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research article

What enables 'real social work' in adult social work? Examining mechanism-based explanations

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The enduring contradiction between managerialism and professional social work has been a central focus of social work research for decades. This article explores the feasibility of implementing the original values and ideals of social work in the face of the pervasive managerialism brought about by New Public Management, which has infiltrated nearly every sector of society. Utilising qualitative research conducted within adult social work on local public welfare agencies, we investigate the mechanisms that enable social workers to align with their ideal professional goals, referred to here as 'real social work', as outlined by social workers themselves. Our analysis, grounded in critical realism and the associated theoretical-methodological framework of CAIMeR theory, revealed five key mechanisms that facilitated real social work: the role-taking mechanism, the response mechanism, the organisational autonomy and responsibility mechanism, the collective attraction and cohesion mechanism, and the critical consciousness mechanism. Our findings suggest the need for further investigation of these mechanisms that empower social workers to resist managerialism and implement real social work in their daily work. This study advocates for prioritising professional aspirations and offers insights for advancing discussions in the realm of adult social work.

Keywords professional social work • adult social work • critical realism • CAIMeR theory
• mechanism-based explanations

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Introduction

In the domain of social work (SW) practice research, a prevailing narrative depicts a critical landscape marked by an inherent misalignment between the professional ideals inspiring practitioners to pursue SW and the realities the practitioners encounter within contemporary welfare states. Investigations into SW practice consistently

uncover such challenges as elevated caseloads, limited time for focused relationship-based interventions, a notable lack of autonomy in decision-making, bureaucratic complexities and inadequate support from agency leadership. These systemic challenges often result in moral distress, demotivation among practitioners, high staff turnover and burnout, ultimately placing a greater burden on remaining colleagues and reducing clients' access to essential services (Banks, 2011; Hamama, 2012; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016; 2020; Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023).

Theoretical explanations of the discrepancy between professional ideals and working conditions include Michael Lipsky's (2010 [1980]) concept of street-level bureaucracy and the dual mandate of SW (Bönisch and Lösch, 1973; Staub-Bernasconi, 2016): balancing the state's intention to control with the clients' aim of receiving help. This growing disparity has increasingly been attributed to the influence of neoliberal ideology and its implementation through New Public Management (NPM). NPM's managerialist regime poses significant challenges to the professional goals of SW and the needs of service users within welfare states (Ferguson, 2008; Banks, 2011; Butler-Warke et al, 2020). This issue has long been a significant challenge in SW within bureaucratic organisations and has been the subject of extensive discussion (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]) because NPM promotes business-oriented management practices and emphasises rational-technical knowledge, such as financial efficiency and streamlined public services (Roose et al, 2011; Timor-Shlevin et al, 2022), which is at odds with the ethical principles of SW. Sarah Banks (2011), drawing from experiences in the UK, has analysed how NPM features continuously exert new ethical pressures on SW. Recent research underscores the need to restore 'the social' to SW (Allgurin et al, 2023), which risks becoming marginalised in the face of continued managerialism (Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023).

While a wealth of research has observed this discrepancy, how it is addressed in practice remains relatively underexamined. In this article, we aim to elucidate the mechanisms that enable social workers to uphold their professional ideals and SW standards despite the pressures from NPM. These professional standards are assumed to enable social workers to help users find good solutions to their problems. We refer to such practice as 'real social work' (RSW), as expressed by the practitioners involved in our study. Our article specifically examines the mechanisms that align SW practices with RSW in one of the five agencies that participated in our research project on adult SW (ASW) in Finland (Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, 2023: 3–4).

Our objective is to make a substantive contribution to the ongoing discourse by utilising critical realism (CR) in SW practice research as a philosophy-of-science approach. CR is relevant in SW research because of its critical and emancipatory components (Schoppek, 2021). We apply CR with theoretical tools derived from CAIMeR theory (Morén and Blom, 2003; Blom and Morén, 2010; 2011; 2015; Boost et al, 2023), as this is increasingly employed, particularly in Scandinavian SW practice research (Kjørstad and Solem, 2018; Svenlin, 2020; Kivipelto and Koponen, 2021; Svenlin et al, 2021; Samsonsen and Heggdalsvik, 2023; Svenlin and Lehto-Lundén, 2023). We apply CAIMeR theory as the methodological approach in our study, as it explores the dynamics contributing to the realisation of RSW.

