Mastering the alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy: A relational account of practices creating meaningfulness in the Danish child welfare services

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> We have a really great job where we can actually make a difference ... But there are all these rules and regulations, which I think can be useful in a way. You just have to be careful that administrative tasks don't take over and become the only thing we do (Social worker, municipality A).

This quote stems from Fanny, a social worker[1] working with child welfare in a Danish municipality. Fanny finds her job meaningful, since she is able to make a difference. However, she also describes a threat to this meaningfulness in her everyday work: the rules, regulations and administrative work, despite their being useful, i.e. meaningful, "in a way". Hence, the quote captures a tension between a meaningfulness and meaninglessness inherent in street-level work at two levels: at one level, between the core in child welfare service *in itself*, that is the objective purpose of supporting children and families in need, and the everyday practice in child welfare, and secondly at the practice level alone, where administrative tasks can generate meaninglessness but also meaningfulness at work. This dissertation sets out to investigate this tension in order to enhance our knowledge on how meaningfulness at work is created in the everyday practices of social workers working in child welfare services.

Both in the media, public debate, in Fanny's child welfare unit, and in the scholarly literature, any positive perspectives about child welfare services often seem to be overshadowed by the negative stories. Participants in the media and public debate have widely described the pressure on social workers in terms of high caseloads, lack of resources, high levels of demand for documentation and insufficient time for interacting with citizens, with immense consequences for children and their families (Mathiasen, 2022). In her New Year's speech on 1 January 2020, the Danish Prime Minister drew attention to these children and to the insufficiencies of the existing care for them in the public services, including the high level of social worker turnover (Statsministerens nytårstale, 2020). These high turnover rates have far-reaching consequences at several levels. At the organization level, it is costly to recruit and train new employees, and high staff turnover may imply losses in productivity. At the employee level, colleagues may need to absorb an even higher caseload, and this may lead to increased stress, burnout, lower job satisfaction and ulti-

[1] In this dissertation, the term *social worker* denotes frontline workers working in child welfare services with regulatory responsibilities.

mately further turnover (Katz et al., 2022). Very importantly, low work satisfaction and high turnover rates among social workers also have high costs for citizens, vulnerable children, and their families. Lack of continuity may limit social workers' insight into individual family conditions. This may result in poorly based decisions, breakdown in foster care arrangements, and consequently social costs for vulnerable families and loss of faith and trust in the system (Egelund et al., 2010; Webb & Carpenter, 2012). During the work with this dissertation, the labor union for social workers in Denmark ran a campaign named "Time for Social Work", which was initiated on the background of a survey showing that one third of social workers were suffering from stress (for social workers in child welfare with regulatory responsibilities the proportion is two fifths). The campaign called attention to the lack of time for interacting with citizens, for professionalism, and for thoroughness. These three factors encapsulate the core of social work from the perspective of the social workers.

In this dissertation, I focus on the meaningfulness of doing social work within street-level bureaucracy. I argue that in order to understand this issue, we need to understand meaningfulness at work as a *collectively* created meaningfulness, and thus move our focus beyond a sole focus on the experiences of individual social workers. I do so by identifying relational practices that create meaningfulness at work in the everyday of social workers in child welfare. I examine how collective practices influence social workers' work satisfaction, how social workers create meaningful administrative work, and how they balance between being an authority and a helper in interactions with citizens. On this background, I seek to offer an empirically grounded conceptual framework, which I will argue creates a foundation for both practitioners, politicians, and researchers to actively explore under which circumstances these positive mechanisms unfold and thereby to maximize the chance that the meaningfulness inherent in child welfare work also characterizes the work in practice.

Child welfare work can be defined as street-level bureaucratic work. The father of the conceptualization of street-level bureaucracies, Michael Lipsky, defines social workers in child welfare as "the ultimate street-level bureaucrats" in the sense that "they exercise police powers in their mandate to remove endangered children from their homes, but, in the name of supporting the families, are expected to exercise this power as infrequently as possible" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 233). In his groundbreaking work, which the quoted observation is part of, Lipsky (1980) draws attention to the dilemmas of street-level work that crystallize in a gap between ideals and practice in street-level bureaucracies. In relation to this gap, Lipsky, describes an inherent tension between meaningful and meaningless forces in frontline work, more specifically

between advocacy towards citizens and frontline workers' alienation from their work and those citizens. Lipsky states that "street-level bureaucrats' work is alienated work" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 75), which stems from the multiple demands and scarcity of resources characterizing frontline work. In the halo of Lipsky's book, an immense literature has investigated how frontline workers and their organizations cope with the pressures, dilemmas, and alienating forces of frontline work. However, in the second edition of his book, Lipsky himself stresses that the focus on the gap between the realities of practice and service ideals and the scholarly literature emerging on this background has neglected that "work goes on in public service organizations to general satisfaction" (Lipsky, 2010, p. xvii). That is, frontline workers, who find their jobs rewarding and fulfilling do exist, but we know very little about the strategies, dynamics and practices creating such meaningfulness among frontline workers. My argument is that the literature on coping mechanisms is inadequate in enlightening us on such dynamics and practices. My ambition with this dissertation is that we can learn something useful by focusing on fulfilling everyday practices in order to better understand the nature of these practices and thus enhance the chance of developing practice in accordance with such fulfilling, or meaningful, everyday practices.

1.1 Research question and contribution of the dissertation

This dissertation investigates the research question:

> *How is meaningfulness at work created in everyday relational practices among social workers in child welfare services?*

I investigate this research question through ethnographic fieldwork in two Danish child welfare units. Combined with a relational theoretical approach this allows me to provide a thick empirical analysis of the social workers' everyday practices and how these practices might rework and reframe the pressures on and alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy that underpin social workers' experience of work satisfaction and meaningfulness in their daily work.

Much previous literature on meaningfulness has conceived meaningfulness in a static manner, for instance captured in surveys through items such as "the work I do is meaningful to me" (Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2020, p. 119), and foregrounds certain parameters, such as societal meaninglessness/meaningfulness or client meaninglessness/meaningfulness (Tummers, 2013). Such studies have provided valuable insights on both individual and organizational factors influencing meaningfulness as well as on the influence of meaningfulness on outcomes such as productivity and retention of staff

(Allan et al., 2019; Schnell, 2021; Tummers & Knies, 2013). However, such studies do not take the *practices* that create meaningfulness into account. By practices, I mean the everyday routines, the judgmental processes, the deliberations with peers, the mastering of demanding emotional situations, the negotiations of autonomy and discretionary spaces, and the everyday that together constitute street-level bureaucratic work (see also Wagenaar, 2004). The accommodation of such an understanding of street-level bureaucratic work calls for theoretical approaches that understand street-level bureaucratic work *relationally* (Emirbayer, 1997). In a relational approach, meaningfulness at work in street-level bureaucracies is created in the interface between formal rules and regulations, peers, managers, and encounters with citizens – not in static and less related work activities. Practices that create meaningfulness at work could be individual as well as collective. There is a flourishing body of literature calling attention to the importance of collective dynamics – in interactions with peers, managers, and citizens – as these collective perspectives have been shown to encapsulate the real-life work of frontline workers more properly than individual perspectives (see e.g. Gofen, 2014b; Goldman & Foldy, 2015; A.M. Møller, 2021; Nielsen, 2007; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Sandfort, 2000). By using a relational approach to the investigation of practices creating meaningfulness at work in child welfare services, this dissertation takes these insights into account and focuses on the collective practices.

