



Inauthenticity at Work: Moral Conflicts in Market-oriented Welfare Organizations¹

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ABSTRACT

The number of employees who develop work-related problems due to stress and other mental tensions has increased in Europe during the last decades, especially among women. One explanation of the female dominance is that women more often than men work in the service and health care sector. Consequently, they are more involved in human relations at work, involving more “emotion work” or “interaction work”. Emotion researchers have described low well-being and mental disorders related to work stress in terms of inauthenticity, as suppressing one’s true emotions. In this article, a social constructivist and contextual perspective on the self is adopted. Based on case studies at Swedish work settings, the article explores the connection between authenticity and values attached to the self and the impact of the organizational setting for their realization in interaction work.

Work-related stress is examined in the light of the implementation of new public management rationales and directives in welfare organizations, with particular focus on customer-orientated management. The main conclusion is that, regardless of gender, stress and mental problems could be seen as effects of feelings of inauthenticity, caused by experiences of being prevented from realizing interpersonal self-values in personal encounters at work. Women more often work in the welfare sector and are consequently more often subjected to these moral dilemmas, enhanced by customer orientation. These premises form the background for the article’s understanding of women’s more frequent development of mental stress symptoms.

The article contributes to the understanding of women’s stress-related problems at work as a phenomenon in the intersection point between the individual and the organization and to the revealing of the interpersonal consequences of the increased customer orientation in the welfare area. Furthermore, by examining the contextual and situational dimensions of authenticity at work, the article adds to the knowledge about being authentic in today’s world.

KEY WORDS

Customer orientation / inauthenticity / interaction work / moral conflict / new public management / self-values / work stress

Introduction

Symptoms of fatigue related to stress and the development of mentally exhausting work are growing problems in Europe. In a survey carried out by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2009) in all European Union member states, respondents named fatigue as the second most common threat posed by the working

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environment.¹ According to the survey, stress was experienced by an average of 22% of the working Europeans. Other studies in European countries indicate that since the 1990s the psychosocial work conditions generally have deteriorated, with intensified demands, less autonomy, and less job security (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007a, 2007b). Particularly European women are increasingly affected by stress at work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2011). Job stress is associated with poorer psychological well-being, which in turn is a risk factor for long-term illness (Virtanen et al., 2007).

Sweden is one of the European countries where stress-related problems are most prevalent. The number of employees who develop work-related problems due to stress and other mental tensions has more than doubled over the last ten years (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010). Today stress and mental strain are the leading causes of work-related disorders among women and the second most common reasons among men (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010).

Studies emphasize that Swedish women compared with women from other European countries, despite a more comprehensive family policy insurance, experience a greater conflict between work and private commitments and more often develop stress-related mental health problems because of this conflict (Strandh and Nordenmark, 2006). Yet, comparative analyses often point out Sweden and the other Nordic countries as role models for gender equality policies (Buchanan and Annesley, 2007; Lister, 2009; Pascall and Lewis, 2004). According to Save the Children's mother index 2012, Sweden was ranked the third best country for mothers (Save the Children, 2012). Furthermore, in the year 2009, about 34% of the employed women between 25 and 54 years with children at home worked part-time (Statistics Sweden, 2010), which might have reduced work stress. The article addresses the question how this "Swedish working women paradox" can be explained by placing individual professionals' experiences within an organizational transformation perspective.

Market-oriented reorganizations in Sweden

One explanation of Swedish women's dominance concerning sick leave because of stress disorders is that many women, in the highly gender-segregated Swedish working life (Gonäs and Karlsson, 2006; Löfström, 2004), are engaged in caring professions, where the caring relation has become more strained because of the public sector's reorganizations and downsizing since the 1990s (Falkenberg et al., 2009; Hertting et al., 2005). For instance, Lidwall et al. (2009) show that the psychosocial work environment and the work situation were more important explanatory factors for long-term sickness in 2002 compared with 1986–1989.

Since the end of the 1980s, market governance has become increasingly common in the public sector in Sweden and many other European countries (Målqvist et al., 2011). Sweden shores high on new public management emphasis (Hood, 1995). The implementation of market-orientated rationales and directives assumes a variety of appearances in different countries (Almqvist, 2006; Ferlie et al., 1996). In Sweden, rationalization and reorganizations have generally taken place in all public areas, as the legal system, the national defense, central administration, the school, the health care, and other service production in the municipalities. Many of the changes during the last decades are re-

garded as effects of the conversion of new steering ideals into new steering methods and organizational structures (Hasselbladh et al., 2008). The practical implementations of the new ideals and their outcomes are not easily defined. However, studies indicate that in Sweden the public organizational transformations have come to circle around ideas about business management methods and a change from an internal emphasis on bureaucratic rules to a more external orientation highlighting the customer (Almqvist, 2006; Bejerot and Theorell, 1992; Hood, 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The notions of “customer value,” “quality control,” and “quality assurance” are ways to conceptualize the customer-oriented management that has become a central component in the Swedish public sector’s new governance regimes (Hasselbladh et al., 2008; Tuckman, 1994).

