LOOKING INTO THE BOX: SWEDISH SOCIAL CARE MANAGERS MAKE MEANING OF THEIR WORK AND ROLE

Marie-Louise Österlind

School of Education and Environment, Kristianstad University and Department of Psychology, Lund University, Sweden

This paper reports on a participative project where Swedish social care managers explored their work and their managerial role by means of repertory grid interviews and collegial reflection. The qualitative, phenomenological data analysis provides a multifaceted picture of what it means to be a social care manager, seen from the managers' perspective. The results indicate that managers in this and other welfare organisations need to construe and re-construe their managerial role in order to balance the contrasting demands on their role, thereby accomplishing a personal equilibrium. The managers' meaning-making process can be supported by constructivist techniques such as those used in this project.

Keywords: social care, managerial roles, personal construct psychology, repertory grid interview, phenomenological analysis, participative research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a participative project in which constructivist techniques were used to explore the participating managers' experiences of their daily work and managerial role. A detailed description of the project, methods, and data was previously published in this journal (Österlind & Denicolo, 2006).

BACKGROUND

In public human services organisations, first-line managers are often considered to be of decisive importance to both the quality and efficiency of the enterprise and the job satisfaction and well-being of its employees. Because such organisations are responsible for large parts of the social services apparatus, the activities of these managers have a decisive impact on quality of life among the citizenry. Recent research (Ericsson, 2010; Hjort & Aili, 2010), indicates that problems such as multiple and competing goals, conflicting goals and interests, and efficiency requirements, which are intrinsic to welfare or-

ganisations and have been described in classic works by Lipsky (1980), Hasenfeld (1983), and Schön (1983), are at least equally present in today's organisations. Many first-line managers find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position, with workdays characterised by heavy workloads, indistinct goals, competing interests, and a lack of resources (Petersson, 2006).

Swedish municipal social care managers and their staff often feel inadequate in their efforts to live up to legal requirements, their organisations' quality goals, and their own professional ideals (Szebehely, 2000; Wolmesjö, 2005). Furthermore, the managers are often subject to explicit demands that they implement politically determined change processes that are expected to produce both higher quality and greater efficiency, but often bring about negative effects in terms of productivity, quality, and work climate (Ragneklint, 2002). A considerable number of managers leave the profession in response to overwork and lack of support, which causes negative effects for their organisations and staff. The situation demands a deeper understanding of what it means to be a manager in this type of organisation.

THE LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The Leadership Project aimed to contribute to new academic knowledge about what it means to be a manager in a Swedish municipal care organisation, as viewed from the managers' perspective, in a process which would sustain the development of leadership and praxis.

The project was initiated by participating managers (nine women and two men) who experienced a difficult work situation and therefore sought an opportunity to explore their situation and their role. The managers, who contributed to the design of the project as well as sharing their views within it, were all members of one managerial group. They were in charge of the activities (aged care residence and home care service, or support and service to persons with certain functional impairments) and comprised the staff in their respective area. All managers had a university degree in social care, nursing, or personnel management. Their periods of service within the organisation and in leading positions varied considerably. The organisation had a high manager turnover. Two managers left their positions, and two new managers were recruited during the project.

The organisation had recently undergone a comprehensive, politically driven change process, which aimed for improved economic efficiency and service quality. In this process a new vision – *The right quality in every meeting* [interaction between staff and care recipient] – and a new quality management system were introduced. New managerial positions replaced previous levels, and 'old' managers aspiring for a 'new' position had to apply for these in competition. The appointed managers were given responsibility over an increased number of staff [50–70 staff members] as well as 'new' professional groups such as nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists.

Methodology and method

The foundational precept of the project was that the individual's constructions of social reality orientate and mediate individual action (Kelly, 1955). The participatory research approach (Heron & Reason, 2001) that was developed during the project proposed to support a scientific way of knowledge creation, where the process, the personal growth of the participating managers, and the development of praxis, understood as the combination of 'theory' and 'praxis' that underpin the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), were considered as valuable as the results, that is, the generation of new general knowledge and theory.

