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Policy alienation in frontline social work – A study of social workers' responses to a major anticipated social and health care reform in Finland

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Policy alienation in frontline social work – A study of social workers' responses to a major anticipated social and health care reform in Finland

Abstract

Change in the policy and ideology governing social and health care has been much debated in the Western welfare states, including in Finland, where the public sector has witnessed a shift towards a market and managerial ideology in a climate of austerity. These changes affect organisations as well as individual workers. Social workers implement social policies in their daily work, and are thus positioned in between policies and clients. This may expose them to feelings of unease in the implementation of certain policies. In this study, we apply the policy alienation framework of Tummers and colleagues (2009) in analysing the responses of social workers to a major social and health care reform prepared in Finland in 2015-2019. By applying problem-driven content analysis to interview data, we study how social workers responded to the proposals for reform, and how the two dimensions of policy alienation, i.e., experiences of meaninglessness and powerlessness, were manifested. The findings suggest that policy alienation is widespread among social workers and that experiences of powerlessness and meaninglessness are common. The social workers experienced powerlessness in relation to specific policies and practices. They also viewed the reform as meaningless, as it lacked socially relevant goals.

Keywords: policy alienation, policy reform, social work

Introduction

Frontline social workers operate in a challenging setting which can be characterised as a riptide of conflicting demands, interests and accountabilities. On a daily basis, they translate prevailing policies into practice while doing inherently challenging face to face-work with citizens in need (Lorenz, 2005; Evans, 2013; Meeuwisse, Scaramuzzino and Swärd, 2011). Thus, social workers try simultaneously to enhance the well-being of their clients and maintain a balance between different interests and needs. This is no simple task. Its complexity becomes apparent in a situation where the socio-political context of their work is undergoing radical transformation.

The broader socio-political context of frontline social work has been undergoing a multifaceted and controversial transformation in many Western welfare states. These changes have been widely discussed in the literature, and some seem to have shared international roots and characteristics (e.g., Blad and Fallov, 2018; Pierson, 2001). The mature welfare states have witnessed changes in their ideological climate and premises (e.g., May and Buck, 1998; Stjernø, 2011; Marthinsen, 2014). Severe budget strains, increased rigidity of policies and political controversies have created an environment that has been described in the literature as the new public austerity (Pierson, 2001; Banks, 2011).

Finland, an example of the Nordic welfare state model, has also witnessed a shift towards a market and managerial ideology in the public sector since the 1990s (e.g., Julkunen, 2001; Anttonen and Karsio, 2016; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015; Turtiainen, Anttila and Väänänen, 2020; Anttonen and Karsio, 2016; Meagher and Szebehely, 2013). Cost-efficiency, effectiveness, measurable outputs and targets, along with pressures to cut public spending, have become everyday realities in the public organisations offering social and health care services (Hirvonen, 2014; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015).

These transformations affect not only the targeted organizations but also the individuals who work in them (see May, 1994; Carey, 2019; Attrash-Najjar and Strier 2020; Turtiainen, Anttila & Väänänen, 2020). Policy changes in social services alter the ethos and nature of frontline social work (May and Buck, 1998), including the concepts used (May, 1994), and may affect the willingness and ability of the workers to implement the new policies (May, 1994; van Engen et al., 2019). Previous research has revealed that social workers have found it increasingly challenging to fulfil their professional aspirations in the current era. Many social workers experience occupational and moral (di)stress, and burnout trying to reconcile their professional ideals with organisational demands and statutory requirements (Kim, 2011; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015; Elpers and Westhuis, 2008; Attrash-Najjar and Strier, 2020). Many organizations also suffer from a high turnover of social workers and challenges in recruiting replacements (Tham, 2007; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Baldschun et al., 2017). These problems can be detrimental to service quality, an outcome that underlines the need to gain better understanding of the experiences of the social workers in relation to far-reaching changes in policy.