In Swedish working life research, the consequences of new public management reforms in the public sector are often considered on a macro level, and workers’ own experiences of their working conditions in their particular work context have been less discussed (Hasselbladh et al., 2008; Liljegren, 2008). Explicit examinations of the institutional transformations’ effects for the self and the day-to-day encounters need to be developed as well (cp Gustafsson, 2000; Trydegård, 2012). The implementations of new public management-inspired rationales and methodologies in other Scandinavian welfare systems have been more thoroughly examined in regard to the implications for welfare workers’ experiences of identity, meaning, and values. Particularly the transitions of the elderly care in Denmark and the accompanying paradoxes for care workers have been paid attention to in several studies (Kamp and Hviid, 2012). Given the high proportion of Swedish women working in the welfare area and being afflicted by stress, it seems relevant to examine new public management reorganizations in more areas than the health care sector. In an attempt to achieve a broader perspective, the article compares individual professionals’ experiences of the outcomes of customer orientation for interpersonal encounters, self, and health, based on empirical data from different welfare work settings (see more below).

Interaction work and authenticity

Low job satisfaction and burnout are, in part, regarded as consequences of employment in jobs characterized by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations and by being engaged in face-to-face contact with people and their problems (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Pines and Aronson, 1988). Emotion researchers present an explanation of the female domination in regard to work stress in their examinations of how work with humans in service or caring professions, often called “emotion work” or “interaction work”, is more often performed by women. Studies show that the management of emotions, especially anger, is liable to feelings of inauthenticity and low well-being and burnout (Bulan et al., 1997; Erickson and Ritter, 2001; Erickson and Wharton, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Pierce, 1995; Pugliesi and Shook, 1997; Sloan, 2007; Wharton and Erickson, 1995).

The question of authenticity and customer orientation in the service professions has been addressed in several studies (Abiala, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993). The implementation of customer orientation to achieve reorganizations in accordance with new public management ideas has, however, not been thoroughly examined in regard to the effects for authenticity.



To a large extent, the emotion research on work and authenticity seems to adopt a substantialist view on the self as entering the world with a preformed core, emphasizing the virtues of immediacy, spontaneity, and uniqueness (cp Ferrara, 2009:23ff). Arguing that “the idea that being authentic in today’s world does not necessarily mean that one is remaining true to some sort of unified or noncontradictory self,” Erickson (1995:135) underlines the importance of “working toward an understanding of self that reflects individuals’ subjective sense of their own feelings of authenticity—feelings that inevitably emerge from interactions within the social world.” Taylor’s (1991) similar perspective is that the self is not a summation of our intrinsic properties. Instead, our identity depends on what values we have. These values are culturally bound. In this way, we become dependent on others, of a community, to develop and realize our self, which is attributed a dialogical character. Erickson (1995) regards the fulfillment of “self-values,” that is, values applied to oneself, as a vital part of feeling authentic today. By conceptualizing authenticity in terms of a system of self-values, the self is put forth as changeable and dynamic. An understanding is enabled, not only of how emotions are fundamental to experience authenticity, but also of how such feelings shape and motivate behavior at the same time as they are influenced by the surrounding social and interactional settings. “Feelings of inauthenticity, which may follow the violation of a commitment to self” are seen “as a result of violating one’s level of commitment to a particular self-value” (Erickson, 1995:131).

In the following, with the aim of shifting focus to the notion’s relational aspects, authenticity is, with Erickson and Taylor, defined as being in the state of acting in accordance with one’s own underlying (but culturally bound) values.

About the study

Close to 90% of the Swedish workforce have occupations dominated by either women or men. Although studies indicate a link between gender-related work segregation and poor health (Bryngelson et al., 2011; Nise et al., 2007), there is a lack of explanations and theories (Alexanderson, 2004), especially about gender segregation at work sites (Svedberg et al., 2009). With the ambition to add knowledge to this area, the sample of the study was based on horizontal gender segregation (Löfström, 2004) from the perspective of workplace and workgroup affiliation.

More women than men work in the Swedish public sector (Statistics Sweden, 2010). Work-related stress and stress-related illness are common among the public employed in general, especially among women (Sundström-Frisk and Weiner, 2005). With these statistics as a departure point, case studies were made at public sector work settings with professional groups with high proportions of stress-related disorders.

Inspired by multisited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), a method of data collection that follows a topic or social problem through different field sites geographically and/or socially, the study follows the topics of authenticity, values, and stress at six different work settings. In accordance with the common design of multisited ethnography, the study uses additional methods like semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and the collection of policy documents.

Three female-intensive public workplaces,² an employment office, a compulsory school, and an elderly care center were picked out. Occupational groups with statistically

high numbers of work stress and stress-related mental illnesses were well represented. Female employment officers belong to one of the professional groups that show the highest levels of stress-related disorders, 24%. Among female elementary school teachers, 19% reported high levels of stress-related disorders, among female nurses 14%, female assistant nurses 11%, and female physiotherapists 11% (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010).

One case study was performed in a male-intensive workgroup: the team managing an educational program (electrical engineering) at a public upper secondary school dominated by male upper secondary school teachers, the male occupational group with the statistically highest numbers of stress-related mental illness being 19% (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010).