The literature on street-level bureaucracy has drawn attention to several dilemmas and paradoxes of street-level bureaucratic work. Based on my reading and interpretation of this literature, as I will elaborate on in chapter 3 on the theoretical approach, these dilemmas and paradoxes can be compiled into three dilemmas, or alienating forces, that need to be handled to alleviate their threat to the meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare units. These alienating forces are *dehumanization*, *lack of control* with the dynamic and often uproarious lives of vulnerable families as well at the rules and regulatory context, and *the need for prioritization* of the multiple goals, values and accountability relations characterizing child welfare units as street-level bureaucratic organizations.[2] The empirical part of this dissertation extends our existing knowledge on the creation of meaningful street-level bureaucratic work by investigating how social workers in child welfare services deal with these alienating forces. It does so in three self-contained papers that form the background of this dissertation:

[2] See chapter 3 where I outline the theoretical framework underpinning the dissertation, for the in-depth discussion of the literature and compiling of the three alienating forces.

- Paper 1: Karmsteen, K. & Bengtsson, T. T. n.d. Professional Solidarity as the Foundation for Satisfaction among Social Workers in a Danish Child Welfare Agency. Submitted.
- Paper 2: Karmsteen, K. n.d. Meaningful Administrative Work in Street-Level Bureaucracy: A Relationally Based Conceptualization and Empirical Practice Exploration. Invited for revise and resubmit in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*
- Paper 3: Karmsteen, K. n.d. Creating Access to Citizens: How frontline workers balance their regulatory role with the role of helper in interactions with citizens to retain access to vulnerable families. Working paper.

In practice, the three core alienating forces inherent to street-level bureaucratic work are inseparable and mutually constitutive of the pressure on and risk of alienation of social workers. Hence, the meaningfulness-creating practices identified in each of the papers all address a combination of the three alienating forces (see table 1.1 below).

Table 1.1 Overview of focus and findings of papers in the dissertation

Paper	**Alienating force handled**	**Meaningfulness-creating relational practice**
Paper 1	A combination of the emotional pressure and potential dehumanization, the uncertainty and lack of control, and the prioritization time spent on families as well as potentially conflicting roles of being an authority and a helper	*The practice of professional solidarity* constituted by the collective practices of 1) caring, 2) professional recognition, 3) prioritization of closeness with the families, and 4) a positive identification with the local child welfare unit
Paper 2	The lack of control over rules and regulations generating administrative work, and potentially red tape, dehumanization, and the need for prioritizing multiple accountability relations	*The practice of meaningful administrative work* constituted through three functions: 1) gaining, judging, and maintaining knowledge, 2) representing citizen's voices, and 3) protecting social workers from conflict and critique
Paper 3	Dehumanization and the potential conflict between the regulatory role and the role of the helper	*The practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper*: 1) combining the regulatory role with the empathetic advisor 2) walking with the citizen 3) showing oneself as a helper 4) split the position of strict authority and friendly advisor on two persons

Together the three papers and this summary offer an in-depth empirical analysis of the everyday practice among social workers in two Danish child welfare units – an everyday practice that in general is filled with satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction. The ambition of this dissertation is to enlighten the simultaneous existence hereof, but not by measuring the perceptions of frontline workers, which has been the methodological focus of much street-level bureaucratic research (Hupe, 2019a, p. 39). Rather, the methodological focus of this research is practice and how the dilemmas and alienating forces are reworked through relational practices constituting meaningfulness at work. Such relational practices seek to enlighten "the good reasons" (Tyssedal, 2023) to undertake different aspects inherent in street-level bureaucratic work. The three papers that form the background of this dissertation contribute by shedding light on three core practices (see Table 1.1) that are conducive to creating meaningfulness at work among social workers in Danish child welfare units. These three core practices are all constituted by a number of subpractices (in the three papers respectively analyzed as collective practices, functions, and strategies) and belong to three different but closely intertwined work arenas: first, the collegial arena in the backstage of street-level bureaucracy, where I coin a practice of professional solidarity constituted by four collective practices; second, in the administrative arena, where I have identified the practice of meaningful administrative work constituted by three functions of administrative work; and third, in the arena of face-to-face encounters with parents, where I have identified the practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper, constituted by social workers' use of four strategies. These empirically grounded concepts contribute with nuances and complexity to our empirical and theoretical understanding of meaningfulness in child welfare work, and as I will argue, to our theoretical understanding of meaningfulness in street-level bureaucratic work more broadly. On this background the dissertation provides three main contributions, which I unfold and elaborate on in chapter 6 in the discussion and conclusion. First, it shows how social workers, through the identified meaningfulness-creating practices, may not only cope with, i.e. survive, the alienating forces of bureaucracy, but master them. Second, it highlights the collective aspect of how meaningfulness at work is created in the everyday of social workers in child welfare. Third, by coining these meaningfulness-creating practices, the findings of this dissertation will hopefully also contribute to the ongoing discussion of policies and actions taken to support the creation of meaningfulness in the everyday practice of the child welfare services as well as other public service organizations.

Chapter 2:
The Danish child welfare system

In this chapter, I introduce and contextualize the Danish child welfare system and the social workers working in the system. Social workers in child welfare perform one of the most radical tasks of the welfare state. Their duty is to engage with families, the most private and intimate sphere of the citizen, ultimately with the authority to move children away from their parents against the parents' – and quite often also the children's – will. That is, social workers stand in the frontline and deal with some of the most serious decisions of the welfare state. Hence, there is a lot at stake, also emotionally, in child welfare work. In the words of Lipsky, these characteristics make social workers in child welfare "the ultimate street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 233). Accordingly, and following Lipsky, in this type of street-level bureaucratic work, the paradoxes in street-level bureaucratic work are most clear and thus also pose the greatest threat of "alienation" (Lipsky, 2010) in the social workers' work. Hence, apart from being empirically important in itself (as outlined in the Introduction, Chapter 1), social work in child welfare – as I will argue below – also represent a case that other street-level bureaucracies can learn from if they find themselves in contexts where meaningfulness is threatened. To provide a background for understanding and judging the findings that I present in this dissertation, I describe the Danish context of child welfare that frames the specific relational practices of social workers in this national context. First, I describe some overall characteristics of the Danish child welfare system, next I describe the legal framework of the Danish child welfare system, then I present some background factors that characterize the specific group of social workers who work in this system, and finally I reflect on child welfare work as case of street-level bureaucratic work more broadly.

2.1 The Danish child welfare system: a family service oriented system

The Danish child welfare system is rooted in what has been characterized as the "social democratic" welfare state model (Hestbæk et al., 2023). The principle of universal distribution of social benefits is core to this model, where all citizens are guaranteed "a minimum standards of income, livelihood, housing accommodation, and education" (Pösö et al., 2014 citing Eriksen & Loftager, 1996, p. 2). This model is based on the premise of a higher fraction of public social expenditures of GDP than other welfare state models and women are

encouraged to take part in the labor market, since a high level of employment is considered necessary to maintain the welfare state.