RSW in the context of managerialism

'Real social work' is not a precise concept but a teleological and critical term to describe a practice, as pursued by social workers, that allows them to assert their professional

ideals, ethics and standards – the 'social' aspect of SW (Allgurin et al, 2023). Haynes and White (1999) employed the term 'real social work' under conditions where increasing specialisation and contrasting traditions of clinical and community-oriented SW, drawn from Mary Richmond and Jane Addams, were found to obscure the commonalities within the field of SW: "The 'real' social work is *all* of social work, in all of its diversity. . . . It was the coming together of opposing principles and visions from which social work as a profession was born . . . which we have in common" (Haynes and White, 1999: 387, emphasis added). RSW could also be synonymous with 'actual social work' (Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023), which may become marginalised when a managerial regime prioritises measurable tasks exclusively. In the context of our empirical study, we conclude that RSW refers to the fundamental content and purpose defining the profession.

Although there is an ongoing discrepancy between RSW and the discouraging impact of NPM, this does not mean that SW values and standards have become irrelevant to current practice. On the contrary, scholars argue that they are essential as guiding principles for critical reflection and resistance against the prevailing managerialist policies that constitute the dominant discourse (Ferguson, 2008; Banks, 2011; Närhi and Kokkonen, 2014; Timor-Shlevin et al, 2022; Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023). Lipsky's (2010 [1980]) analysis has already established that the essence of street-level bureaucracy consists of autonomy and discretionary power, which enable professionals to navigate complex situations and address the human dimensions of varying circumstances. Autonomy and discretionary power also contribute to the legitimacy of the welfare state, as they bolster the self-respect of the worker and instil confidence in clients that the worker has the means to mobilise assistance for them.

In the famous view of Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2007; 2016), SW does not just have a dual mandate from clients and the state but also has one from the profession itself. This third mandate is founded on scientifically based professional knowledge, SW ethics and human rights-based values. According to Staub-Bernasconi (2007: 200–1; 2016: 44), skilfully balancing these three mandates is an integral part of the competence required in any profession.

As Banks (2011) noted, the increasing focus on the ethics of SW is partially linked to resistance against the rise of neoliberal management approaches. Social workers aim to advocate for professional autonomy, uphold the rights of service users, promote social justice and rekindle personal commitment to professional ethics. Conversely, NPM seeks to dehumanise and depoliticise the ethics of SW by generating ethical codes to regulate it (Banks, 2011: 16–20).

RSW's theoretical and methodological approaches, influenced by diverse perspectives in SW education and academia, provide a scientifically validated framework for professional practice. They reflect what SW should fundamentally represent, how it should be executed and how the client's life world can be comprehended (see, for example, Fook, 2016; Payne, 2020; 2021). The globally recognised SW values of equality, justice and engagement are included in theories of SW (Dominelli, 2002; Howe, 2009: 128; IFSW and IASSW, 2014; Payne, 2021). Respected social workers have internalised and are able to uphold a strong SW identity and values, allowing them to find meaning and satisfaction in their jobs, even in challenging environments (Tang, 2020). Identified organisational mechanisms that promote social workers' alignment with their professional ideals emphasise the significance of team relationships, decision-making processes, management, workload and workplace expectations, access to resources and infrastructure support, and inter-organisational

relationships (Shier and Graham, 2013). The possibility for practitioners to reflect constantly and collectively about the content and conditions of RSW, as suggested in CR and SW practice research (Banks, 2011; Kjørstad and Solem, 2018), safeguards the essence of the profession but is increasingly limited in managerialist contexts. We conclude that RSW is identifiable in theoretical-methodological discussions within the field of SW, but there is limited knowledge regarding what enables its realisation due to the challenges caused by NPM, such as diminishing resources, high caseloads, managerialist leadership and ongoing social and healthcare reforms.

CR and CAIMeR theory

For us, CR is an appropriate approach for SW research because it enables the exploration of social phenomena at different levels of reality while simultaneously contributing to the development of the theoretical foundations specific to SW (Houston, 2010; Svenlin, 2020: 22; Wolniak and Houston, 2022; Samsonsen and Heggdalsvik, 2023). CR stratifies reality at three different levels of depth: the *empirical* level represents the observable experiences; the *actual* level comprises events and experiences; and the *real* level encompasses the deep, unobservable processes that generate both the empirical and actual and where the mechanisms are in play (Bhaskar and Lawson, 2007: 5–6; Bhaskar, 2008: 2–9; Blom and Morén, 2011: 62). According to CR, the social world is also unpredictable and characterised by a high degree of complexity and instability (Bhaskar, 2008; Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014; Danermark et al, 2019: 24–5; Archer, 2020: 140; Hastings, 2021).