In this study, we address this challenging situation by approaching social workers' experiences from the perspective of policy change and policy implementation. We apply the policy alienation framework of Tummers and colleagues (2009; also Tummers, 2012) in analysing social workers' responses to a major social and health care reform that was under preparation in Finland in 2015-2019, during the coalition government led by Juha Sipilä. Our aim was to investigate social workers' perceptions of the proposed reform and how they experienced the different dimensions of policy alienation (Tummers et al. 2009) during the preparation period. The reform was planned to be a profound overhaul of service provision at

all levels, including changes in the practices, structure and logic governing services. This makes the proposed reform an interesting case to study, as it represented a major shift in Finnish social and health care policy.

But why policy alienation? Frontline social workers, as street-level bureaucrats (see Lipsky, 1980), can be understood as the actual executors of policies and as having considerable discretion in implementing these policies in their daily practice (Blomberg et al., 2013; Gofen, 2014; Evans, 2013; van Engen et al., 2019). However, it is also plausible that workers feel unease about implementing and executing certain policies that might, for example, collide with their personal or professional moral values (van Engen et al., 2016; Lynch and Forde, 2016). Thus, frontline workers face pressures arising from their multiple accountabilities and role as street-level bureaucrats (Evans, 2013), though their experiences have remained understudied in the context of policy reform.

Alienation

The roots of the alienation concept can be traced, in particular, to Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, and his theory of work alienation in a capitalist society and mode of production (1961, [1844]) and to the work of Hegel (2003, [1807]); Weber (1978); Fromm (1991, [1955]) and Marcuse (1986, [1964]) (Tummers et al., 2009; Carpenter, 2015). Marx approached work alienation as an objective phenomenon comprising four aspects: alienation from the product of labour; the labour process; 'human nature'; and one's fellow human beings, i.e., other workers (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004; Carpenter, 2015). In general, the concept of alienation is widely used in different disciplines, and hence defined in multiple ways (see Seeman, 1959; Kanungo, 1982). It can generally be understood as "a sense of social estrangement" and lack of "meaningful social connection" (Tummers, 2011: 560).

Seeman (1959: 784) approached alienation subjectively, arguing that alienation as powerlessness is less about the objective conditions of society and more about a person's "expectancy or probability" that she can affect or control outcomes by her own actions. More recent scholars have also approached alienation subjectively from the worker's point of view, and the concept has been discussed in the context of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Tummer et al., 2009; Carpenter, 2015). Lipsky (1980), in particular, suggested that the work of street-level bureaucrats is alienating in its very nature.

Previous research on policy alienation

The existing empirical research on policy alienation is somewhat limited and in the majority of cases has been quantitative (Tummers et al., 2009, Tummers, 2012; van Engen et al., 2019, except e.g. Thomann, 2015). Studies have mostly been conducted in the Dutch context and have focused, for example, on the experiences of teachers, nurses, police officers and insurance physicians (see eg. Tummers, 2012; van Engen et al., 2019). However, policy alienation has been recently studied in the US in the context of implementing health policy (Carpenter, 2015), in the Czech Republic on the consequences of reform in job centres (Hiekishcová, 2019), in Switzerland on veterinary inspections (Thomann, 2015) and in Belgium on the implementation of policing policy (Loyens, 2016). These studies have produced empirical evidence that policy alienation can influence individual professionals as well as the effectiveness of policies themselves (van Engen et al. 2019; Carpenter, 2015; Loyens, 2016; Thomann, 2015; Hiekishcová, 2019; Tummers, 2012).

At the individual level, empirical studies have indicated that experiences of general policy alienation, that is to say, problems of identifying with governmental policies in general, are not uncommon (van Engen et al., 2016; 2019. For example, Dutch secondary school teachers felt that they did not have enough power to influence government policies that they perceived as meaningless for their society or for their pupils (van Engen et al., 2016,

2019). Policy alienation has also been associated with a lack of willingness to implement policies (van Engen et al., 2016; Tummers, 2012). Loss of the sense of ‘participation’ (powerlessness to have influence) has been associated with impaired employee wellbeing and performance. The feeling of powerlessness at the professional level might be an outcome of professional associations lacking power to influence policies (Tummers, 2011).