The Danish system is described as a family-service-oriented system (Hestbæk et al., 2023). This is ideologically different from the risk-oriented systems, which for instance are found in the US and to some degree the UK, even though all three systems are increasingly implementing elements from each other (Berrick et al., 2017). The family-centered system in Denmark has taken an increasingly child-centric approach with the child's and their family's *need* at the center of assessments and decisions (Hestbæk et al., 2023). Danish social workers are trained to conduct an individual assessment of the needs and rights of each child (Hestbæk, 2011). They are expected to take a cooperative approach to children and their parents by providing family-based services, based on the fundamental expectation "that it is possible to change and improve people's life circumstances, preferences, and behaviors" (Hestbæk et al., 2023, p. 114). As such, Danish social workers are geared towards upholding the right to family-life for both children and their parents, even though recent political and legal developments in Denmark increasingly foreground children's rights to obtain the same possibilities for care, learning, personal development, thriving, health, and an independent adult life. Hence, this right has an increasingly higher priority than the parents right to uphold family-life with their children (Hestbæk et al., 2023).

2.2 Legal and institutional responsibilities

The child welfare system is regulated by the Danish Consolidation Act on Social Services (CASS) (Serviceloven, 2015) and the Consolidation Act on Legal Service and Administration (Retssikkerhedsloven, 2022). The CASS states that *"The purpose of assisting children and young persons with special needs is to provide such children and young persons with the same opportunities for personal development, health and an independent adult life as other children and young persons"* (CASS, Section 46). The responsibility for implementing the objectives for child welfare stipulated by the Act lies with the 98 municipalities in Denmark. The municipal councils have the formal responsibility to choose the measures that are best suited to resolving the problems and needs of a child. The CASS is a so-called framework law, which means that the municipal child welfare units are provided a considerable level of discretion in terms of assessing when special support for children is needed, and which type. The threshold for providing services is low. Danish child welfare is premised on consent, which implies that the authorities provide support to families and children who freely accept it, and most in-home services are provided in collaboration with families, while approximately three of every four

out-of-home placements of children are carried out with the consent of parents and children. The municipalities also have the statutory authority to take measures without the consent of the families, both regarding in-home services and out-of-home placements, and in 2022 24 pct. of all placements were carried out without the consent of the parents and/or the child (Statistikbanken, 2023).

Apart from the statutory responsibility to choose the methods best suited to the needs of specific children, the economic responsibility for child welfare services also lies in the municipalities. Accordingly, interventions in families are dependent on municipal budgets, which also cover a range of other areas, for instance schools, employment interventions, local roads and cultural services.

2.2.2 Organizational setting

The social workers in the municipal child welfare units work within an increasingly complex organizational system that causes an increasing need for cross-organizational cooperation (Ebsen, 2022). As one actor in this organizational system, the social workers are placed in a complex web of dependency relations characterized by both sequential relationships, which means that the social workers awaits the work of others, and reciprocal relationships characterized by higher degrees of interdependency between the social worker and other organizational entities (O'Toole, 2003). The social workers are continuously in contact with a range of entities including the Danish "Children's Houses" (which deal with cases of abuse on children), the Board of Youth Crime (which deals with cases of serious crime dangerous to others), the Family Law House and Court (family law system with responsibility in cases of conflictual divorces), and the mental healthcare system. The social workers follow "their" citizens in their interactions with these entities, provide case descriptions and documentation, and often have to accommodate assessments of needs described by these entities or decisions made by the Board of Youth Crime.

Within each municipality, the child welfare units are dependent on the municipal child and youth committee in decisions on removing a child from the home without the consent of the parents and the child who has reached the age of 15 years. The local child welfare unit take decisions on bringing cases before the committee. The child welfare unit then prepares the case by compiling documentation for the intervention and puts the case to the committee (Hestbæk et al., 2023). On this background, the child and youth committee takes the final decision. Furthermore, decisions on child welfare made by the municipalities can come under the scrutiny of the National Social Appeals

Board. Parents and children from the age of 12 years can appeal all decisions on child welfare interventions to this board.

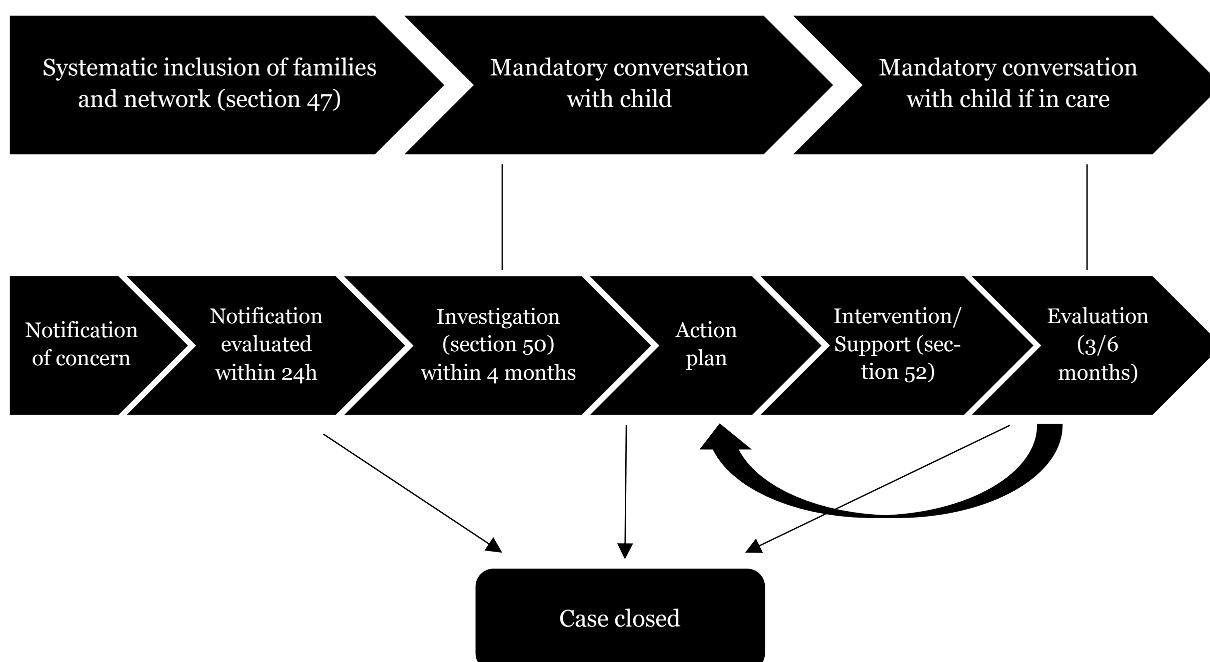
In addition, organizational specialization characterizes the development of the internal organization of the child welfare units (Haack et al., 2018). The units are often divided into the two areas of psychosocial issues and disability issues, and into children teams and youth teams. Moreover, a division between the purchaser and provider of interventions has characterized the field in many municipalities, with the child welfare units in the role of purchaser (Nørrelykke et al., 2011). This division was introduced to ensure transparency about the purpose of an intervention, which provider was best suited to provide this intervention, and the costs of the intervention (Ebsen, 2022). However, in acknowledgement of the challenges of such sharp specialization, the division between purchaser and provider has been softened in recent years.