To be able to make comparisons, two male-intensive workgroups in the private sector, with occupational groups with statistically low numbers of work and stress-related mental illness, were selected. According to Statistics Sweden, in the year 2011 about two out of three privately employed were men. Engineers and machine operators are two of the most male-dominated occupational groups in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2010). Case studies were executed in a workgroup at a telecom company dominated by male engineers (7% with stress-related disorders according to the Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010) and a manufacturing industry with several male machine operators (4% with stress-related disorders according to the Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010).

Focused semi-structured interviews (Merton et al., [1956] 1990) were conducted with informant groups at the various work sites: the main informants (professional groups with statistically high or low work stress), staff members belonging to other occupational groups, and the local management and safety representatives. Each interview lasted one to two hours. The use of multiple target groups at the workplaces aims at identifying how different parts perceive and relate to similar situations. In line with the multisited ethnographic perspective, the ambition was to capture nuances and diversity and to discern patterns between groups that are independent of the workplace.

A total of about 60 interviews were conducted at the six workplaces, all located in the middle of Sweden. Regarding the main groups, six teachers at various levels (five women and one man) at the elementary school in the study were interviewed. Six teachers with different orientations (two women and four men) belonging to the work team at the upper secondary school were interviewed. Six employment officers (four women and two men) were interviewed at the employment office. At the elderly care center, interviews were made with two nurses, three assistant nurses, and one occupational therapist (all women). Five engineers (all men) at the telecom company participated in the study. At the manufacturing industry, six machine operators (all men) were interviewed. One to two employees from other professional groups (such as administration, attendant's office, and customer support), one to two management representatives (for instance, principals and area managers), and the safety representative at each workplace were interviewed as well.

The selection of work sites was directed by the condition that the main groups would be well represented. The local management or safety deputy sending out a request to the employees before my visit made the selection of informants. A disadvantage is that the sample could be controlled and that the experiences of the interviewed are not representative of the group as a whole. To balance this, additional interviews were arranged by



myself after I had arrived at the work sites. The interviews took place in the workplace during working hours. A potential weakness is the risk that the interviewed withhold critique and other sensitive information. However, in the interview situations, my impression was that the majority spoke openly, often critically, about their working conditions. One advantage of placing the interviews in the workplace is the ability to gain insight into everyday work. In most cases, it was through the interviews that the opportunities to accompany some of the persons during their workday were given.

One interview guide was used in the interviews with the employees and another in the interviews with the management and safety representatives. The guide used in the interviews with the employees included the following themes: relationship to work; values about what is important when working and the opportunities to practice values at work; complicity and influence in relation to the organization's or company's policy, objectives, and directives; workplace changes and their implications for the working conditions; and experiences of stress and mental troubles. The interview guide used in the interviews with the management and the local safety representatives was based on the following themes: demands and expectations on the employees; the employees' influence regarding the organization's or company's policy, objectives and directives; the implementation of changes and their impact on the employees' working conditions; and stress and illness among the employees.

I followed some of the interviewees in the main group (at least one per workplace) during work as a participating observer (for instance, in the classroom, in customer and user meetings, and on the shop floor). The observations were carried out in accordance with similar themes as the interview guide for employees and summarized in field notes. Of course, it was hard to avoid my presence as a researcher affecting the observed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:189f). The observations have nevertheless been valuable, not the least in making it possible to place the accounts of the interviewed in their work context.

Job descriptions, policy documents, and work environment evaluations were collected at the workplaces. The aim was to acquire a complementary picture of employees' work content and demands, stress and illness, and the organization's or company's policies, objectives, and guidelines.

When the material had been collected and transcribed, an initial categorization and conceptualization process was carried out. Then comparisons were made, between the work sites and between different groups at the workplaces, using a comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The search for resemblances and variations was based on a combination of a theory-oriented approach in which I, on the basis of theories and concepts of authenticity and well-being, had set the themes I wanted to illustrate through the empirical data and an empirically grounded approach in which themes were taken from the material (Silverman, 1985). One of the observed patterns in the comparative analysis was that personal encounters with help-seeking individuals were central features of the teachers', employment officers', nurses', assistant nurses', and occupational therapists' workday, while for the engineers and machine operators, the relation to things was a more prevailing characteristic. Within the public organizations and the private companies, for some of the interviewed, the inverse relationship existed. For instance, the upper secondary school janitor has a predominantly thing-oriented work while the customer support personnel at the telecom company mainly have a human-oriented work. Characteristic for all of them is that they do not belong to any of the main groups. In the

data, there were indications that the conditions for personal encounters had been altered due to changes, often results of an increased customer orientation, in the participating public organizations. Therefore the data were re-examined to further investigate this similarity between the, in many other regards, different work settings. Two main themes emerged, which was identified as the expression of personal values in encounters with help-seekers and the experiences of authentic engagements with them. Parts of the interviews have been used as illustrations in the presentation of this joint analysis. The aim is to elucidate some specific aspects of the human service workers' conditions in order to emphasize and problematize the complexity of their work in the context of the studied organizational changes.