In the case of social workers, empirical knowledge on their subjective experiences in relation to policy implementation is clearly lacking. However, the concept of alienation in general is not absent from the social work literature (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). Many studies focusing on the practice of social work and occupational wellbeing have highlighted the lack of control, disconnect and meaninglessness that many workers currently experience. Social work practice has become increasingly focused on budget management, control, and bureaucratic tasks, all involving more and more screen-level work, leaving little time for face-to-face working with clients in need (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015; Postle, 2002; Astvik and Melin, 2013; Bovens and Zoudiris, 2002).

While the topic has been foregrounded recently, it has been under debate since the 1970s (Farmer, 2011). Practising meaningful work, in accordance with one’s moral code, is essential to the wellbeing of social workers (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015), as also shown by research on the tensions between different accountabilities, role conflicts, and ethical challenges experienced by frontline workers in their daily work with clients (see Welander et al., 2019; Närhi et al., 2014; Jaskyte, 2005). The existing empirical findings also point to the importance of studying policy alienation among social workers in a situation where welfare states are undergoing a radical change of direction away from their founding values.

Policy alienation framework

The policy alienation framework (see Tummers et al., 2009; Tummers, 2011) draws on the theories of Marx, Seeman (1959), Blauner (1964) and Hegel (1982) and seeks to capture employees' experiences of alienation when executing policies (see Tummers et al., 2009; Tummers, 2011). Tummers and his colleagues (2009) defined policy alienation as “a general cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy programme being implemented, here by a public professional who regularly interacts directly with clients” (Tummers et al., 2009: 686). Thus, in their definition, the focus is on subjective alienation, i.e., on the alienation experienced by the worker, in this instance a street-level public employee.

Besides the Marxist concept of alienation, the roots of the policy alienation framework also lie in occupational psychology, where it has been noted that workers self-determination and ability to exercise control over their work is fundamental for their occupational wellbeing (Karasek, 1979; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Furthermore, at the individual level, the policy alienation framework also informs research on work insecurity. Work insecurity, “the perceived potential loss of continuity in a job situation” (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984: 440; Mauno et al., 2017: 712) is a significant stressor that negatively affects employees' work attitudes and has health-related outcomes (Mauno et al., 2017).

In this study we apply the framework of policy alienation proposed by Tummers and colleagues (2009). They differentiate policy alienation from work alienation by focusing on 1) the policy to be implemented instead of the work to be carried out, 2) the public instead of private sector, and 3) professionals instead of manual workers (see also Tummers, 2011: 562). According to Tummers (2011, p. 561) policy alienation consists of two main

dimensions: experiences of *powerlessness* and experiences of *meaninglessness* (Table 1). *Powerlessness* refers to a lack of control and influence over one's life events and can be analysed on three different levels (Tummers, 2011; 2012). On the strategic level (1), powerlessness refers to a lack of influence on policy content. On the tactical level (2), it refers to a lack of influence on how a policy is executed in the employing organisation. On the operational level (3), it refers to a lack of influence on the implementation of the policy, meaning that professionals have little or no discretion in carrying out the policy (Tummers, 2012).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

According to Tummers (2011; 2012), *meaninglessness* refers to the perception that a policy does not contribute to achieving a larger meaningful purpose. In the policy alienation model, meaninglessness can be analysed on two levels. First, on the societal level (4), it refers to the perception that a policy does not contribute to socially relevant goals, and second, on the client level (5), it refers to the perception that the policy does not contribute to client wellbeing (Tummers, 2012; see Table 1).

The policy alienation model was originally used to analyse the extent to which professionals identify with a particular policy programme, but it has since been extended to explore general policy alienation as well (van Engen et al., 2016; 2019). In this article, we take the subjective approach to the policy alienation and define it as *a subjective experience of disconnect from the policy reform to be implemented*. We apply the definition of policy alienation proposed by Tummers and colleagues (2009) and focus on the manifestations of *powerlessness* and *meaninglessness*. We study the experiences of workers who are in face-to-

face contact with clients in their daily work. These workers occupy frontline positions and translate social policy into practice (Lorenz, 2005: 97; Meeuwisse et al., 2011: 6).