We are investigating the mechanisms within RSW that help resist NPM in concrete situations. The mechanisms consist of powers in terms of causes, motives, considerations, choices and social interactions at the individual, collective, organisational and societal levels (Blom and Morén, 2011: 64–5). Mechanisms are causing – or, as Bhaskar (2008: 244) puts it, ‘triggering’ – empirically observable phenomena, such as RSW. However, a mechanism is rarely precisely delineable or even clearly identifiable; instead, its existence must be inferred from the various consequences it engenders (Fletcher, 2017; Houston and Swords, 2022). Therefore, we needed analytical tools to study, first, the observable phenomena, second, the underlying objective reality and, third, what causes the observable phenomena in SW.

There are examples of how a critical–realist perspective can be applied in a variety of empirical research (see, for example, Fleetwood, 2004; Blom and Morén, 2010; 2011; 2015; Danermark et al, 2019; Koopmans and Schiller, 2022). However, Blom and Morén’s (2010; 2011; 2015) CAIMeR theory provides a valuable analytical tool for SW research (see, for example, Kivipelto et al, 2019; Matthies et al, 2021; Svenlin, 2020; Svenlin and Lehto–Lundén, 2023). While CR represents a philosophy–of–science approach; CAIMeR offers a more concrete theoretical and methodological framework.

In accordance with the application of CAIMeR theory in SW, the attainment of outcomes or results (R) is directed and shaped by context (C), actors (A), interventions (I) and mechanisms (M). However, since our focus does not involve direct interactions with clients, when we mention interventions (I), we are generally referring to the actions and the operational approach within the organisational context of RSW.

ASW in Finland and the empirical research context

In Finland, SW is integrated into the public social and healthcare system. This study focuses on ASW, which addresses the complex challenges faced by working-age

individuals, including economic hardships, health issues, limited labour market access, life management difficulties and migration (Jokela and Kivipelto, 2021; Kivipelto and Koponen, 2021). In the Finnish context, ASW places a strong emphasis on client-driven objectives and involves collaboration between various professions (Karjalainen et al, 2019). Despite the fact that ASW is a significant part of the public social welfare system, its professional status is characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty compared to other areas of SW (Svenlin et al, 2021). One explanation we consider is that frequent reforms and strict regulations in labour market policies, combined with the complex systems of welfare services and social income security, present substantial challenges to individuals. This is especially the case as services progressively transition towards non-personalised digital delivery (Närhi et al, 2013; Kivipelto and Iivonen, 2023).

The context of this article is a combination of a two-year practice development project (PDP) called 'Financial Capability and Social Inclusion' and a parallel practice research project (PRP) called 'Effectiveness of Adult Social Work Methods'. We limit the description of these projects to the extent that is needed to understand our empirical research context, which led us to ask the questions about the mechanisms that enable RSW. The collaboration between two parallel projects simultaneously enabled practice development and scientific research on the developed methods (see Orme, 2010; Kelly et al, 2020). While the aim of the PDP was to promote the social inclusion and financial capability of ASW service users through the systematic application of targeted ASW methods, the PRP had the task of investigating the effectiveness of these methods. The PRP followed an agreement between the University of Jyväskylä and the municipal agencies, with the university's Ethics Committee assessing its research ethics.

In total, 70 social workers from five public agencies participated in the PDP. In the PDP workshops, social workers gained a deeper understanding of the methods and planned for the implementation of the methods. In response to the needs identified by social workers in the PDP and guided by the topical paradigms proposed by the PRP, strengths-based client engagement, financial SW, community- and nature-oriented approaches, and network strategies in immigrants' services were emphasised. The funding of the PDP enabled the appointment of one social worker in each of the five ASW agencies as a part-time facilitator, supporting the daily implementation of the practice methods. The use of these methods and the utilisation of CAIMeR theory as a common theoretical framework were discussed through a series of workshops involving all social workers in the PDP.

Five facilitators from the PDP, along with the university researchers, established the so-called 'practice research team' and convened online for reflection sessions every other week. Facilitators frequently reported that social workers wanted to focus on the application of the methods, but their daily responsibilities primarily revolved around handling urgent and crisis-oriented casework tasks in a 'firefighting' approach. High staff turnover and understaffing had a detrimental impact on both the practice of ASW and our research activities. Social workers felt that the nature of their work was more influenced by higher authorities than by their own understanding of ASW (see Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023).