Procedure – repertory grid interviews and group reflection

Repertory grid interviews (Kelly, 1955) facilitate the exploration of how individuals and groups organise and interpret aspects of their experiences through a process which engages the participants in a reflective process (Fransella, 2005). A combination of repertory grid interviews and group reflection was considered suitable for the dual purpose of (1) acquiring new scientific knowledge about the participating managers' perceptions of their daily work and their roles as managers, and (2) contributing to the professional growth and advancement of the participating managers.

Repertory grid interviews

The theme of the interviews was *My tasks and responsibilities as a manager.* The interviews took place in the manager's workplace and were recorded on audiotape. The process was sustained by computer analysis software (Rep Grid II), and encompassed the following steps:

1. Identification and listing of tasks and assignments performed (elements).

2. Reflection on similarities and differences (construct poles) between triads of tasks addressing the questions: *What do these tasks mean to you? Which aspects can illuminate your tasks and your managerial role?*

3. Sorting of remaining tasks on a range between the two construct poles generated in step 2.

4. Conclusion of each interview by a short feedback and discussion of the graphical representations of the manager's grid as generated by the programme, in order to validate and amplify the results, as suggested by Smith (1995).

Group reflection

The results from the first analysis of the interview data were presented and discussed at a group session, allowing for feedback and comments from the managers and a validation of the results on the group level. This session relatively soon transitioned into a further exploration of the managerial role which provided unexpectedly useful information. It also provided a gateway to the second part of the project, in which the managers deepened and developed the investigations of their own work situation and role through a collegial meaning-creation process (Österlind, submitted).

Analysis

The data consist of (1) verbatim transcriptions of the recordings from the interviews and the group session and (2) the managers' individual grids [i.e. the graphical representations of the managers' listings and comparisons of their tasks generated by the computer program]. For a detailed description, see Österlind & Denicolo (2006).

The data analysis was performed in the following steps:

1. Qualitative content analysis of the managers' grids in order to obtain an overview of the tasks performed by the managers, how these were construed and related to each other and to the managerial role.

2. Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts providing additional information from the interviews which did not appear in the grids.

At this stage, the results from steps 1 and 2 were reported and discussed at the group session.

3. Qualitative content analysis of the transcript from the group session.

Although the results from steps 1, 2, and 3 provided useful information on the managers' work situation, a deeper understanding of what it means to be a manager in this type of organisation was still lacking. Therefore a qualitative phenomenological analysis of the transcripts from the interviews and the group session was performed.

4. This analysis, based on principles formulated by Giorgi (2009) and Langdridge (2007), comprised several readings and re-readings of the transcripts in accordance with the idea of the hermeneutic circle, that an understanding of the parts requires an understanding of the whole and vice versa (Gadamer, 1997). The analysis was performed in the following order: (a) Re-reading of the transcripts to obtain an overview of the material; (b) Division of the text into meaning units; (c) Condensation of the meaning units into concise formulations by omitting 'superfluous' words; (d) Identification and selection of cores of significance focusing meanings, modes, and aspects.

5. The analysis revealed two constructs [the *face* and the *box*] that illuminated the essence of the managerial position and role. The *face-*construct appeared in an interview where the participating manager who used *faces* as a synonym for the *different roles* his tasks and responsibilities induced him to play. The *box-*construct appeared and was elaborated at the group session. These elaborations encompassed the managerial role as: (I) a *framework for what happens*, which they were expected to both *stay within* and *hold together* and (II) a portable storage compartment for their job duties [*a case with a handle*, a *beauty box*, and a *toolbox*]. The statements also included wishes for support, development, and change expressed in terms of *keeping a ladder or lift in*

the box, in order to be able to get out of the ditch [when losing oversight and control over the job situation]; *getting help in looking at what was in the box; cleaning out the box* or even *discarding the box and getting a new one*.