2.2.1 The casework procedures

In this section, I describe the legislation that guides the casework process in Danish child welfare units, which is a pivotal point for the social workers' everyday practices and for the creation of the meaningfulness I analyze in this dissertation. The legislation on children in need of special support has increased considerably during the last decades (Ebsen, 2022; Hestbæk, 2011), and will continue to do so with the new "Child's Law", which will come into force in October 2023. This is also the case for casework procedures, which are also, "to an increasing extent, the object of legislation and very specific government guidance… [so far] that the governance has now started a debureaucratization process" (Hestbæk, 2011, p. 149).

The development in the legislation on child protection reflects an increasing focus on the involvement of children and children's rights. The child welfare units must have conversations with children before a range of specified decisions are taken (CASS, Section 48). Furthermore, the significance of parental cooperation and participation are recognized throughout the legislation (Hestbæk et al., 2023). In Figure 2.1, I present an overview of the casework procedures. It explicates the casework process in the lower process line and rights for inclusion of the child and its family stated by the CASS. It should be noted that for the sake of giving a brief overview, the figure has a linear and rather simple form. In the child welfare units' practice, the complex and dynamic conditions characterizing the everyday processes of casework are much more iterative and circular.

Figure 2.1 The casework process and inclusion of the child and its family



Source: CASS and inspired by A. M. Møller (2018, p. 78).

The CASS states that the child welfare unit must consider how to include the child, its family and network systematically and it is mandatory to have conversations with the child throughout the casework process. Regarding *notifications of concern*, Denmark has strict legislation on mandatory notification to the relevant child welfare unit in cases of children and families potentially in need of special support. The duty of mandatory notification includes both professionals who hold public office or who provide public services to children and citizens in general. All notifications must be screened by the local child welfare unit within 24 hours to assess whether immediate action is necessary.[3] Many municipalities, including the two that are part of this research project, have established special teams within their child welfare units that register and investigate these notifications. If the unit decides that a child needs support on the background of the initial investigation, the child welfare unit must complete an *investigation* that analyzes the nature of the problems and needs, and if and which intervention should be initiated. The investigation must include the child/young person's: 1) development and behavior, 2) family relationships, 3) school circumstances, 4) health circumstances, 5) leisure time and friendships, and 6) other relevant conditions. The investigation must be

3 All together, the Danish municipalities received 138,000 notifications on 78,200 children in 2021, which means that there is one or more notifications on 6.2 pct. of all children in Denmark.

completed within a timeframe of 4 months, and it must be undertaken as gently as possible, not be more comprehensive than required, and it must insofar as possible be undertaken in cooperation with the parents or custody holder. Furthermore, the child welfare unit must carry out *a conversation with the child* (CASS, Section 50). If the investigation reveals the need for an intervention, the child welfare unit produces an *action plan* before deciding on a specific intervention, which also must be done within 4 months. The action plan must describe the goal of the intervention and how to achieve this goal (CASS, Section 140). The child welfare unit must *evaluate* the intervention and the action plan within 3 months and thereafter every sixth month, insofar as possible in *collaboration with the parents and young persons aged 15* (CASS, Section 70). If a child is placed in care it is mandatory to have a conversation with the child during the evaluation process.

2.3 Characteristics of social workers in Danish child welfare units

In the following section, I describe the core characteristics social workers in Danish child welfare. The social workers have a professional degree in social work (BA, 3½ years). In general, a study from 2012 – to my knowledge the newest – describes that the majority of social workers (82 pct.) are women and come from homes with limited resources and have relatively low levels of economic and academic resources (Harrits & Olesen, 2012). This study moreover shows, that among students studying to be social workers, 96 pct. find consideration of other people's welfare very important. Moreover, only 15 pct. agree with the statement that they have "little respect for people who have problems if those people do not do anything to solve those problems". All social work students (99 pct.) find that it gives them energy to know that they did something good for citizen, while 45 pct. of the students find the consideration of the citizen more important than formal rules. It is also notable that 28 pct. find that "if the citizen is satisfied, the task has been resolved" (Harrits & Olesen, 2012). Hence, the social workers are highly motivated by making a difference for citizens, including citizens with problems who are not willing, or incapable of, solving their problems themselves. At the same time, the Danish social workers tend to be oriented towards their obligations within the welfare system – that is, they are not only agents of the citizen but also of the state (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Similar tendencies has been observed in empirical measurements of social workers public service motivation (Kjeldsen, 2012).

The newest report on the job satisfaction and wellbeing of social workers in Denmark requested by the Danish Social Worker Union shows that 44 pct.

of social workers in child welfare feel stressed most or all of the time. In comparison, the same applies to 31 pct. of the social workers in general and 16 pct. of employees in Denmark in general. The report also shows that in general, social workers in Danish child welfare units are generally relatively inexperienced. A total of 54 pct. of social workers are under 39 years of age, 24 pct. are aged 40-49 and 22 pct. are 50 years or older. Further, 56 pct. have 0-3 years length of service, while 33 pct. have been in service for 4-9 years, and 12 pct. have more than 10 years of service (COWI, 2018). Hence, it seems pertinent to investigate what may support the retention of these social workers. One part in this puzzle may be to focus on what creates meaningfulness in the everyday work of these social workers.

2.4 Child welfare work as a case of street-level bureaucratic work

Defined as "the ultimate street-level bureaucrats" by Lipsky, as noted in the introduction of this chapter, social workers in child welfare represent an extreme case of frontline workers. This has implications for the generalizability of this study's findings to other professions and types of street-level bureaucracies, as I will also reflect upon and discuss in chapter 4 on the methodology and in chapter 5 summarizing the findings and limitations of the dissertation. Representing an extreme case of street-level bureaucratic work, a study of social workers in child welfare is well-suited for understanding the micro-dynamics of creating meaningfulness at work in street-level bureaucracies, since we may expect the basic mechanisms of such practices to be activated in this highly pressured context (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Simultaneously, the pressure on meaningfulness in the everyday of social workers in child welfare may infer that the meaning-creating practices are found here and not in street-level bureaucracies where the pressure on meaningfulness is lower – simply because the need for such practices is lower. Ultimately, it is up to empirical studies on meaningfulness-creating practices in other street-level bureaucratic fields to attempt to answer this question.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework of this dissertation. To do so, I first argue for the importance of meaningfulness at work for creating job satisfaction among social workers, which is crucial for retaining these social workers in their jobs. Second, I introduce the characteristics of street-level bureaucratic work and the multiple dilemmas, paradoxes, and challenges that may threaten the realization of meaningfulness at work in street-level bureaucracies and child welfare units in particular. Third, I discuss how existing literature has investigated how frontline workers deal with the dilemmas and challenges of frontline work through a variety of coping mechanisms and argue that these coping mechanisms potentially enhance the risk of alienation of frontline workers instead of limiting it. On that background, I argue that there is a need for further conceptual development of ways of dealing with the dilemmas of street-level bureaucratic work that create meaningfulness in everyday work practice. Fourth, and finally, in consideration of a flourishing literature that highlights the importance of social dynamics and everyday practices of frontline workers, I argue that a relational theoretical approach is advantageous when taking these social dynamics and everyday processes into account. In doing so, I argue we can develop our knowledge on the creation of meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare and potentially among frontline workers more broadly.