Finally, a 'vicious circle' of ASW as a counter-mechanism in relation to its own goals could be identified through the collaboration between the PDP and PRP. This consisted of macro-level societal-structural obstacles and contextual social problems,

meso-level managerialist efforts to govern chaos and shortcomings through pressure to increase efficiency, and micro-level poor conditions for meeting service users' needs in a trustful working relationship (Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, 2023: 9–11). However, social workers of one local ASW agency, which we call 'Lucky Lakes' (LL), provided a different perspective and gave us reason for the additional study that is the focus of this article. Unlike other agencies with similar caseloads of 100–200 monthly clients per social worker, it was quite surprising that high turnover and staff shortages were not apparent in LL. This observation prompted us to conduct a further investigation to understand the factors contributing to LL's unique situation. We wanted to find out which mechanisms enable social workers in LL to align with their ideal professional goals, which they referred to as 'real social work'.

Data collection and analysis

To address our research question, 'What kind of mechanisms enable social workers to uphold their professional ideals and SW standards despite the pressures from NPM?', we conducted two focus-group interviews, supplemented by reports of PDP workshops and the research team's reflection sessions as background information. The first interview involved 12 social workers from LL, and its themes covered the five CAIMeR theory elements. We interpreted the positive practices observed within the LL ASW team as the desired result (R) and sought insights into the context (C), actors (A) and interventions (I) that, together with the mechanisms (M), may explain the achievement of the results. Unlike previous research (Blom and Morén, 2010; 2011), our focus was on using CAIMeR theory to understand and explain the mechanisms in an organisational context, specifically how the implementation of a particular type of ASW was made possible, rather than on how clients receive guidance and support (a client-focused context).

The second interview was held at the end of the project collaboration with the five facilitators of the local ASW teams. This thematic interview was also structured by CAIMeR theory and served as an overall evaluation of the practice–research collaboration. Given the research project's objective, we asked what contextual factors enabled or hindered the attainment of the targeted ASW methods of the project in terms of actors and interventions. This interview deepened our awareness about a 'vicious circle' in ASW, thus bringing out the difference of LL. Here, we first utilised the counterfactual analysis, as the vicious circle of most agencies had already demonstrated what would happen in the absence of the positive mechanisms found in LL.

The collected data, consisting of 48 pages of transcribed interview texts, were initially categorised into CAIMeR categories using Taguette software. The categories were then organised thematically into 38 distinct themes related to RSW. We noticed that these themes included several positive factors relating to team functioning and significance, professional freedom, multidisciplinary, task diversity, a positive leadership culture, and the rewarding nature of ASW. They included elements at the micro-level (clients and professionals), meso-level (teams, methods and services) and macro-level (management, decision-making and local community) (Blom and Morén, 2011: 64–5). To conduct a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms, we developed a six-step analysis model, illustrated in Table 1 (Blom and Morén, 2011: 67–8; Danermark et al, 2019: 130; Boost et al, 2023: 36–8). Table 1 exemplifies how the empirical data were analysed using this model.

Table 1: An analysis model for identifying mechanism-based explanations for RSW

CAIMeR phases	Stage 1: Description	Stage 2: Analytical resolution	Stage 3: Abduction	Stage 4: Retroduction	Stage 5: Counterfactual comparison between different abstractions	Stage 6: Concretisation and contextualisation
Sections of the analysis	<i>Result (R):</i> ASW team has a valued status and collaborates closely within the local community (policymakers, other professions, NGOs, churches and SMEs)	<i>Context (C):</i> Space for recognising others as potential collaborators, not SW adversaries <i>Actors (A):</i> Partners have trust and the capability to collaborate <i>Intervention (I):</i> Making transparent what ASW is doing with regular communication with policymakers and other agencies	<i>Theories:</i> Holistic view of local environment, community-based and structural SW, dialogical approaches, networking theories, and ecosocial SW <i>Value base:</i> SW is a profession with a political mission to promote change	<i>Role-taking mechanism (M1):</i> Enables active search for dialogue and transparent role of SW in society <i>Response mechanism (M2):</i> Local community and partners respect ASW due to its active role-taking	<i>Context (C):</i> Isolated and ignored status of ASW, and unknown or unclear picture about the content of ASW <i>Actor (A):</i> Low self-confidence of ASW and sceptical attitude towards other agencies <i>Intervention (I):</i> No apparent involvement of ASW at the organisational-political level, and a lack of time and resources for collaborative networks <i>Result (R):</i> RSW hindered	<i>Causal powers:</i> Overcoming challenges of managerialism by convincing professionalism; power of communication; and trust in dialogue and the capability of other agencies to understand this

Notes: NGO = non-governmental organisation; SMEs = small and medium-sized enterprises.