6. In the further analysis, these constructs were used as analytical tools to achieve a deeper understanding of the managers' work situation and professional role.

7. The results from this analysis were arranged in eloquent themes in order to illuminate the findings. The designations, inspired by the stated constructs, were chosen with the purpose of enhancing the comprehension of the complexity of the managers' work situation and role. The results are interspersed with italicised quotes from the managers' statements.

8. In conclusion, the themes were related to earlier research and theories attempting to attain wider commonality and to generate hypotheses and theory. The outcomes of this process are presented in the final part of this paper where the results are interleaved with earlier research to form a broader frame of reference.

THE MANY FACETS OF SOCIAL CARE MANAGEMENT

The managers had a complex and often very demanding (but also stimulating) work situation that was characterised by a large number of varied job tasks and a multi-faceted managerial role involving extensive responsibility for the operations, staff, and finances. Their workdays involved parallel multitasking, intermittent work interruptions, a lack of time, and problems in setting limits on their own work. The scarcity of resources often made it difficult for the managers to live up to their own level of aspiration, to the administrative management's demands, and to legal requirements.

A large and varied work content

During the interviews the managers generated a very large and varied number of job 'elements' which, based on the managers' constructs, could be divided into two main groups: stimulating and demanding managerial tasks and boring routine tasks that took time away [from their managerial tasks].

The bulk of the managers' job tasks were construed as *consistent with their educational background and managerial position*, and of such a nature that they *had to be performed by the managers*. These tasks were related to the managers' three main areas of responsibility: (I) operations, (II) staff and (III) finances. They were construed as *varied*, *fun*, *stimulating*, *interesting*, *exciting, enterprising, creative*, and also as *challenging* and *uncertain with regard to the future*. They *required reflection* and *were demanding on the manager as a person*. Tasks that *had to do with people* required both *heart*, i.e., commitment and empathy, and *brains*, i.e., knowledge of personnel administration and labour law regulations, and of the laws that regulate the rights of the care recipients and the obligations of the municipalities. In most cases, the managers were required to *make assessments* and prioritise in terms of what could be accomplished within the framework of the applicable guidelines and budgetary framework.

The managers also performed job tasks that were construed as *not being consistent with their educational background and managerial position*. These tasks were related to administration, information, and management of buildings/premises. They were construed as *unchallenging*, *less interesting and boring, concrete and practical*, *easy routine work* that *can be performed by or in cooperation with someone other than the manager*. These *tasks* were often considered to *prioritise themselves* and thus also to *take time away* from the *demanding* and *stimulating* managerial tasks.

The issue of whether or not to delegate these time-consuming tasks often became a topic of deliberation with regard to budget restrictions, staff working conditions, and quality of the services performed. While some managers at-

tempted to solve this apparently impossible equation by trying to get the staff to take on additional job tasks within the limited time frame, many managers performed the tasks themselves in order to avoid further burdening a staff that were already pressed for time by adding new tasks within an unaltered timeframe. In some cases, it was considered inefficient to delegate a task, since delegation initially takes more time than it frees up. Some managers also performed routine tasks because it provided much-needed breathing room and time to ponder over difficulties.

The managers' personal strategies for balancing their heavy workloads against demands that they be available to their staff and colleagues included *creating personal routines* such as *setting aside the first hour at work for being available for the staff* and establishing readiness to cope with the emergency situations that tended to crop up by *making sure to have open time in the calendar*. Some strategies such as *avoiding taking extended leaves of absence* so that tasks do not pile up too high and *taking work that require concentration home* in order to work on it undisturbed, could affect their private lives.

A vague action frame of reference

The managers' position of *team manager* was introduced in the recently completed organisational overhaul. The position was construed as a *qualitatively different way of leading and organising the operations*, in which *a sense of 'we'*, *participation* and *cooperation* between individual employees and between different professional categories was emphasised and granted special status, in contrast to the earlier 'supervisor' position, which was associated with the previous *rules-based management*. The senior management's intentions with the re-organisation were perceived as unclear, and the new managerial position was found to be *vague and in need of definition*. A number of managers sought clarification from the management regarding their areas of responsibility and their roles. Newly appointed managers in particular expressed concerns about not knowing all that was

expected of them and often advocated direct job descriptions. The lack of clarity regarding the position was considered to cause heavier workloads, role conflicts, and stress.