The research setting

Aim

In this study, applying the policy alienation framework (Tummers et al., 2009; Tummers, 2012), we analysed social workers' responses to a profound social and health care reform that was under preparation in Finland between 2015-2019. Our aim was to find out how social workers related to the proposed reform and how the different dimensions of policy alienation, i.e., feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness (Tummers et al. 2009), informed their experiences of carrying out their duties amid these preparations. Our focus was on policy initiatives, not the actual implementation of the policy, as the plans for reform were not eventually realised. We suggest that the act of initiating a change of policy affects working practices (May, 1994; Mauno et al., 20017; Lee et al, 2018). Thus, our aim was to extend the policy alienation framework to include experiences in relation to expected change in policy and the restructuring of services as well as to the preparation process in general.

The Finnish social and health care reform

Preparatory work on a proposed major social and health care reform took place in Finland during the government led by Juha Sipilä between 2015-2019. This coalition government comprised representatives of the three largest centre-right parties, the Centre Party, the National Coalition Party, and the (True) Finns Party. The reform aimed at a radical reorganisation of service provision and financing of services.

Reform of Finnish social and health care had been a much-debated issue long before the Sipilä government (Pohjola, 2017). Previous studies have shown how the privatisation of public services was already present in in different forms both in rhetoric and practice from

the 1990s onwards (Anttonen et al., 2013; Meagher and Szebehely, 2013). However, as all the political parties in the government agreed on the need for reform, it was decided to undertake a larger re-structuring programme. The reason for this consensus is due to the challenging situation facing Finland's municipalities, which have traditionally been responsible for the provision of basic-level social and health care services. Municipalities had for some time been struggling to guarantee their residents adequate and equal services within the current service structure and in a context of adverse changes in their dependency ratio (see THL, 2019; Pohjola, 2017; Lehtonen et al., 2018).

The aims of the reform were to reduce inequalities in health and wellbeing by enhancing the equality, accessibility, effectiveness and efficiency of services and integrating these at all levels (HE 324/2014, 15/2017; Manssila and Mattsson, 2019). In brief, the idea was to re-shape the existing structures and services by transferring the responsibility for organising services from the municipal to regional level and at the same time increasing citizens' freedom of choice when seeking services (see May & Buck 1998 on consumer choice). Thus, services hitherto publicly provided would be delivered by public, private and third-sector organisations (Manssila and Mattsson, 2019). Sceptics claimed that the reform aimed at cutting costs and promoting the marketisation of social and health care (Pohjola, 2017; Lehto, 2017).

Data

The data consist of interviews conducted in 2017 with 13 frontline social welfare workers from different parts of Finland. All the informants were women (mean age approx. 35 years; range: 23-66 years). The majority worked in the fields of child welfare and/or child protection in public social service organisations. One informant was employed in non-profit organisation offering welfare services for children, and one in a joint municipal organisation.

All the informants practised face-to-face social work in direct contact with clients despite their different job titles and affiliations. (Table 1.)

The interviews took place via telephone and were conducted by trained research assistants. Participation was voluntary and all informants had the right to withdraw at any point during the interview or at any later stage of the research process. All participants consented to the use of their data for scientific purposes. The guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) were followed throughout the research project.

The themes of the semi-structured interviews were the participants' job-related characteristics and the policy reform. Work practices and how the reform was perceived in the interviewee's workplace, and its possible impact on the participant's work were topics of particular interest. Participants' perceptions of the importance and effects of the reform on their work and clientele were also discussed. Furthermore, as the interviews were part of a larger project, other work-related topics, such as the use of technology and working conditions, were also discussed. The interviews lasted 25-55 minutes (M= 45 min) and were transcribed.