Source: Blom and Morén (2011: 67–8), Boost et al (2023: 36–8) and Danermark et al (2019: 130).

Initially, we created ‘descriptions’ based on the interpretations and accounts of those involved, that is, interviews with social workers from LL. In the ‘analytical resolution’ stage, we examined recurring patterns in the descriptions by using the elements of CAIMeR theory. During the ‘abduction’ stage, we explored relevant SW theories and values to explain these patterns (Blom and Morén, 2011: 69–70; Danermark et al, 2019: 130; Boost et al, 2023: 38–40). In the ‘retroduction’ stage, we aimed to reconstruct the underlying mechanisms (M) based on empirical and theoretical observations (Blom and Morén, 2011: 70–2; Danermark et al, 2019: 130; Boost et al, 2023: 41–4). We focused on identifying mechanisms (M) that could explain our earlier findings. Using counterfactual questions (Ylikoski and Kuorikoski, 2010; Ylikoski, 2019; Pozzoni and Kaidesoja, 2021), we analysed the causal relationships, reasoning backwards from observed effects to potential causes and underlying structures

(Danermark et al, 2019: 117–24). During the ‘comparison between different abstractions’ stage, we explored counterfactual scenarios in other agencies where these observed conditions were absent. In the concluding ‘concretisation and contextualisation’ stage, we aimed to identify mechanisms (M) linked to other causal powers and contextual factors (Blom and Morén, 2011: 72–3; Danermark et al, 2019: 130; Boost et al, 2023: 44–6). We viewed this phase as a process of establishing connections between different mechanisms (M) and assessing their relevance within various contexts (C).

Results

We interpret the identified ‘vicious circle’ causing the exodus of practitioners and a perceived impossibility of RSW as apparently reflecting the conflict between managerialism and professional SW. In contrast, we observed high employee commitment and low staff turnover among social workers in LL’s ASW team, where supportive macro-level management, reflective and supportive teams at the meso-level, and holistic and motivating client interactions at the micro-level were all detectable. Social workers met clients in their own environments. These multifaceted contextual conditions fostered adherence to professional ideals and standards in ASW.

We identified five mechanisms that appeared to have a significant connection to the realisation of RSW in LL, with the role-taking mechanism (M1) and response mechanism (M2) related to the macro-level, the organisational autonomy and responsibility mechanism (M3) and collective attraction and cohesion mechanism (M4) related to the meso-level, and the critical consciousness mechanism (M5) related to the micro-level of reality (see also Blom and Morén, 2011: 64–5).

The role-taking mechanism (M1) enabled an active search for dialogue and the transparent role of SW in society. It was connected with the observation that the ASW team had a valued status and close collaboration within the local community (R), including policymakers, other professions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), churches and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (A) (see Table 1). M1 was promoted as social workers maintained regular meetings with policymakers and other agencies (I). Contextually (C), we identified ample space for recognising potential collaborators rather than adversaries in the field of SW, contingent on partners (A) trusting each other and possessing the capacity to collaborate. It can be noted that the profession’s value base aligned with its political mission to drive change (IFSW and IASSW, 2014).

M1 can also be likened to Blom and Morén’s (2011: 72–3) ‘role-transgression mechanism’; however, M1 did not involve transgression but rather focused on maximising the active role of SW. These connections embrace a holistic view of the local environment and service systems, incorporating community-based and structural SW, dialogical approaches, networking theories, and ecosocial SW (Dominelli, 2002; Payne, 2021). For example, social workers had municipal negotiations twice a year, and they had an audience with the council to discuss their work and raise awareness about their activities:

So, we have municipal negotiations twice a year, where we go around all the ... municipalities. And there, we go through our services from the perspective of that particular municipality. There’s also discussion, and maybe we’ve been able to influence the mindset as well. (Interview in LL, social worker)