Faces portraying the complex managerial role

The commonality of the managers' construal of their professional role may be depicted by six *faces*, which portray qualitatively different role aspects. Each manager embraced these faces to a varying extent, as described in this section.

The self-employed portrays the manager as a pressed-for-time multitasker with a large and varied number of tasks of various degrees of difficulty, who often works considerably more than 40 hours a week and is available by mobile phone 24/7/365. The self-employed has little opportunity to delegate job tasks, and rarely if ever has anyone to go in and handle the manager's tasks when he/she is ill or absent from the workplace for some other reason. Absences lead to accumulations of routine tasks that are found to be stressful and can negatively impact opportunities to handle higher-level tasks. The situation can be perceived as highly stressful in connection with extended absences, such as summer holidays. The self-employed has the feeling of being ruled by the managerial job duties, a feeling that is unsatisfying and stressful.

The communication manager portrays a manager who sits like the *spider in the web* and guides the flow of information to and from the organisation, and who has an extensive obligation to provide information and report upward within the organisation. The role encompasses being a *way station* that forwards incoming telephone calls to the right person within the organisation, and a *pilot and guide* within the municipal care service for citizens who find the administrative organisation to be impenetrable. This manager *collaborates* and *cooperates* with professional groups within the organisation, with representatives from other caregivers, and with the relatives of the care recipients, and spends a considerable time in meetings, training sessions, etc. Because this manager strives to live up to the demands of the management and staff in

terms of being an accessible and available manager, the office door is always open, the telephones are on, and the e-mail programme is up and running whenever the manager is in the office. This leads to numerous intermittent and stressful interruptions that negatively affect the opportunities to perform tasks that require reflection and concentration.

The managing director is characterised as *caring about people*. This person believes that the quality of the service is created and maintained in large measure in the daily encounters between care recipients and staff, making it important to be a manager who *puts people* [the care recipients and staff] *at the centre*. This manager construes the quality work as a *continuous, ongoing process that is rooted in the discussion of concrete problems experienced within the staff groups, which leads to proposed measures to improve quality*. The managing director may find that personal views on quality stand in contrast to the administrative management's views, which she/he considers to be closely connected to the recently implemented quality assurance system. This system is perceived to be *taking time away* from the staff's important primary task, working with the care recipients, since a new job task – keeping comprehensive documentation for each care recipient – has been imposed on the care staff within their already limited timeframe. The administrative management's demands in terms of high and ensured service quality within the framework of an unaltered budget are particularly problematic to cope with, as the general care needs of the care recipients have grown considerably. In especially difficult situations, it may happen that the managing director exceeds the budget in order to ensure that the care recipients receive care of acceptable quality, and that the staff have a tolerable work situation.

The staff manager is convinced that the *staff constitutes the service's greatest resource*, making it additionally important to *be perceived as a manager who puts people at the centre* and *under whom the staff will want to work*. The staff manager has overall responsibility *for making sure that the needs of the care recipients are met by skilled, competent, and pleasant staff* who are cooperating to the optimum extent. The staff manager demonstrates a great deal of caring about the staff in general and the individual employee in particular. This care extends to being a *welfare officer* to whom the staff can turn to discuss and obtain support in matters of a more or less personal nature, which can be *emotionally burdensome*. Caring for the staff also includes acting as *a department of complaints* in terms of taking on difficult discussions with care recipients and their relatives in order to *spare the staff from unpleasant confrontations*, and avoiding delegating additional job tasks to staff groups that have heavy workloads, even if this means that the manager's own workload increases. The scarcity of resources often makes it difficult for the manager to live up to a personal level of aspiration, to the administrative management's demands, and to legal requirements. The manager's heavy workload can force meaningful and time-consuming job tasks to take a backseat to more urgent tasks that demand attention. In some cases, this manager feels compelled to turn away from staff members in need of immediate support in favour of other urgent tasks, leading to *feelings of frustration and inadequacy*.