In the following, the term "human service worker," not "welfare worker" or "public service worker," is used to distinguish the workers whose workday is mainly oriented toward humans from other workers in welfare organizations whose work is more concerned with less directly human-oriented services like administration. In a similar way, the label "thing worker," not "privately employed," is used to distinguish the workers whose work is predominantly related to things from those who have work tasks more preoccupied with humans, as customer support personnel, in the participating private work settings.

Organizational framework: the implementation of customer orientation

During the past years, the introduction of a customer orientation management doctrine, which provides new ideals, norms, and practices that change the management in the Swedish public sector, is evident in all the public work settings in the study.

The Swedish Public Employment Service might be seen as a forerunner when it comes to an enhanced market thinking and customer orientation since the agency at an early stage implemented the "customer" concept. From being a traditional agency with citizen focus, the Swedish Public Employment Service has increasingly become a customer-oriented service agency. The most important task is to meet the labor market requirements of effectively "matching" job seekers with employers with priority to those who are distant from the labor market (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 2007). The authority is by its "strategic focus on increasing customer value" (The Swedish Public Employment Service, 2012:66) engaged in development work for customers to receive consistent service throughout the country. The year 2011 was decided on a common basic service to streamline efforts for clients, evident in the monitoring of enrollees' search activities in standardized ways and the establishment of individual action plans.

At the Public Employment Service office in the study, located in an immigrant dense area with many applicants distant from the labor market, open hours have recently been expanded in order to give the customers service. As an effect of the Service's enhanced focus on result and goal attainment in terms of successful matching, the officers' work has shifted from the traditional emphasis on supplying jobs to a growing focus on documentation of seeking activities and action plans.

As in many other Western countries, the Swedish educational system is currently undergoing major restructuring. During the 1990s, the state promoted school choice and competition through legislation and funding of independent (private) schools



(Government Bill, 1991/1992, 1992/1993), even though education in Sweden has traditionally been a public issue and pupils have been enrolled in the (municipal) school in the area where they live. In addition, today the school is characterized by higher demands on goal and result attainment and evaluation of pupils' achievements, formulated in 2011 in the new school programs (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, 2011b).

At the compulsory school in the study, the teachers' work has been altered from the traditional prominence given to teaching to an increased emphasis on documentation of the pupils' learning outcomes. The amplified documentation demands have been introduced together with the implementation of new technology, an Internet-based platform, for the standardized registration of results and evaluations. The extended documentation work was introduced as a way of enhancing the pupils' learning undertakings and of achieving better learning outcomes and by that reaching better goal attainment for the school.

At the upper secondary school, the teachers' work has been reorganized from the traditional subject affiliation system to an organization based on interdisciplinary work teams. The work teams were initiated as a way of increasing pupils' learning activities and accomplishing better learning results. In addition, a mentorship program, where the teacher functions as a mentor for some of the pupils, has been implemented in order to give each pupil an individual treatment and better accessibility and to strengthen the school's competitiveness.

In the year 2009, a law about freedom of choice regarding elderly care was implemented (Government Bill, 2008/09). Exposed to this competition several municipalities declared, in distinct market-oriented terms, their future goal to be a "world-class" elderly care. A "dignity assurance," based on a "national value system," has been introduced to secure the daily care quality for the "users" (SOU, 2008). The assurance implies an increased focus on results of operations and follow-up through individual implementation plans and national instruments for needs assessment in order to facilitate a systematic and more uniform approach.

At the elderly care center in the study, the increased customer orientation is manifested in the execution of a value system based on the users' requests as a way to reach the overarching goal to offer a world-class elderly care. In accordance with these objectives, especially the nurses and assistant nurses work has been more orientated toward giving residents a better service, with enhanced open hours at the restaurant and the establishment of a café. Their work has also changed from the traditional emphasis on care to an intensified attention to documentation of the accomplishments in relation to the individual users. The increased documentation was initiated as a way of improving and safeguarding user satisfaction in line with the value system.

In the following, an analysis is provided of the results about the employees' experiences in these welfare work settings.

Care work and intersubjective authenticity

Welfare workers work in direct contact with citizens, providing basic services defined as rights in the welfare state (Blomqvist and Rothstein, 2000). The core of all welfare work has been defined as personal encounters with two or more people (Gustafsson,

2000:143). As indicated above, a common denominator for all female and male study participants working in the public sector in a profession with statistically high levels of stress-related disorders is that interpersonal relations with help-receiving individuals are leading parts of their work. In comparison to health care and education professionals, employment officers have a partly different work situation since their work is also about the exercise of public authority. However, several studies highlight the street-level bureaucrat's key position as the encounter between the authority and the help-seeker (Lipsky, 1980; Taylor and Kelly, 2006).

In the care research area, different kinds of care work have been distinguished: care work connected to growth or results, sustenance or standstill, and situations of regression (Waerness, 1984). The care work performed at the welfare organizations in the study cover together all three areas. The teachers at the compulsory and upper secondary schools do care work connected to pupils' educational growth and results. The employment officers at the public employment service office practice care work oriented toward adults' work-related growth and results. The nurses, assistant nurses, and occupational therapists at the elderly care center perform care work associated with the sustenance of the residents' abilities and situations of dying (regression).