3.1 The quest for meaningful work and meaningfulness at work

The scholarly literature on work motivation increasingly points to the importance of the realization of meaningfulness at work for individual workers (Bailey et al., 2019; Tønnesvang et al., 2023), also within public administration (Tummers & Knies, 2013). In the psychological literature, it is argued that meaning on equal terms with relatedness, competence and autonomy coined in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) – is a basic psychological need (Schnell, 2021). Meaningfulness has further been connected with performance, motivation, job satisfaction, and retention (Allan et al., 2019; Schnell, 2021). In the case of child welfare, low performance and lack of retention has – as mentioned in the introduction (chapter 1) – high consequences for the children in need of support and their families, since low retention of social workers implies many changes of social workers within individual citizens'

cases, which may limit social workers' insight into individual family conditions. This may result in poorly based decisions and consequently social costs for vulnerable families (Egelund et al., 2010; Webb & Carpenter, 2012). Hence, creating meaningfulness at work among social workers is pivotal both to them and to the vulnerable children and families they are employed to support. Thus, experiencing meaningfulness at work is key to the motivation and job satisfaction of social workers in child welfare units.

The term meaningful work has a variety of definitions in the literature (Tyssedal, 2023 see also Martela & Pessi, 2018). Many of these definitions emphasize the individual's quest for meaningfulness, that is, the individual's search for purpose and for understanding the connections between work and these purposes (Laaser, 2022). In contrast, as stated in the Introduction of this dissertation, I investigate meaningfulness at work as a relational practice that refers to the collective. I will unfold the implications of this approach in the section on "A relational account of meaningfulness at work". For the purpose of the argument of this section, I utilize a basic definition of meaningful work that allows for a situational analysis of everyday practice. This definition is as follows: "work is meaningful if there are good reasons to do it" (Tyssedal, 2023). In this respect, doing work that would seem to fulfill the objective for child welfare services stated in the Danish Consolidation Act of Social Services is meaningful: "*to provide [that] children and young persons with the same opportunities for personal development, health and an independent adult life as other children and young persons*" (Section 46 in the Consolidation Act on Social Services, see also chapter 2). However, the literature on street-level bureaucracy (and public organizations more broadly) has shown that there are several dilemmas and challenges inherent in street-level bureaucratic work that often work against the actualization of this purpose in the everyday practices of frontline workers, blur the bond between what the everyday work consists of and the purpose of the work, and thus threaten the experience of meaningfulness in the frontline workers' everyday work practices. In other words, the characteristics of street-level bureaucracies may create a discrepancy between what makes *work in itself meaningful* in such organizations and the opportunities for *meaning at work* (Tyssedal, 2023, p. 5). This, as we shall see, calls for relational practices to create meaningfulness at work.

3.2 Characteristics of street-level bureaucracies

The theory on street-level bureaucracy contains a range of concepts. In this section, I first present the basic elements that define people that work in street-level bureaucracies and the core implications of these basic characteristics. Next, I describe three key dilemmas, or alienating forces, which I, based

on my reading and interpretation of the literature argue are crucial to deal with to create meaningfulness at work among frontline workers in general and social workers in particular.

Frontline workers working in street-level bureaucracies can be characterized by six key elements: 1) they do their work while in public service, 2) they work at the bottom of organizational hierarchies, 3) they interact directly with citizens, 4) they have had training to perform the specific tasks they are working with, 5) it is not possible to regulate their work in detail, and 6) they work under circumstances of limited resources that are prioritized by their political principals (Hupe, 2019b, p. 6; Hupe et al., 2016, p. 16). These characteristic elements of street-level bureaucracy capture a broad range of factors that vary dependent on the specific street-level contexts. Work in public service can broadly speaking be divided into two categories of tasks: public regulation and public service delivery[4] (Hupe & Buffat, 2014). Interactions with citizens can be episodic or prolonged (Gofen et al., 2019). The level of education and the required professional background of street-level workers may vary considerably between different types of street-level bureaucracies (Hupe et al., 2016). Likewise the level of regulatory detail may vary and determine more or less paper work, just as the level of resources for the street-level work varies (Hupe & Buffat, 2014). In combination, the characteristic elements of street-level bureaucracy have multiple implications for frontline workers' everyday practice, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction. These implications are treated in the literature through a variety of concepts that are connected in a variety of ways. It is no easy task to demarcate the specific implications of each characterizing element and to my knowledge such a demarcation has not yet been done, probably because these characterizing elements capture a complex reality that all together have a range of consequences. Thus, we must settle with a more random presentation of the implications of the fundamental elements of street-level bureaucratic work. However, in the following, I do seek to distinguish between on the one hand *implications that logically* follow from the six elements listed above, and which cannot be reworked or changed – for instance the room for discretion – and on the other hand, *practical implications* that capture implications that are dependent on the empirical reality but which could potentially be reworked – for instance the resource gap manifested in a demand for public services exceeding the supply.

[4] Hupe and Buffat (2014) also mentions a third category of task: "public arbitrage". However, they do not explicate what this is, and which types of frontline workers perform this category of work. Since, it does not seem to have implications for this study, I do not include and describe this task here.

A central implication that logically follows from the rules and regulations structuring street-level bureaucracies is that the rules and regulations leave significant room for discretion (Hupe et al., 2016; Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017). Since different types of street-level bureaucracy are structured by different rules or regulations, it follows that in practice there is significant variation in the granted room for discretion between these different types of street-level bureaucracy. As described in chapter 2, the child welfare units in Denmark and the social workers working within them have a considerable level of discretion to assess and judge which children and families are in need of special support and what this support consists of.

Furthermore, it logically follows from the defining elements of working in street-level bureaucracies that frontline workers are part of the policy process, they are "the pin linking state and society" even though they do not define the policies and rules (Hupe, 2019b, p. 7). It is in the bureaucratic encounters that policies take their final form with practical implications for citizens (Hupe, 2019b). In the case of social workers in child welfare this means that they are granted the authority to implement policies and programs that are regulated in the Consolidation Act on Social Services. As such, this Act de facto provides the social workers with the legal opportunity, and responsibility, to help vulnerable children and their families – as well as the opportunity and responsibility to separate children from their parents by force. That is, with this legislation and regulations in their hand, social workers are able to acknowledge citizens', in this case children's, rights and provide them with significant resources (Dubois, 2010, p. 61).