The financial manager is characterised by a responsibility to economise the limited resources in order to *keep within the budgetary framework*, a managerial ideal in which *the finances are at the centre*, and *economising* is important. Even though this manager has overall responsibility for the finances in the area, she/he also often performs routine tasks such as 'invoice management' or 'account-coding', which is perceived as *unsatisfying*. The administrative management's expectations and the financial manager's own aspirations in terms of being able to live up to the requirements of a balanced budget, a qualitatively good organisation, and a good work environment are found to be particularly problematic in situations where the opportunities for achieving these goals are severely limited by the leeway available in the budget. The financial manager is also expected to *stay loyal to the administrative management and the politicians* in situations where the staff express disappointment over the manager's inability to implement

planned improvement measures because of a lack of financial resources.

The colleague is characterised as a staff member who is subordinate to the area manager and who is included, along with managerial colleagues, in the management group, which is led by the area manager. The colleague/manager is expected to 'cooperate actively' in both the management group and the development and advisory groups initiated thereby. These groups sometimes make decisions about joint strategies and measures, which result in new job tasks for the manager or staff. The *colleague* most often construes the management group as *a supportive environment*, in which to get to address important issues. However the full agenda leaves little or no room for spontaneous deliberations. The informal collegial contacts are considered *extremely valuable*. Colleagues help to *see new solutions* and *offer challenges that counteract the tendency toward blindness to defects in the manager's own work*. The colleagues are also *a source of major support in particularly difficult situations*. However, during periods when the position's workload is particularly heavy, difficulties in living up to personal and collegial expectations can lead to *stress and feelings of inadequacy*.

Role problems

A number of indications of role problems are present in the managers' statements. Role overload in the form of experiences where the demands and expectations of the managerial role exceed the managers' ability to perform that role and to live up to their own aspirations and doing a good job occur frequently. Various types of role conflicts are also common occurrences. For example, when the senior administration express lofty expectations that managers should devote themselves to enterprise-level issues without giving them the previously promised relief from their routine tasks; when managers attempt to balance the staff's expectations of having a present and available manager against the management's and colleagues' expectations in terms of participation in activities outside of the actual workplace; when the expectations on the part of staff, care recipients and the public related to the previous managerial position are perceived as running counter to the administrative management's intentions with the new position; when the demands requiring managers to deal with a volume of time-consuming routine tasks come into conflict with the demands for high-level managerial work; when the demands and needs of the organisation and staff cannot be balanced against the financial restrictions and the requirement to stay within the budget. Personal role conflicts, in which the managers' personal values are in conflict with perceived role expectations, occur when the administration's perceptions of quality of the services are found to be in conflict with the managers' personal and professional values. This is especially evident in situations where the managers find that the care recipients' quality of life and the staff's work environment are seriously threatened.

The managers' perceived options to handle these difficulties vary considerably. Managers with more extensive experience emphasise the importance of developing a personal approach to the demands and expectations, while those with less experience more often express a desire for clear guidelines and direct supportive measures. Organised managerial support was considered desirable for all managers, and essential for newly hired ones, particularly during periods when major organisational changes were being made, but also when handling emotionally burdensome situations.

DISCUSSION: MAKING SENSE OF MUNICIPAL CARE MANAGEMENT

The Leadership Project was intended to contribute to new academic knowledge about what it means to be a municipal care manager, as viewed from the managers' perspective, in a process which would support the participating managers and sustain the development of praxis.