Content analysis

We applied problem-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), and in the original method, questions are set and answers sought by systematic reading of the relevant text. In this study, the guiding questions were 1) "*How is the restructuring of social services perceived (re its implications for oneself, organisations, clientele, wider societal implications)?*" and 2) *are social workers explanations/conceptualisations of the impending reform informed by' (a) powerlessness or (b) meaninglessness, and, if so, how are these experiences manifested?*" The questions were prompted by our interest in the views and experiences of social workers' on the restructuring initiatives. However, our approach differs

from the text-driven analysis, which is motivated by the text itself and possible questions arising from it. In the first stage, we defined the questions based on the research aim and coded the data based on the analytical questions (i.e., restructuring and its implications for oneself, organisations, and clientele; its wider societal implications; and participants' manifestations of powerlessness and meaninglessness). While we wanted to test the applicability of the policy alienation framework, we were open to the option that not all its dimensions would be identified in the data. Both researchers were familiar with the data and had participated in both the planning of the interviews and the analysis.

Results

In general, the social and health care reform had given rise to much confusion among the interviewed social workers. A lot of preparation had been conducted for the reform both within and outside their employing organisations. However, these preparations had mixed relevance for individual workers, depending on their position, employing organisation and type of work. Few of the social workers had worked actively on preparations for the reform while others had had little to do with the reform in the ongoing planning stage. Overall, many seemed to be too busy to think about it or discuss it with colleagues. Nevertheless, the massive reform-to-be was 'the elephant in the room' in different ways in their daily practice.

Manifestations of powerlessness

Both strategic and tactical powerlessness (Tummers et al., 2009) were identifiable in the social workers' interview talk. In other words, the interviewees felt remote from both the content of the policy the manner of its implementation.

Strategic powerlessness: policy taking

Essentially, the social and health care reform seemed to be pre-determined. It was described as something “that will happen to them”, something that will come from above and that they will eventually just have to adapt to. Many of the social workers reported that meetings had been organised or that they have received information about the reform by email or from their supervisors. Thus, instead of having an actual influence, they were more in the role of information recipients; as Mary explained: *“You note the reform when you get some information or news in your email. Like municipal newsletters and info about the reform.”*

Some participants reported that their colleagues were taking part in planning sessions and meetings related to the reform, and a few, who had supervisory or managerial responsibilities, were participating in these sessions themselves. Many of the social workers said that responsibility for the preparation for the reform was more on the management levels, while for the frontline staff it was business as usual. Some hoped that frontline workers’ views would be considered in planning the reform, although their wishes were rather modest. The fact that the reform was on the national rather than regional level was seen as distancing the worker from decision-making power. As Lina explained: *“Well, of course frontline workers should be heard. Obviously, it’s a national level reform, so you can’t have an impact on everything, but on the regional level, the frontline workers could have a say in how to do these things.”*

Strategic powerlessness was amplified by lack of the resources, such as time, needed to participate. The workers referred to both lack of time and the uncertainty of the whole reform. Some said that while they felt obliged to take part in meetings and sessions, they also felt that this requirement was asking too much on top of their regular daily work. Thus, while they had some opportunity to influence planning, many felt that in reality they did not have

the time to do so. Olivia spoke of the lack of resources at the level of the team, explaining that “*it disturbs us and takes time, as our supervisor has responsibilities and has to participate in the working groups a lot. [...] It is really good and important, but we have only four to five people working [...] it takes a lot of time then.*” Thus, structural factors also played a role in how workers perceived the policy reform: tight schedules and adverse working conditions adversely affect their possibilities to participate. In such circumstances, the forums offered for participation may appear as merely cosmetic.

The reform was intended to be far-reaching, as changing the basis of service delivery and the relationship between the individual client and the state. The lack of clarity of the reform induced feelings of strategic powerlessness. The social workers were puzzled about the reform and unsure which of the changes that were about to take place were actually part of the proposed reform. Thus, for those workers, the idea of influencing the content of the reform was far too remote: “*It’s really vague and difficult to grasp,*” Susan explained. Thus, as the content of the policy reform seemed rather unclear, and the social workers felt unable to influence on the decisions concerning it, they can be argued to have been experiencing strategic powerlessness. It is interesting that, as a whole, the *content* of the reform, including its aims, remained relatively invisible in the interview data. A couple of social workers, however, highlighted their concern that the socially relevant aims of the reform, such as the integration of social and healthcare services, would end up buried under the aims that were more related to the economic aspects of the reform.