I have found it important that I have received an invitation, for example, to the decision-making bodies ... to talk about adult social work, client cases and what I do for a living. Here, I had an audience with the council, and I got to talk about my work there, to spread this awareness of what we do. (Interview in LL, social worker)

The response mechanism (M2) increased the acknowledgement and valuing by the local community and ASW partners of ASW for its active role-taking (see also [Blom and Morén, 2015](#): 63–4). M2 is closely connected with the role-taking mechanism (M1). While M1 enhanced the active role of ASW, M2 responded to M1 within the local community and organisational context by recognising the increased importance of SW. M2 increased not only the appreciation of SW among partners but also a respectful attitude towards SW clients. Social workers actively advocate for the use of respectful and empathetic language in decision-making forums, such as the association board:

I have noticed, for example, in our organisation, such as the decision-making bodies, the association board – for a few years, no such concepts have been used in speeches like ‘drunkards who go there’ or ‘when they drink their own money first’ – this type of discussion, it hasn’t been there for a few years. (Interview in LL, social worker)

Counterfactually, without M1 and M2, the status of ASW would have remained uncertain or ambiguous (R), social workers (A) might have experienced low self-confidence or a sceptical attitude towards other agencies, and the role of ASW at the organisational-political level would not have been clearly defined (I). Additionally, there would have been limited time and resources available for collaborative networks (C).

The organisational autonomy and responsibility mechanism (M3) at the meso-level of ASW teams triggered autonomy and flexibility, emphasising discretionary power and responsible accountability (see also [Lipsky, 2010 \[1980\]](#)). At the contextual level, certain key factors were observed, including supportive leadership, a flat organisational hierarchy, a long-term commitment to staying with the team and strong personal relationships among team members (C). Team members (A) were receptive to developing new approaches to better serve people’s needs. Supervisors (A) actively participated in grass-roots work, and there was a consistent emphasis on training and self-reflection among social workers (I). Additionally, the incorporation of flexible task assignments and dynamic working environments kept the job engaging and fulfilling (I). M3 resulted in a scenario where social workers were autonomously able to determine their working methods, established their own schedules, and chose collaboration partners based on their professional knowledge and values. As the social worker says in the quotation, they employ diverse methods and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams to determine the best approach for each client. They also appreciate the lack of unnecessary bureaucracy:

You can try different methods, working methods, different multidisciplinary professional teams, and always thinking about what would be best for that client. And I feel that we don’t have such unnecessary bureaucracy that we have to ask permission from our superiors for everything, but we get to

creatively try things out together, even if we are devising a multidisciplinary project or something. Yes, it has a big meaning, how flexible and agile or whatever the word is for this organisation and for our managerial work as well. (Interview in LL, social worker)

The value base of ASW in LL was grounded by professional standards and mutual support and respect. M3 aligned with RSW by embracing the organisation, which allowed for autonomy while ensuring accountability, with an acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of SW and the value of updating SW knowledge (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]; Staub-Bernasconi, 2016).

The collective attraction and cohesion mechanism (M4) operated at both the team and leadership levels, that is, at the meso-level (see also Blom and Morén, 2010: 102–3). M4 harnessed the collective strength of a team, leveraged its influence to confront unfair systems and exerted a sustaining force to uphold the ethical and moral principles of SW. M4 aligned with previous research into the significance of team autonomy and flexibility for professional standards of work (Banks, 2011; Shier and Graham, 2013; Fook, 2016). Social workers particularly highlighted the positive team spirit. Additionally, they noted that having a good team enables them to endure a lot: ‘We have a good team. That’s definitely it. I work with everyone in some areas. But it’s that kind of good team spirit’ (interview in LL, social worker); and ‘Of course, the team is good; that’s why you can endure a lot’ (interview in LL, social worker).

M3 and M4 worked together in synergy, employing both traction and sustaining forces. In a counterfactual scenario, a controlling leadership and strong hierarchy (C) would have impeded the effectiveness of M3 and M4, resulting in resistance to RSW (R). Moreover, social workers might have found themselves working in isolation, handling heavy caseloads, experiencing a lack of support from remote top-down supervisors and facing an increased risk of burnout (R).