From the interactions with citizens and the authority and discretion granted to them as part of public service, it logically follows that these interactions are characterized by moral and emotional proximity (Hasenfeld, 2010b; A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023; Pors & Schou, 2021). In contrast to policymakers higher in the bureaucratic hierarchy, who may adopt a moral distance to citizens, frontline workers are firsthand witnesses to lives of the citizens they encounter and receive often intimate details on citizens' lives as well as their gratitude and their frustrations (Dubois, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Nisar & Masood, 2020). Hence, to the degree that frontline workers must manage and respond to such feelings in an appropriate manner, they conduct emotional labor (Guy et al., 2008). Further, in practice, the interactions with citizens can be episodic, but are often prolonged and at times close and frequent (Gofen et al., 2019; Harrits, 2016). Social workers in child welfare can be engaged in prolonged and often close and frequent interactions. As described in chapter 2, they often interact with families and children over longer periods, often over years – and they often have rather close interrelations where families may share intimate and sensitive details about their lives

(see paper 3 for specific illustrations). They experience the life situations of some of the most vulnerable children in society as well as the consequences of the assessments, judgements and decisions they undertake, both when the decisions are made in accordance with the wishes and preferences of the children and parents and when they are not. And qua their position as the "guardians" of vulnerable children, their decisions have tremendous consequences, both for the children and their parents. As a consequence, they must often face and handle the frustrations and anger of parents and children, that is, they often must conduct emotional labor.

Finally, a high level of ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty in public organizations logically follows from the key defining elements (Hasenfeld, 2010a; Raaphorst, 2018; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Wagenaar, 2004). Street-level bureaucratic work is guided by multiple bureaucratic values inherent in public services, such as respect, responsiveness, efficiency, fairness, transparency and the rule of law as well as political and societal goals and norms, goals and norms of specific street-level organizations and occupational professional norms and values based on the educational background of the various professions of street-level bureaucrats (du Gay, 2000; Hood, 2007; Schott et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017). Placed in a complex web of accountability relations (Hupe & Hill, 2007), frontline workers need to respond to and take the ensuing goals, values and norms into account. In addition, in practice, policies are often vague and empirical studies have identified a constant tendency to "rule piling". "Rule piling" describes the tendency to policy accumulation at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy – rules create more rules – which results in rules piling up at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy, where the complexity increases (Hupe, 2019b). Simultaneously, placed at the bottom of the policy process, frontline workers have to comprehend and deal with ambiguities, complexities and uncertainties characterizing street-level bureaucracy, since they cannot delegate them any further down (Hupe, 2019b, p. 7 see also Zacka, 2017, p. 25). The distinction between state agency, citizen agency and professional agency, or knowledge agency, captures the practical manifestations of comprehending the complexity (Cecchini & Harrits, 2022; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2022). For social workers in child welfare this manifestation entails among other issues that while working as an advocate of the child, they are obliged to take both policy, bureaucratic, professional, and organizational goals into account, and in line with frontline workers in general, they have to do this in situations often characterized by insufficient resources (Brodkin, 1997; Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 2010) both in terms of resources for specific interventions and in terms of caseload and the amount of time for each citizen, in this case a child and the child's family.

In the following, I outline the dilemmas, paradoxes and pressures that the implications of street-level bureaucratic work described above pose to frontline workers in their everyday work, and to social workers in child welfare in particular.

3.2.1 Negative consequences of the characteristics: threads against meaningfulness at work

One by one, and not least in combination, the characteristics of street-level bureaucratic work have been shown to involve multiple dilemmas, paradoxes, and challenges, which generate pressures and alienating forces, which again may threaten meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare. In his seminal work, Lipsky states that:

> To deliver street-level policy through bureaucracy is to embrace a contradiction. On the on hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditional (Lipsky, 2010, p. 71).

The statement encapsulates three core challenges related to street-level work that, based on my reading and interpretation of the literature, need to be handled to alleviate the threat these challenges pose to the meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare. The three challenges are: dehumanization, lack of control, and need for prioritizing. In the following, I describe these three core challenges and subsequently, based on the literature, I describe how these challenges may threaten meaningfulness at work.

Dehumanization: Even though frontline workers in street-level bureaucracies are not at a moral and emotional distance from citizens in the same way as policymakers and administrative staff employed at higher levels in the bureaucratic organizational hierarchy, there are elements in their work that truncate the human interaction. Lipsky (2010) observed how frontline workers, in order to satisfy bureaucratic purposes, must judge and control clients. This practice is at odds with the expectation of advocacy, or responsiveness to citizens and thus contributes to dehumanization, which Lipsky highlights is particularly relevant for social workers in child welfare. In street-level bureaucracies, including child welfare units, frontline workers continually categorize citizens in accordance with the abstract rules and regulations developed at higher levels in the hierarchy (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Nisar & Masood, 2020). As a consequence of high workloads and requirements of efficiency and specialization in street-level bureaucratic work, interactions between social workers and children and parents tend to take the form of "people

processing" (Lipsky, 2010). That is, the social workers do not see the individual child and family and their life stories and circumstances and thus do not respond holistically thereupon but tend to see them merely as an instance of a general category.

Lack of control: The lack of control is closely related to the different kinds of uncertainty characterizing street-level bureaucratic work and the problem of resources and unpredictable workload. Frontline workers do not control the inflow of either citizens or rules, nor the input, that is the life situations and competences of children and families and the (often vague) content of policies based on a political focus that frames the frontline workers' opportunities both economically and in relation to specific interventions (Lipsky, 2010; Wagenaar, 2004). Regarding the children and families, social workers aim to offer interventions that support and help the children for a limited period of time, until the child's wellbeing is in order. However, in line with other types of frontline workers, the social workers continuously face information, interpretation and action problems (Raaphorst, 2018), resulting in various questions such as: what is going on in the families? How should we assess and judge the knowledge at hand? Which one is the most suitable intervention to offer this child and their parents? And, how do I convince them of the advantageous perspective of this intervention? Further, if and when social workers succeed in offering effective support, these children and families often do not "stay fixed", since many of them have to deal with complex problems and uproarious life situations – situations that are out of the control of the social workers. Regarding the policies, the social workers do not control the rules "piling up" at their level of organization, nor the content of them. Nevertheless, they need to consider and adjust their everyday work in accordance with them regardless of the considerable mismatch that is sometimes created between the practice these rules prescribe and the response required by the lives situations of citizens (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Apart from the emotional strain that the process of responding to this mismatch may infer (Guy et al., 2008), the rules may also turn into "red tape", also defined as unnecessary rules and procedures (Bozeman, 1993). Red tape has been shown to threaten meaningfulness and job satisfaction among social workers in child welfare (Steijn & van der Voet, 2019), because the logic between the rules, including the administrative tasks they often infer, and the purpose of child welfare work is missing (at least in the perception of social workers) – there are no good reasons to undertake this administrative work. On the other hand, green tape – effective organizational rules – has been shown to enhance job satisfaction (Dehart-Davis et al., 2014).