The complexity of municipal care management

The managers had a large and varied work content and a heavy work burden. These results are largely consistent with earlier research (Wolmesjö, 2005) and work environment studies (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2005), that show that the expectations in terms of what municipal care managers are supposed to achieve within the confines of their relatively limited resources are often very lofty. Managers are given quantitatively and qualitatively heavier workloads even as they are also expected to take on new tasks without the addition of new resources. Drawing on Weick (1995) the great heterogeneity of issues that many first-line managers have to deal with in their daily work life, is caused by the equivocal inputs to the organisation and which the managers are required to absorb in order for the organisation's system to function. This could prove to be an explanation as to why the managers to such a great extent felt governed by their tasks.

The vague action frame of reference was problematic to managers who were insecure in their managerial role and therefore needed guidance and support, while it offered considerable freedom for managers who were confident in their role. This is consistent with results from Österlind, Denicolo & Johansson (2007).

Many of the managers' reactions to the recent organisation overhaul were related to Kelly's (1955) construct of transition, such as anxiety, fear, and threat arising from role conflict, ambiguity, and overload; guilt at failing to deliver on the expectations of the role set; and aggression in coming to grips with the demands of their role. This could shed light on the managers' struggles, both with ongoing organisational change, and with the personal transition of adding the management role to their professional background in social care or nursing. Anxiety can be reduced by group learning processes (Schein, 1990), such as the ones performed in the second part of the project (Österlind, submitted).

The many faces of social care management

The complexity of the participating managers' professional role was portrayed by six managerial *faces*. In accordance with Minzberg's managerial roles (1971), these *faces* may be said to constitute a gestalt, an integrated whole, which reflects the participating managers' constructions of their managerial position, and of the obligations, demands, and expectations entailed thereby. This gestalt illustrates the *cross-pressures* (Hjort & Aili, 2010) among differing demands and expectations in which managers and staff in public human service organisations often find themselves. It is also comparable to Alvesson & Sveningsson's (2003) description of private sector managers *caught between two forces*, where practical limitations, administrative requirements, and *micro-management* prevent them from devoting themselves to the visionary leadership that is often seen as desirable.

Schein (1985/1992) construes a role as a set of expectations by stakeholders that gives rise to tasks. The stakeholders' (in this case senior managers, politicians, staff, colleagues, clients, relatives, and the public) often divergent expectations give rise to role conflict, ambiguity, stress, and overload. It is possible that another repertory grid procedure, with stakeholders as elements, could yield insights that could empower the managers to negotiate more effective relations with members of their role set, especially if this process allows for a collegial comparison of the grids, as suggested by Denicolo (1996).

Risk of occupational illness but also opportunities for a regenerative job

The results indicate that the managers were in a situation where the risk of occupational illness was significant, since vague job boundaries and recurrent changes often result in the individual experiencing uncertainty as to the demands being made, and as to whether the work being done is good enough (Allvin et al., 2006). Heavy demands combined with low perceived autonomy and a lack of support (Karasek & Theorell,

1990), along with role ambiguity and role conflict can have negative effects on managers' performance (Burkert, Fischer & Schäffer) and health and well-being (Christensen & Knardahl, 2010).

The results also point out an existing potential to develop better working conditions and, in the best case, a regenerative job, i.e., one that is capable of re-creating people's resources (Ericsson, 2010). The *challenging* and *demanding* but also *stimulating* and *interesting, varied and creative* job tasks that the managers in the present study construed as *compatible with the position of manager* exhibit strong similarities with what Aronsson, Bejerot & Härenstam (1999) have identified as being significant for college-educated individuals' perceptions of their jobs as healthy. However, given the managers' complex work situation and role, this presupposes that the managers are offered relief from time consuming routine task and appropriate managerial support.

Applicability of the methods and quality and relevance of the results

The repertory grid interviews yielded an unexpected number of elements [tasks] for each manager, which provided valuable information of the managers' work situation to researcher and participants. However, the listings and comparisons of tasks were time-consuming and therefore reduced the time available for a further exploration of the meanings that the managers gave to their work at superordinate level, such as laddering. Performing a second interview, with predetermined elements [tasks] generated from the initial interview and negotiated among the managers, as one of the managers put forward during the group session, would free up more time for elaborations over the deeper meanings of these tasks. It would also facilitate the appraisal of commonality between the managers' constructs.