An essential aspect of the performance of all types of care work in the study is the conviction that the encounter itself is important. Many of the human service workers' experiences indicate that care work is not only depending on the individual professional's incentives and capacities, but on how the help is received. Astvik and Aronsson (1994) show that the meeting between caregiver and receiver is an important source of motivation as well as work satisfaction. The results of this study reveal the pervasive moral dimensions of the motivation and satisfaction experienced in the encounter as well. A majority of the human service workers assume a highly personal approach to work; expressing the idea that acting in accordance with committed principles is a condition for helping others to realize themselves. The other's realization could be learning things, getting a job, or making old age as harmonious and active as possible. One of the male teachers at the upper secondary school gives a good example of this when he associates entering pupil encounters in an automatic manner, without a personal commitment, with an inability to practice his teaching work:

There is a rewarding thing one does not talk so much about, I think: when the pupils are able to experience themselves and say: "God, I have developed, I have learned something". When they can see that. I have this idealistic notion about empowering the pupils... that's what I want to do in my teaching job. Some say: "You just go with the autopilot," but that's kind of impossible. There is one thing that cannot be forgiven and that's when the teacher enters the classroom and is not there with the pupils because you just do not have the strength to have the contact. They sense that. They feel rejected and then it is impossible to teach them things.

An underlying assumption in the utterance is that it is the maximization of personal capacities and resources that enable the human service worker to function optimally and morally correct in the encounters at work, that is, authenticity is required (cp Bovbjerg, 2011). The ideas about the importance of encountering the help-seekers in accordance with committed principles can be related to the person's professional ethics or the values of the profession. Nevertheless, a majority of the respondents describe their motivations



to help others not primarily in terms of accomplishing external work-ethical obligations. Instead, as especially the interviews reveal, showing concern for the welfare of others is intimately linked to how they perceive themselves, not only as workers but also as persons, and to the fulfillment of inner commitments. Consequently, the altruistic ideals about recognizing and benefiting the needs of others seem to be closely committed to the self, that is, they might with Erickson be characterized as self-values.³ Another indication of the values' personal attachment is the commonly held belief among the human service workers about the importance of being constant in relation to all kinds of situations, displaying a "cross-situational consistency" (Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000:184) when practicing their altruistic values. One of the female nurses gives evidence of this when she declares that she is the kind of person who wants to take care of everybody she meets, not only the elderly at work:

I love to work as a nurse because I love to create a cheerful atmosphere. I always want to be positive and take care of the people I meet, not just the residents and staff at work, but everybody. If someone at the street needs help, I walk over to help. I am like that. I am such a person who wants to give to other people. I always try to take the time, sit down and listen to residents and colleagues, or give them a hug. I think that if you give with one hand, you get back in the other. Maybe you don't get something back right away and by the same person, but in the long run, you always get something in return, that's what I think.

For the privately employed workers at the telecom business and manufacturing industry, interpersonal encounters are not equally central in their work. The main reason is probably that things more commonly serve as objects for their work. For the thing workers, the relationship to the "object" is not as multifaceted and mutual. Their work is not depending on setting processes in motion in the other. For the thing workers, the fulfillment of personal values at work and cross-situational consistency seem less important as well. A majority express a strong work engagement, personal interest in, and responsibility for their work. The engagement is, however, usually directed toward things without an apparent connection to personal values related to life as a whole. With Erickson (1995) one might assume that their self-values more seldom are intertwined with their professional role, but to other life areas.

A common consequence of the human service workers' strive for what might be called an "intersubjective authenticity" is that their psychological well-being is depending on the response of the other. One of the female assistant nurses gives evidence of this when she explains how good she feels about herself when she has been able to make the elderly satisfied in accordance with her values and this is reflected in the receive:

When I work I see the residents and think that it's I who sit in that chair and want the best help: "That's me!" And I do as much as I can. Then I feel good. I feel so happy when I say to the resident: "Sleep well!" and he says back: "I hope you sleep well too!" [...] It is emotional indeed and I feel so happy and go home without feelings of guilt.

The revealing of feelings of guilt in the quotation above, when not being able to act in a way that satisfies the help-receiver, further reinforces the conclusion about the moral dimensions of the interpersonal encounters at work. In the following, I show how experiences of obstacles, due to transformed organizational conditions in order to achieve

improved customer orientation, to perform interaction work that contribute to the realization of these altruistic values are common among the human service workers in the study.