The critical consciousness mechanism (M5) seemed to be involved when consciousness of the diversity of knowledge, admitting the limits of one’s own knowledge and valuing clients’ expertise in their own issues were present in ASW. M5 derived its strength from working within clients’ own environments. Settings like home visits, outreach SW and collaborative groups of experts with lived experiences were used (I). The greater the involvement of social workers in clients’ real-life settings (I), the more profound their understanding of clients’ needs became in the context of SW and ASW approaches, which enhanced the efficacy of RSW (R). They emphasised that in all development work, it is crucial to consistently prioritise the perspectives of clients. When clients provide feedback suggesting areas for improvement, swift and genuine action should follow:

It should be clear in all development work that clients’ perspective is always heard.... If we notice that clients provide feedback indicating that this matter should be developed in some way, we should genuinely take action on it. (interview in LL, social worker)

The operation of M5 appeared to necessitate the validity of M4 too, as the concept that knowledge must be collaboratively produced cannot be effectively implemented without M4.

Certain mechanisms exhibited varying degrees of interdependence and strength. We noticed that the organisational autonomy and responsibility mechanism (M3) did not appear to be in operation unless both the role-taking (M1) and response mechanisms (M2) were valid. Additionally, some mechanisms appeared to be closely interlinked, as evidenced by the interconnectedness of the role-taking (M1) and response mechanisms (M2), as well as the collective attraction and cohesion (M4) and organisational autonomy and responsibility mechanisms (M3). These mechanisms were most likely influenced, in part, by the same interventions (I) and contextual factors (C). Notably, all the mechanisms of RSW shared a similar foundational value base, as well as common theoretical and methodological underpinnings.

Discussion

The objective of this article has been to explore the mechanisms that empower ASW practitioners to uphold their SW ideals, even in challenging circumstances. We conceptualised this ideal state using the notion of RSW. While many of our insights have previously been discussed (see, for example [Shier and Graham, 2013](#); [Tang, 2020](#)), the novelty in our study was its empirical examination of supporting mechanisms in a context that is not significantly different from other similar SW contexts.

Our research reinforces the prevailing perspective that managerialism permeates the entire landscape of welfare services ([Ferguson, 2008](#); [Rose and Palattiyil, 2020](#); [Tammelin and Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2022](#); [Stenius and Storbjörk, 2023](#)). However, we identified enabling mechanisms that reinforced resistance against the effects of managerialism. The role-transgression (M1) and response mechanisms (M2) notably enhanced the autonomy and authority of social workers, a departure from the constraints of NPM, characterised by top-down regulations, legislation and administrative procedures guiding decision-making. It is worth noting that these mechanisms may remain 'dormant' until activated in certain contexts, where certain actors and interventions are in play ([Blom and Morén, 2011](#): 63; see also [Haigh et al, 2019](#)). Thus, there remains a realm of speculation regarding why certain mechanisms manifested or became activated solely in LL (see [Pratten, 2020](#): 28; [Cash-Gibson et al, 2021](#): 6). It is therefore crucial to delve deeper into why certain mechanisms remain dormant and what prompts their activation in various contexts in ASW.

Many factors that were different in LL and thus promoted RSW were identified quite readily by the interviewees, which might raise the question of why we needed the CAIMeR theory and the six-phase analysis model to study it in the first place. However, it is essential that SW research is grounded in rigorous scientific analysis, which CAIMeR theory enables by systematically guiding the identification and eliminating assumptions that may not have significant relevance to the implementation of RSW, as determined through careful analysis. In future research, it would be beneficial to consider clients' perspectives of RSW separately as well, which was not possible with the limited time and labour resources available in this research.

We suggest refraining from drawing overly straightforward conclusions about how mechanisms operate in various contexts. This study highlights that SW can exhibit variations even under similar conditions. Hopefully, our findings will encourage practitioners to insist on conditions that enable the achievement of RSW, as RSW

ultimately delivers the desired efficiency in the use of public resources, surpassing pseudo-effective managerialism.

The value base of CR fits very well with the starting point of SW research (see Mäntysaari, 2005; Samsonsen and Heggdalsvik, 2023: 9). We also hope that our application of CR will inspire further SW researchers to explore new ways of applying and interpreting it. Further analysis is necessary to identify the mechanisms that lead to less favourable outcomes too.

The small sample size of our study restricts how far we can generalise from our findings. We also have to admit critically that without data on the experiences of service users in LL, we cannot verify the assumption that RSW as identified in LL would inherently bring better solutions for users' problems. However, data from LL and the four other agencies with contrasting perspectives allowed us to conduct an exploratory and in-depth examination and identification of mechanisms. The option of using AI-powered tools to assist in the processing of complex, multidimensional qualitative data could also be critically considered (Eubanks, 2018).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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