Empirical material and results from repertory grid interviews have been discussed by Bell (2005) and Österlind & Denicolo (2006) among others. The richness of information derived from the transcriptions of the interviews performed in this study confirms both the potential of the rep-

ertory grid process as a catalyst in conversations between researcher and participant (Pope & Denicolo, 2003) and the potential which, according to Cassell et al. (2000) and others, is inherent in qualitative analyses of transcripts from repertory grid interviews.

The phenomenological analysis of the transcripts in this project provided a multifaceted picture of the managers' work situation, in which the complexity of their positions and roles stood out more clearly. The analytical tools [*faces* and *roles*] inspired by the managers' constructs allowed for a manageable assessment of commonality of construing which gave a deepened understanding of what it means to be a manager. The exhaustive descriptions of the results, interspersed with quotes, provided an insightful example of what it can mean to be a manager in this specific context, in keeping with what has been advanced by Alvesson & Willmott (1996) and Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000).

The feedback of the individual grids at the end of each interview provided an initial validation of the results at the individual level. The group sessions provided an opportunity to identify and discuss the interview results, as well as the process per se, and thereby allowed for a validation of the managers' professional construct systems and likelihood of construct similarity within the managerial group, as suggested by Denicolo & Pope (2001). The carefully described analysis process helped to facilitate assessments of the reliability of the results in keeping with what has been advanced by King (2000).

Contributions to personal and local development

Managers' insights regarding their own work are of major importance in terms of performance and efficiency (Minzberg, 1971) and their personal health (Ericsson, 2010). The managers' assessments show that both the repertory grid interviews and the group reflection, originally intended for feedback purposes, provided rare and valued opportunity for individual and collegial reflection. From a constructivist orientation,

this could be of importance to the managers as, according to Kelly "a person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replications of events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 50). In order to be able to interact effectively, group members, such as colleagues in a managerial group, need both commonality – that is, to share common ideals – and sociality – that is, to be able to construe issues from the perspective of the views generated by other group members. The group session supported the collegial validation of the managers' personal and professional construct systems, thereby providing a greater potential for and likelihood of a closer relationship between the managers and a closer construct similarity within their managerial group, as suggested by Denicolo and Pope (2001).

The thorough descriptions of the process can serve to inspire researchers and managers who wish to initiate similar projects.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to our knowledge of how the intrinsic problems of welfare organisations, described in classic works by Lipsky (1980), Hasenfeld (1983), and Schön (1983), and more recently by Hjort & Aili (2010), are manifested in a Swedish municipal care organisation, seen from the participating first-line managers' perspectives.

The results indicate that managers in such organisations need to construe and re-construe their views on their managerial role and tasks in order to balance the contrasting demands on the role, thereby accomplishing a personal equilibrium. The managers' meaning-making processes can be supported by the use of constructivist techniques (Butt, 2008), such as the ones used in this project.

The unexpected transition of the group session, from a feedback session intended to conclude the interview process into a collegial exploration of the managerial role, demonstrates that openness to the unforeseen and a readiness to leave the process to the participants can add value to the results and to the process. In the Leadership Project this openness provided a

gateway to a collegial meaning-making processes in which the managers fulfilled their mutual wish to *look further into* and *think outside the box* [the managerial role] (Österlind, submitted). Such processes are found particularly valuable by first-line managers in welfare organisations during times of transition and uncertainty (Ericsson, 2010).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie-Louise Österlind is junior lecturer at Kristianstad University and doctoral student at the Department of Psychology, Lund University, Sweden.
E-mail: marie-louise.osterlind@hkr.se

FUNDING

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Marie-Louise Österlind
Högskolan Kristianstad, 29188 Kristianstad, Sweden
E-mail: marie-louise.osterlind@hkr.se

REFERENCE