Moral conflicts in welfare work

The results suggest that the customer-oriented directives imply a view of the help-seeking person that often diverges from the understanding of the human service workers. In a critical analysis of the market-oriented reforms in the Swedish health care sector, Hasselbladh et al. (2008) expose how the management of the organization takes the legitimacy of the professionals to speak for the customer into possession, for instance through programs to “put the customer in the center.” “Customer-oriented business management is not a method to ensure that the individual customer’s will guides operations. Customer-oriented management consists of systematic methods to control activities toward market-related goals.” [...] The encounter with the customer is framed by control regimes where information about the customer and the customer meeting is collected by continuous measurement,” Hasselbladh et al. (2008:71) conclude.⁴ That the introduced customer orientation is not primarily on the conditions of the help giver and the receiver is confirmed by the findings in all welfare organizations in the study. One example is given when one of the managers at the senior care center expresses her expectations on the employees to comply with the recently implemented value system to put the customer in the center with the overarching goal of attaining world-class care:

A value-system must permeate the entire business from users to employees. They [the employees] must also bring it with them in the encounters with the users, but also with relatives, with other health care providers and other cooperation partners. We promote a unit at the market and it is important that we are good at this. Based on the customers’ responses to a survey, we created three words: time, trust and safety. [...] Then we established ways to work with them as starting-points: How will customers feel that they are given time? Maybe it’s not about customers getting more time, but that you take off the beeper or sit down even if you only have five minutes. If you sit down it feels like a lot longer than if you stand with one foot inside and the other one outside the door. [...] And it was really important to send these values with the staff. These three words should goddam sit on the door when they leave the office to visit the customers.

In the quotation above, the manager reveals that the staff’s adherence to time, one dimension of the common value system, could just as well consist of giving the customers an illusion of more time. The utterance exposes what is characteristic for the customer orientation directives in all the public sector organizations in the study: that the notions about customer value and quality adherence are not primarily methods to ensure that the will of the individual customer guides operations, but to adapt to a competitive market. This might explain why a majority of the interviewed human service workers in the public sector experienced what can be termed a growing moral conflict. The conflict is well illustrated by the experiences of one of the female elementary school teachers. She describes how the intensified emphasis on a standardized documentation and evaluation of results and goal attainment tends to shift her focus



from what she finds important, namely the interpersonal relation with the pupils and their parents:

I have had such great meetings with the pupils and their parents. Just this, human encounters. Therefore it feels very sad to spend more and more time on documentation work in front of the computer. It doesn't suit me. Or as one mother said already a few years ago when we sat in a parent-teacher meeting, when we were done she said: "Can we have a real conversation another time? I'll bring cake and tea". And then I realized this was an indication of me not having had this genuine contact. I had just looked quickly in the papers and: "Yes, yes, he has that and that result". Actually, I did not have the time, but I took the time and made sure that I had cleared the whole round table, so there was not a single piece of paper on it. And then she came with tea and cake and we sat down and talked and *then* she could tell me about her concerns about her son. And what if this mother had not dared to ask me, then her concerns and questions had remained unanswered.

Common among the other human service workers are similar experiences of a reduced possibility to carry out their work in what they perceive as a moral way, that is, in accordance with values about recognizing the other's life situation, individual capacities, development and needs, because the margin of maneuver in personal encounters has been curtailed by stricter guidelines and goals and more documentation work. Especially the teacher and authority professions have been described as occupations with relatively high levels of discretion and autonomy, which have been diminished by the introduction of market-based governance (Farrell and Morris, 2003; Lundström and Parding, 2011; Taylor and Kelly, 2006). It is likely to think that the ability to authentically realize oneself and one's values at work is connected to at least some measure of discretion in different situations (Sheldon et al., 1997). This is evident in the teacher considering the more standardized procedures for pupil evaluations as incompatible with her personality ("It doesn't suit me") in the quotation above.

In their thinking, the human service workers can be said to give proof of what Waerness (1984) calls "care rationality." Those who work in the frontline in the welfare sector need to solve concrete everyday problems in interpersonal activities. When you work with people you cannot behave in the same way in all situations; the help must be adapted to the specific situation in a mutual process in order to meet the other's needs. Discretion and autonomy are required for genuinely empathic meetings where the other is recognized as a unique individual. Gustafsson (2000) states that the managerial steering mechanisms have particularly many implications in the public sector in their attempts to define and control work, as the care of children and elderly, with multidimensional and immeasurable ways of acting and effects. Studies of health care personnel confirm these conclusions by indicating a correlation between ethical conflicts or role conflicts, conflicts between short-term cost-effectiveness and providing care consistent with professional values (Bejerot and Astvik, 2009; Målvik et al., 2011; Vabø, 2009).

Researchers claim that since the introduction of market orientation in public organizations, another kind of rationality, "cost rationality," has gained impact beside the care rationality (Nordström, 2000; Trydegård, 2012). Apparently, cost rationality is a vital aspect of the customer orientation, where the customers' needs are measured against predefined scales. In some respects, cost rational governance requires that individuals should be treated as things. One outcome of the cost rational logic is that social

encounters tend to be too regulated concerning time and results, since the cost rational perspective tends to ignore the fact that here-and-now situations may be different. One possible explanation of the thing workers' more rare experiences of similar moral conflicts might be that their work motives are more in accordance with the company's overall managerial logic about cost rationality. Their work is not characterized by the same need for situational adaptation since mutuality and responsiveness are not required for work performances in relation to things.