Tactical powerlessness: practice taking

According to Tummers and colleagues (2009: 4), tactical powerlessness refers to a lack of influence on decisions concerning the way a policy is implemented in an organisation. Thus, it relates, for example, to how the aims of a reform (policy) are translated into more specific

performance-based requirements that the organisation should meet and to the allocation of resources. For the present social workers, these tactical level changes also seemed to be more like something pre-determined on which they have little or no influence. They perceived their role as simply adapting to new practices: in other words, 'practice-taking' instead of 'practice-making'. Although the reform was seen as not in the distant future, the social workers also stated that they did not know whether and, if so, to what extent they would be able to affect how the reform will be implemented in their organisation.

New practices related to the reform were already being prepared, even though the law on the reform had not been passed at the time of the data collection. When the social workers described the changes that were taking place, their own agency and role seemed minimal. Some reported that there had been changes in the monitoring and documentation of their client work, such as the piloting of a new model of documentation planned at the national level. They also talked about the restructuring of teams and piloting a systemic child protection model developed and promoted by the National Institute for Health and Welfare. Thus, the workers were implementing changes that had already been developed on the national level.

Although the reform mostly seemed too obscure for them to pin down its practical outcomes, some concerns were raised that amplified the feeling of tactical powerlessness. Some of the workers were concerned that the restructuring would mean the centralisation and standardisation of services, and less autonomous decision making in their own organisations. As Olivia said: "*We work in a small municipality, and we, workers included, have been able to make decisions quite independently. I'm worried that decision-making power will shift away from us, the hierarchy will increase, and the rules will become more rigid.*" This links

the sense of alienation to the Weberian bureaucratic organisation, to which the roots of the concept of policy alienation can be traced (Carlson, 2015).

Manifestations of meaninglessness

Societal meaninglessness: lack of socially relevant goals

The social workers widely shared the view that the added value of the reform was low and, more importantly, that its focus was wrong. The reform would change the internal logic of service provision altogether and seemed to have false aims. According to the workers, the reform focused too much on issues related to the marketisation of services and economic aspects in general rather than on socially relevant goals. *“It sounded a little bit crazy, all that talk about competition and markets,”* Helena explained, and continued, *“All that seems so far away, and you start thinking why can’t we just serve our clients as well as possible? If our clients are treated well and we respond to their needs, aren’t we then accomplishing the tasks we are here for in the first place? All that talk about competition sounds strange, and it feels that we are departing from the aims of our work.”* Her words demonstrate how the lack of policy continuity can amplify the feeling of societal meaninglessness (also May, 1994).

The professional aims and even ethical guidelines governing social work seemed to the participants to be at odds with the policy reform. The mere thought of having to foster competition seemed in conflict with the aims of the profession: who are social workers’ competitors? If realised, this policy objective would mean a significant change in social work policy. In fact, it was this very discontinuity in policy which caused the social workers to question the aim of the reform.

The social workers expressed doubts, especially on the ideology of consumer choice. They worried that instead of services being better integrated, this aspect of the reform would merely generate a more complex, scattered and diffuse service structure with multiple

disconnected actors. Thus, the workers shared the concerns raised by many scholars (May, 1994; May & Buck, 1998; Pohjola, 2017; Lehtonen et al., 2018; Lehto, 2017; Burström et al., 2017). They also had concerns about one of the main aims of the whole reform, i.e., to improve the equality and accessibility of services. Many were doubtful that these aims would be achieved and considered that they might even increase regional inequality. Given that any policy is likely to have intended as well as unintended outcomes at the level of implementation (van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002), failure of the new policy to deliver the intended societal outcomes would potentially reinforce societal meaninglessness (Carpenter, 2015).