The need for prioritization: The need for prioritization captures the idea that frontline workers have to navigate the multiple, and often conflicting

goals and values characterizing their work in combination with limited resources and an endless stream of citizen encounters (Lipsky, 2010; Schott et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017). Indeed, the need for prioritization is the manifestation of uncertainty in everyday decision-making practice, where the frontline workers have "the freedom to struggle" (Raaphorst, 2018, p. 499) with the insufficient resources and the vague, ambiguous, and often paradoxical nature on street-level bureaucracies. In practice, the need for prioritization encompasses the need to prioritize between citizens (Lipsky, 2010) as well as between equally desirable but sometimes conflicting goals and values (A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023). Among social workers in Danish child welfare, this means for instance that when deciding on a very expensive intervention for one child, there will be de facto less resources for interventions for other children. So, in the decision-making situation, social workers may need to choose between adjusting to their professional norms and the (budgetary) goals of the child welfare unit. Likewise, the caseload forces the prioritization of the time spent on each family – respectfulness and responsiveness versus fairness and efficiency.

The implications of the dehumanization, lack of control, and need for prioritization in street-level bureaucratic work have been shown to place a substantial psychological, emotional pressure on frontline workers, resulting in high amounts of experienced distress (Guy et al., 2008; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013; Schott et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017), and even alienation of frontline workers from their work (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers, 2013). Lipsky (2010) states that "jobs that require workers to deny the basic humanity of others may be considered alienating" (p. 75). The source of this denial of basic humanity, and thus the alienating force is the separation of frontline workers from influence on and control over their work (Lipsky, 2010, p. 75). In his conceptualization of policy alienation, Tummers (2013) slightly challenges this observation. He finds that it is not the lack of influence in itself that contributes to alienation and truncates meaningfulness at work. Instead, Tummers finds that we must pay attention to the (lack of) logic in policies and street-level bureaucratic work tasks as a source of meaningfulness as well as the threats to the experience of meaningfulness at work (Tummers, 2013, p. 146). Thus the sources of the experienced pressures and alienation – the characteristics of street-level bureaucratic work – seem to threaten meaningfulness at work, since they tend to blur the bond between the everyday practice of street-level bureaucratic work and its relation to the many actors the social workers are accountable to – children, parents, the local child welfare unit, the municipality as a whole, state authorities, as well as society in general.

So, how may we expect social workers to respond to these dilemmas and alienating forces? They cope. And, according to the main part of the existing

research, they do not cope in ways that necessarily enhance the experience of meaningfulness at work among social workers, and frontline workers in general, as I will argue in the following section.

3.3 Coping mechanisms as a way of dealing with the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy

An immense literature has investigated how frontline workers deal with the challenges and alienating forces outlined above. Some streams in this literature emphasize self-preserving ways of dealing with the dilemmas and alienating forces (e.g. Brehm & Gates, 1997). Other streams have paid attention to cynical ways of coping with the dilemmas, for instance by rigidly following rules without responding to the needs of individual clients (Guy et al., 2008; Oberfield, 2014). Others have highlighted citizen-serving ways of dealing with alienating forces, also coined by Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2003) as the citizen agent. That is, frontline workers "play" the rules, or go against them, in favor of citizens and may use personal resources to help clients (Dubois, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). In a review, Tummers and his colleagues synthetize the results of this literature into three types of coping behavior during public service delivery: moving towards clients, moving away from clients, and moving against clients (Tummers et al., 2015). If we relate these three types of coping behavior to the three key challenges stemming from the characteristics of street-level work – dehumanization, lack of control and need for prioritizing – both the mechanisms of moving away from and against clients, in this case children and their parents, obviously do not contribute to humanizing the bureaucratic interaction but may rather lead to greater dehumanization. In contrast, the mechanism of moving towards clients may counterbalance the dehumanization and thus contribute greater meaningfulness at work. However, I argue that this may still not be the case.

In his book on moral agency in street-level bureaucracies, Zacka (2017) conceptualizes three corresponding ways of handling the psychological pressure of street-level work,[5] namely the indifferent, the enforcer and the caregiver. Zacka emphasizes that these ways of handling the pressures of bureaucracy are all reductive insofar as they truncate important responsibilities of frontline workers. Hence, from this perspective even though the social worker who takes the role of a "caregiver" and moves towards a child and/or their

[5] Zacka denotes them or "dispositional orientations", which is defined by 1) a way of perceiving the situation, 2) a mode of affective attunement, and 3) a normative sensibility – a particular way of "weighing" factors, which give salience to some considerations over others (Zacka, 2017, p. 85)

parents, maybe thus escaping the people processing and thereby humanizing this interaction, she still fails her responsibilities toward the higher levels in her organizational hierarchy as well as her professional responsibilities toward her peers. That is, a common factor in these coping mechanisms is that they are ways for the *individual* social worker to deal with the dilemmas faced by the social worker at the expense of considerations of the multiple collectives that she is part of. As such these coping mechanisms may be antagonistic to the objective of providing equal opportunities for all children and thus antagonistic to the purpose of work in child welfare services. Consequently, such coping mechanisms may result in accumulating alienation and distress instead of creating meaningfulness at work. In sum, the coping mechanisms enacted during interactions with clients coined in the existing literature do not solve the quest for meaningfulness at work in street-level bureaucracies. Accordingly, we need to focus on what creates meaningfulness at work in this bureaucratic context, and my argument is that such focus requires a relational approach.

The handling of the dilemmas and alienating forces need not be an individual exercise of coping prone to further distress, alienation and meaninglessness. Several studies have emphasized the importance of peer relations and strong communities as a way to deal with the dilemmas of street-level bureaucratic work (Goldman & Foldy, 2015; A. M. Møller, 2021; A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023; Raaphorst, 2018; Schott et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017). For instance, Schott et al (2016) highlight that "what really counts is *not* the levels of pressures, stress, and coping as such, as objective conditions, but how these factors are [...] actively reworked – in specific contexts. [...Frontline workers] might reframe and restrain pressures and thereby perform tasks in a healthy manner" (Schott et al., 2016, p. 603). In the following section, I will elaborate on this perspective and the implications for the investigation and theoretical approach of this study.

3.4 A relational account of meaningfulness in street-level bureaucracies

The street-level bureaucracy literature is increasingly recognizing the importance of social dynamics (Nielsen, 2007; Oberfield, 2014; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Sandfort, 2000). Lipsky touches upon such "relatively supportive communities" as counteracting the alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy, though he highlights that most frontline workers, including those in child welfare, work in isolation (Lipsky, 2010, p. 75f). More recent developments in the literature on street-level bureaucracy understand frontline workers' work and decision-making as a collective practice (Gofen, 2014a; A. M.

Møller, 2021; A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023; Visser & van Hulst, 2023; Wagenaar, 2004). Studies have shown how frontline workers, both tax officials and social workers in child welfare, handle or cope with uncertainties connected with making interpretations and judgements about clients by deliberating with each other (A. M. Møller, 2021; Raaphorst, 2018).

Accommodating such social dynamics and collective practices in the development of street-level bureaucracy calls for a theoretical approach that perceives street-level work as a social practice (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020, p. 50), or in slightly other terms perceives street-level work *relationally* in the interface between formal policies, rules and regulations and bureaucratic encounters where frontline workers, citizens, and technologies come together to make everyday *practices* (Pors & Schou, 2021, p. 157).