Based on the discussion in feminist theory, initiated by Gilligan (1982), the motives of the female-dominated human service worker group could be described in terms of responsibility-oriented morals as well, that is values and moral commitments which, in their focus on caring for and openness to the needs of others, are different from a rights-oriented morality, primarily associated with men. The lack of attention paid to care rational principles within new public management organizations can be considered in the light of Gilligan's explanation of how responsibility morals historically have been misunderstood and neglected. In the following, I show how the human service workers' difficulties to fulfill the care rational self-values at work in turn contribute to feelings of inauthenticity and low mental well-being.

Inauthenticity as a consequence of the inability to fulfill interpersonal self-values

With a reduced formal accountability for the professionals, the persisting dilemmas in personal encounters tend to become more of individual moral problems, situated in the body like a bad conscience or feelings of inadequacy (cp Vabø, 2002). One example is a female employment officer's portrayal of how the customer-orientated guidelines easily give rise to conflicting demands, causing mental distress and feelings of insufficiency:

Our entire mission is contradictory. On the one hand, we should keep up the pace. On the other hand, we should focus on those who have difficulties getting out in work, which lowers the pace. For me personally, it causes very high stress. There is a huge gap between quality and quantity. The word insufficient... that's a word that persecutes an employment officer. The efficiency requirements of the politicians and the authorities... that's just paper instructions, while we live in the concrete reality in which we meet these people with all their characteristics and needs. Fair enough if I forgot to write a journal note or make an action plan, but maybe I didn't succeed in this meeting either to think in a way that enables me to help this person. *Then* you can feel inadequate. [...] These relational aspects... *there* it's easy to feel bad. [...] The set of rules is simple and straightforward. Well, that was exaggerated, but in relation to a human being... it's nothing.

As the quotation above indicates, despite the growing customer orientation the dilemmas in personal encounters persist. As Taylor and Kelly (2006) conclude about teachers and social workers, "the rule-making (hence bureaucratic) capacity of professionals at street-level is much less influential than before although it is questionable whether or not the greater accountability of professionals to management and clarity of the targets and objectives of organizations delivering public policy has liberated them from the dilemmas of street-level bureaucracy." Ethical dilemmas in personal encounters seem



rather to be enhanced by the implementation of market orientation in welfare organizations, Taylor and Kelly (2006) conclude. Studies of health care workers reveal that their work situation easily gives rise to a “stress of conscience” in situations containing ethical dimensions, where the worker experiences difficulties to maintain all interests and values at stake. These situations are often followed by symptoms of stress or burn-out, since accelerating demands of a personal relationship and a responsibility taking at work are obstructed by continuous reorganizations and cutbacks (Glasberg, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2008; Juthberg et al., 2007). Other studies of health care workers show that conflicting ideals and moral uncertainty together with external constraints cause ethical conflicts and a “moral distress” (Førde and Aasland, 2008; Källemark et al., 2004).

The results of this study suggest that not only health personnel but also more generally professionals working closely with humans, as teachers and public officers, are easily troubled with a stress of conscience or moral distress connected to persisting dilemmas in personal encounters. Some of the interviewed human service workers tell about restraining emotions or passions, which researchers usually have connected to inauthenticity (see above). However, more common are feelings of inauthenticity related to moral conflicts, which can be related to a widening gap between self-values and the policies and goals of the organization. With Tummers et al. (2009) the human service workers’ experiences can be understood in terms of “policy alienation,” increased by new public management practices because of a perceived dysfunctional focus on efficiency, results, and stricter implementation of rules. To violate one’s personal values about creating beneficial encounters tends not only to cause feelings of estrangement, but of being morally reprehensible as well. This is evident in the quotation above where the employment officer’s distancing from the efficiency requirements as “just paper instructions” is accompanied by feelings of inadequacy. Another elucidating case is the experiences of a female compulsory schoolteacher of how the stricter regulations about learning outcomes bring about an inability to act in accordance with her values, which in turn have a negative impact on her self-esteem:

In my experience, the creativity is gone. I feel the whip hanging above my head: that they [the pupils] must cope with the stricter demands and the learning objectives. Somewhere you lose these individuals on the road. I must say, this fall I haven’t been a particularly good class teacher, because I’ve never used so many stencils, cleared off and tested. I feel anger and powerlessness... since I notice that this is not good for the kids. The pupils are stressed. [...] Excuse the expression, but I feel like a whore. I’ve sold myself. If I did not need my salary, then I would quit today.

It is hard to imagine an encounter more associated with inauthenticity than to engage in intimate sexual acts for payment. In similar, but not always so drastic ways, many of the human service workers express feelings of being a “bad” or an “unworthy person” since they are unable to fulfill their values in encounters at work. The respondents’ self-perceptions can be interpreted as signs of not being true to themselves. Of course all non-authentic actions do not lead to moral conflicts. As evident above, the material indicates that it is particularly when values, that are intimately associated with the worker’s own personality, repeatedly fail to be expressed that stressful dilemmas arise.