Clients' experiences of meaninglessness: concerns about the most vulnerable clients

The social workers questioned the added value of the reform for their clients as well as themselves. These views were common, and they and related, for example, to the unforeseen and uncontrolled effects of the reform on their clients. As the whole reform was considered unclear and obscure, its potential effects were difficult to estimate. In general, the social workers did not see the reform as having any added value for their clients. Eve explained how, instead, the reform seemed to extend the sense of meaninglessness to clients: *"If we can't follow this, you can't really expect the client to find the right place to go to."*

The workers expressed concerns, especially about their most vulnerable clients. They were not convinced that the promotion of freedom of choice would benefit clients in vulnerable life situations. Some were worried that the most vulnerable clients would end up totally excluded from services. Thus, the informants predicted that clients would experience the reform as meaningless. Susan shared this concern about the most vulnerable: *"I am afraid that emphasising the freedom of choice might not be the best option for people who might find it a struggle making decisions for themselves."* Reflecting on the lack of resources

reported by the interviewees, it seems that for them the right kind of reform would be one which built on the existing rationale and increased resources.

Table 2 summarises the findings and various dimensions of policy alienation. The empirical analysis identified the core elements contributing to policy alienation.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Concluding discussion

In this study, aimed at increase understanding of the effects of a proposed social and health care reform on frontline social workers, we applied the policy alienation framework of Tummers and colleagues (2009, see also Tummers, 2012). We studied how the workers perceived the proposed reform and their role during its preparatory phase, and we analysed how the different dimensions of policy alienation (Tummers et al., 2009) were manifested in their interview talks.

The two main dimensions of alienation, i.e., powerlessness and meaninglessness, were both strongly present and linked to many different aspects of the proposed reform in the social workers' perceptions (summarised in Table 2). A particularly notable finding was the considerable, almost tangible, confusion about the practical consequences of the reform among the participants. This confusion was manifested in both feelings of powerlessness and feelings of meaninglessness. Not knowing what would change or where one might have a say, engendered feelings of powerlessness. Similarly, feelings of meaninglessness were engendered by those who felt that the reform was not important or relevant for society or their clients.

In preparing the reform, the role of social workers, as street-level bureaucrats, seemed to be more one of policy- and practices-takers than active policy makers (Gofen, 2014). Hence, feelings of powerlessness were common among them. The planning of the reform, despite information delivery sessions, newsletters and suchlike, seemed to fail to give the workers a voice in the process. Moreover, lack of time made it difficult for them to take part in the forums that were open to them. Thus, preparations stayed at the regional or national level, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness.

The aims of the reform, in turn, seem to arouse feelings of meaninglessness. The reform was viewed as lacking socially relevant goals, and the situation of the most vulnerable clients evoked concern. It was as if the goals of the new policy conflicted with the aims and ethics of social work. This seems to be a common experience among social workers today. This disconnect between policy and organisational objectives and frontline workers' professional aspirations, as well as its practical consequences for workers, has been approached from different perspectives and with many different concepts in the social work literature (e.g., Attrash-Najjar & Strier, 2020; Turtiainen et al., 2020). Because the role of social workers, as policy implementors, is extremely complex, this disconnect can induce them to feel uncomfortable.

The Finnish welfare system has a intricate history. Its development was never straightforward or unanimous (Rauhala, 2001) and has always involved multiple actors with competing interests and roles. The social and health care reform under preparation in 2015-2019, was thus a major attempt to overhaul the provision of services and the role of clients. The reform would also have changed the work environment and its foundations for the numerous employees working in social and health care, an issue that has received little attention in either the public arena or in research.

The reform encountered many challenges during its preparation, including major legal obstacles, and was returned to the Finnish parliament for revision several times. For example, the ideology of consumer choice, which was built into the reform, conflicted with the Finnish Constitution (Lehto, 2017). It was criticised for benefitting the better-off and better-educated citizens, leaving those living in more vulnerable life situations struggling, as their freedom to choose might be very limited in the fragmented and complex service structure envisioned by the reform (Pohjola, 2017; Lehtonen et al., 2018; Lehto, 2017). The social workers interviewed for this study expressed similar concerns, which can be understood as manifestations of societal meaninglessness (Tummers, 2011).

The nail in the coffin of the reform-to-be was a scandal over the neglect of care standards in privately-run elderly care homes in January 2019. This scandal and its aftermath foregrounded the problems related to the marketisation of services (see, e.g. Yle News 30.1.2019). The crisis led to the resignation of the government in March 2019. All the preparations for the implementation of regional authorities and the reform of health and social services have been discontinued until very recently (see THL 2019).

