, such as long-term employment among the staff, work environment, and the relationship with management.

There is one thing we can say with some certainty: however positive the relationship between management and employees might be in other municipalities, the social workers in Greenland are without any labour union support.

Conclusion

The study set out to explore the possibility of a disempowered social worker profession and took a first look at the conditions of Greenlandic social workers. The conclusions can be divided into parts starting with the consequences of disempowerment of the profession on the local level, the interdisciplinary level, and the social system level.

On the local level, i.e., the municipal social service department, the findings suggested that the social workers were disempowered and that they worked reactively, where they were acknowledged neither by their management nor by their interdisciplinary network. This led to further individualization. With no references to the profession as a group and without a labour union, problems with management and symptoms of stress became individualized problems. From a critical point of view, these were problems that occurred in social contexts but were handled in isolated circumstances. Without the support of a labour union, they were isolated and the Greenlandic society would be without a strong forum for social justice.

On the interdisciplinary level, the social workers were socially invisible. Not being recognized as having a mandate to act in the civic sphere is an issue of systemic disempowerment that has an impact on co-operation between sectors in a welfare society and weakens the capacity in the society to increase equality. A lack of interdisciplinary communication and acknowledgement equates to not fully trusting the capacity of other professionals from different sectors. This could mean that, for example, a social worker double checks whether the school system follows up on a pupil's attendance or a nurse in the health care system ensures that a pregnant teenager has a social safety net. It could result in the professional either double checking everything or being indifferent, as long as the client is not their primary and direct responsibility. A lack of interdisciplinary trust ultimately leads to some parties losing out. Society as a whole also loses out because insecurity in the interdisciplinary network forces the allocation of resources to support bureaucratic and instrumental actions instead of being allocated to constructive co-operative services, which could empower the population and facilitate civic, bottom-up-oriented action.

When social service workers are disempowered, it causes a ripple effect that could have a negative impact on clients. A Greenlandic citizen in need of public assistance is, by definition, in a situation of (at least) partial powerlessness. Social problems in a social democratic welfare system need to be addressed by capable, empowered, and resourceful professional social workers who rely on a trusting interdisciplinary network. This is far from the situation found in this study, and this creates a grave democratic problem. During the research, we did not come across empirical evidence of a support system that ensures a sound safety net; instead, we witnessed powerlessness created by a reactive social service workforce.

A future task will be to build up capacity within the welfare service sector by way of an empowerment strategy. One way could be to strengthen the solidarity of the social workers by collaborating with them to organize a labour union. We suggest a series of meetings with themes that would have a dual focus on business-oriented labour rights and on the social responsibility of a union. This could facilitate key factors of a new critical phase of Greenlandic social work. Another element is, arguably, the future education of social workers, which we have not touched upon in this article. An essential factor must be a faculty that is capable of teaching and discussing the history and contextualization of a critical paradigm in Greenlandic social work. A system of social work is perhaps only as good as its students, and if our definition of utopia is an egalitarian society, the road to this is created by critical

students equipped to discuss exactly what anti-oppression means and how it contributes to a future Greenlandic welfare state.

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The authors thank the participating social workers for sharing their experiences with us. The Government of Greenland and the Commission for Scientific Investigations in Greenland (KVUG) helped with the funding for this study. We are very grateful for the anonymous reviews we have received. It has helped immensely with qualifying our arguments, *qujanaq* (Greenlandic for thank you).