The experiences of a moral conflict and inauthenticity are often related to feelings of work stress. One of the female upper secondary school teachers illustrates this when she describes her most common causes of stress:

A kind of exploitation of the workforces has emerged, I think. Because they [the school management] feed upon that it is human beings you work with. It is not a thing. You cannot just close the door when the pupils come to see you, I think. I believe there's a certain morality. And these features create a stressful environment. But not the teaching hours or the number of pupils, I can manage their enlargement. [...] Of course I could say: "No, you have to come back when I have class". But it has to do with my own values as well, of how I would like to be treated.

Among the human service workers in the study, stress-related problems such as sleeping problems, a lack of mental energy, emotional imbalance, headache, high blood pressure, or stomach problems are very common. Several had been on sick leave for longer or shorter periods because of fatigue and depression diagnoses. A male employment officer who developed fatigue symptoms tells about his experiences:

What I personally believe was most draining was the feeling that there was so much I could have done, but I always felt I did not have the time. It made me feel unsatisfied, because I... well, there were a lot of opportunities to do things if the strength and the time had been enough. And then I felt that I got stuck in administering very much. There was a lot of administrative work and to arrange money and very little employment service. If I can take two hours and make eight calls, I can actually find an internship in which this person can get a chance to see what she is capable of and sort of get her confidence back...but I didn't find those hours. And they never came. I mean, it was quite a lot of cases I had where I didn't contribute to something good. [...] I didn't notice myself that I was getting sick, it was my colleagues who came to me and said: "Damn, how do you look? How much do you actually drink? You should do something about this". And I was actually sober.

In some cases, employees had asked for changed, less human-oriented, work assignments to avoid stress-related distress. Some of the study's thing workers are afflicted by these troubles as well, but not to the same extent at all.

Final remarks

The analysis implies that gender segregation in regard to workplace or workgroup as such might not explain women's stress-related illness. This is particularly indicated by female and male teachers' similar experiences of persisting dilemmas in personal encounters, dilemmas that can be related to the implementation of new public management rationales and methodologies in the Swedish public sector. The more frequent development of mental stress symptoms among Swedish women in comparison to the men can be understood in terms of women more often working in the welfare area and consequently more often experiencing moral conflicts. In contrast to those who primarily work with things, human service workers are more dependent on what happens in



personal encounters, on the conditions for how help is given and received, to experience self-esteem and mental well-being. In other words, the analysis suggests that the “Swedish working women paradox,” mentioned above, is more adequately described as the “human service workers in new public management organizations paradox.”

The cross-pressures experienced by the human service workers might as well be explained in terms of an incompatibility between institutional obligations that cannot be adequately fulfilled without compromising. The material verifies that often prevalent in the customer orientation policy is an embedded tension between conflicting demands of quality (give good care in personal encounters) and quantity (be effective and attain results). As exemplified above, with a quotation of one of the elderly care center managers, the friction is for instance apparent in the management representatives’ often contradictory statements about their expectations on their staff.

However, in order to shed light on the interconnections between these contradictory obligations and human service workers’ mental health indicated by the previous research mentioned above, it is important to direct the attention at the individual level as well, to who the workers feel they are and want to be. Relating the human service workers’ thoughts and feelings about themselves to a more all-embracing social transformation perspective, it is suggested that in today’s “authenticity culture” (Taylor, 1991), “more and more the presentation of an ‘authentic self’ is one of the demands placed upon individuals, above all in the sphere of skilled labor” (Honneth, 2004:467). According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), “the new spirit of capitalism” in the Western societies gives rise to a tension between extended claims of authenticity and flexibility, which in reverse means expectations of variability and adaption. The rapid rise in the frequency of depression is regarded as a result of anomie caused by this friction (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005:423f).

The stressful moral conflicts and low mental well-being common among the human service workers in the study might be understood in the light of these contradictory societal demands, where the workers’ endeavors to fulfill care rational values are not in accordance with the market-oriented governance’s calling for an adaption to the new cost rational ideals. On the one hand, human service workers are expected to present authenticity in the form of a genuine interest in caring for others and to develop a personal relationship to work. On the other hand, a flexible adaption to the organizational changes and intensified demands for efficiency and results is required. With Boltanski and Chiapello, one might ask if new public management organizations, in their quest for customer orientation, bring the conflicting demands on today’s workers the farthest.

The issue of increased authenticity claims brings the question of the limitations of care to the fore. One conclusion is that care rationality is given less margin of maneuver in new public organizations. Another finding that needs to be considered as well is that, as indicated especially in the quotations by the nurses and assistant nurses, there often seem to be practically no limits for care. With Gilligan (1982), women, or as this study suggests, more generally persons guided by a responsibility ethics, need to find a balance between caring for others and taking care of your personal needs. The introduction of managerial steering mechanism in welfare organizations may be said to reinvigorate the need to reconsider the question about “good enough care,” not the least in order to prevent stress and low well-being.

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End notes

- ¹ Only musculoskeletal problems are seen as more likely to damage workers' health.
- ² When more than 60% of the employed are women or men, the workplace or workgroup is characterized as female or male dominated (Löfström, 2004).
- ³ The question of how these interpersonal self-values originally are acquired, about the importance of a gender-coded primary socialization or a vocational socialization, is not addressed here.
- ⁴ The author has translated the quotations.