Although rejected, the reform as a policy process has its legacy: it disrupted the long-standing foundations of Finland's social and health care policy. It was a major government initiative that included a great deal of preparatory work at different levels of the social and health care services and administration system. Although the reform discontinued, at that time, the aborted reform has affected policy consistency (van Engen et al., 2019). The preparation work done will have a role in the future too, which renders the reform an interesting topic of study.

To conclude, the policy alienation framework can assist in understanding the experiences of frontline social workers in adapting to ongoing changes and reforms

(Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004; Carey, 2019). It is important to understand how top-down policies affect individual workers' experiences and position, as they are the expected implementors of these policies. Individual responses and coping strategies regarding structural and organisational changes merit study as lack of identification with changes can lead to failure in their implementation: workers are not very willing to implement policies that they feel alienated from (van Engen et al., 2019). Thus, the policy alienation framework might offer an interesting perspective in, for example, analysing the implementation of measures to control the Covid-19 pandemic in different countries. It is plausible that top-down policies might not be alienating, if they are experienced as meaningful or necessary, and if people still have some control and influence over events concerning them (see Tummers, 2011).

Majority of the research on policy alienation has concentrated on individual characteristics. Our study suggests that certain structural factors also play a role. Lack of the resources needed to participate reinforces the process of alienation. Moreover, it is plausible that policy alienation is context-dependent: some organisations might, owing, for example, to a tight economic situation, be more likely to adopt rigid interpretations of policies and rules, while others are able to give frontline workers space to adopt more flexible policies. It may be that public sector organisations are more rigid, third sector organisations the most flexible, and private sector organisations the most varied. Such differences are likely to be linked to the type of services provided, the size of the organisation, and the role of managers in introducing the rationale for new policies. This would be an interesting area of future study requiring data beyond that gathered for the present study.

In addition to the relevance of context, it should be acknowledged that policies are not free from their history (Pierson, 2000; van Engen et al., 2016; Ugland, 2019). Thus, when

focusing on a specific policy, it is important to know about relevant past policy programmes and experiences related to them. In Finland, the restructuring of social and health care has been a long and contested process that is connected to larger societal and ideological shifts. Van Engen and colleagues (2019) point out that there are 'no neutral implementers'. For example, frontline workers are always embedded in a continuing process. The policy reform under preparation in 2015-2019 in Finland was important for frontline employees. It should not be forgotten that any subsequent reform processes will inevitably be informed by previous policy reform initiatives.

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Table 1. The five dimensions of policy alienation (adapted from Tummers 2009; Tummers 2011, 560-562).

Dimension:	Level:	Definition
Powerlessness	Strategic powerlessness	The social worker's perceived influence on decisions concerning the content of the policy.
	Tactical powerlessness	The social worker's perceived influence on decisions concerning the manner in which the policy is implemented within their organisations.
	Operational powerlessness	The social worker's perceived freedom (professional autonomy) in making decisions and choices when implementing the policy.
Meaninglessness	Societal meaninglessness	The social worker's perception concerning the policy's added value to the socially relevant goals.
	Client meaninglessness	The social worker's perception concerning the added value of the policy for their clients.

Table 2. Summary of the findings.

Dimension	Core factors adding feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness
Strategic powerlessness	<p>Top-down strategy and ‘policy taking’.</p> <p>Receiving information, no participation</p> <p>Reform located at national level.</p> <p>Work conditions, such as hurriedness not enabling participating.</p> <p>Lack of clarity of the policy.</p>
Tactical powerlessness	<p>‘Practice taking’.</p> <p>Lost autonomy of the individual worker.</p> <p>Lost autonomy of the local organization.</p>
Societal meaninglessness	<p>View on the added value of the reform low or having a wrong focus.</p> <p>Policy continuation changed profoundly.</p> <p>Questioning possible hidden aims of the policy.</p>
Client meaninglessness	<p>Unforeseen and uncontrolled effects.</p> <p>No need for the reform.</p> <p>The reform is not targeted right.</p>

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