The three analyses presented in this dissertation are all inspired by a relational theoretical perspective (Emirbayer, 1997). In this relational perspective, the social workers and their practices of meaningfulness at work, are viewed not as static, or predetermined entities, but rather as dynamically embedded in relations and practices that may shift over time:

> In a relational view, the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. [...] Relational theorists reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pregiven units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis (Emirbayer, 1997: p. 287).

In this perspective, the concept of meaningfulness (at work) is transformed from a concept of substance, or an attribute of the individual, to a concept of relations. Many existing studies on meaningfulness conceive meaningfulness in a static manner and foreground certain parameters, such as passion for social issues or greater work-life balance (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017, p. 595). Instead, Mitra & Buzzanell suggest an approach to investigations of meaningful work that centers the dynamic and relational nature of meaningfulness. For the purpose of this study's investigations of practices that create meaningfulness at work, it means that I do not study the meaningfulness of more or less separated work tasks such as casefiling, citizen encounters, or internal meetings but lending the word to Wagenaar (2004, p. 644) who captures my focus at point, I study "the hundreds of practical judgments, the everyday, taken-for-granted routines and practices, the explicit and tacit knowledge that is brought to bear on concrete situations, the moving about in legal-moral environment of large administrative bureaucracies, the mastering of difficult human-emotional situations, the negotiating of discretionary space, and the interactive give and take with colleagues that, taken together, make up everyday public administration".

To capture specific mechanisms that create meaningfulness at work, I draw on three unique theoretical conceptualizations that all draw on the relational perspective. Paper 1, written in collaboration with Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson, investigates collective practices that create job satisfaction in one of the child welfare units investigated in this dissertation (see Paper 1 for a clarification of this analytical decision). The paper draws inspiration from Durkheim's concept of solidarity to understand how the social workers see themselves as part of a collective whole (Durkheim, 1997 [1933]). In this view, solidarity is not based on individual sentiments that distinguish who is worthy of one's sympathy or care (Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2003). Rather, solidarity is social and embedded in the cohesion between individuals in a society (Durkheim, 1997 [1933]). More specifically, we draw on Durkheim's concept of occupational solidarity. This type of solidarity stems from the functional differences between members of a group, where non can exist without the others even though they carry out different tasks. Accordingly, occupational solidarity is pivotal to the success of organizations since it counters the disintegrative functions of individualism (Hawkins, 1994). We combine this understanding with an approach stressing the collective as an everyday practice. That is, we demonstrate how collective practice is neither determined by the individual social worker, nor by the organizational structures but in "the relationship between specific instances of situated action and the social world in which the action takes place" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). In this way, we seek to contribute to the literature by focusing on the role of the micro-dynamics in creating a practice of professional solidarity constituted by four collective "sub-practices" and on this basis add nuances and complexity to our understanding and conceptualizations of what constitutes meaningfulness.

In paper 2, I study the creation of meaningful administrative work. From a relational perspective administrative work potentially becomes meaningful through the functional roles it plays in the myriad interactions that constitute the everyday work practice of social workers (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). One implication of this approach is that I seek to move beyond the dual conceptualization of work as either meaningful or meaningless, often expressed in the duality between meaningful social work (i.e., interpersonal) and meaningless administrative work, which I also outlined in the Introduction in Chapter 1. Instead, the relational approach allows me to recognize and capture the inherent relationship between the interpersonal and administrative work in the everyday administrative practices, and how this inherent relationship was evident to a practice of meaningful administrative work constituted by three "sub-practices" or functions.

In paper 3, I investigate the social workers' strategies of balancing their regulatory role with the role of the helper in interactions with parents of children in (potential) need of special support. I look specifically at interactions that seem to succeed in the sense that the social workers created or retained access to the parents and their children. In the paper, I seek to understand the social workers' behavior in dynamic interactions with citizens, and thus I turn to symbolic interactionism and the work of Goffman. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how people adapt to the social order of specific situations (Järvinen, 2020; Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2007). Thus, from this perspective, successful interactions are characterized by the social workers and parents reaching consensus on the definition of the family's situation and whether the child and/or parents are in need of special support. In the paper, I draw on several of Goffman's concepts. In order to underpin our understanding of the insights gained from using this theoretical lens, I will highlight two aspects. First, the ritualized order of interactions, which lead social workers and parents to follow a script of the street-level bureaucratic interaction. Since *both* the role of the helper, but also the regulatory role is embedded in the script of such interactions, as we shall see in the paper, this leads the parents to seek out the regulatory role, if the social workers do not explicate it. The other aspect is "face-work" (Goffman, 2008). Face-work is part of the rituals of interaction and according to this concept, the participants in an interaction are in face, when they are "in line" with the social order of the situation. When in face, it follows that the participant feels safe to openly present herself to others (Goffman, 2008, p. 8). Hence, by supporting the parents in keeping face during interactions social workers make them (more) comfortable with sharing intimate knowledge about their daily lives and thus permitting access to the backstage of their family life. In this way, the core practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper, with its four ”sub-practices”, or strategies, identified in the paper represent micro-mechanisms of dealing with the uncertainty characterizing street-level bureaucratic work as well as the lack of control following from this uncertainty.

Together these three core practices – and the ”sub-practices” they are constituted by – contribute to creating meaningfulness at work in the everyday practices of social workers working in child welfare by supporting the social workers in mastering the alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work. The practices create meaningfulness at work by handling different combinations and aspects of the alienating forces highlighted in this chapter. The first practice of professional solidarity contributes to mastering the emotional pressure and potential dehumanization, the lack of control, and the need for prioritization of the time spent on families (paper 1). The second practice of meaningful administrative work contributes to mastering the lack of control

over rules and regulations generating administrative work, the risk of dehumanization, and the need for prioritizing the multiple accountability relations characterizing the social workers' work (paper 2). The third practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper contributes to mastering the risk of dehumanization and the potential conflict between controlling and helping citizens (paper 3).

Chapter 4: Methodology – studying relational practices

In this chapter, I introduce the methodology and methods underpinning this study. The relational theoretical approach guiding this dissertation has methodological implications. Since I seek to capture the creation of meaningfulness at work as an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted in everyday practice (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1243) – rather than capturing the individual social worker's perception of meaningful work – I need a methodological approach that allows me as a researcher to study these everyday practices in a way that makes me sensitive to how meaningfulness is socially and collectively created in these everyday practices. For this purpose, I draw on an interpretive account using administrative ethnography (Rhodes, 2014). This approach allows me to clarify what is going on in the complex realties of social workers working in street-level bureaucracies and to draw some conclusions about work meaningfulness in this context. Systematism and an attitude of doubt are fundamental to interpretivist research accounts as it is for variance-based research approaches (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, p. 17). However, the ways of using such systematism and doubt are different from variance-based approaches, as are the criteria for judging the quality of interpretivist studies (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The quality of an interpretive research study rests on the *trustworthiness* of the account presented by the researcher – this trustworthiness criterion corresponds to the quality criteria of "validity" and "reliability" in variance-based studies (Schwartz-Shea, 2015). The core aim of this chapter is to transparently lay out to the reader how I have engaged with ensuring such trustworthiness by providing a *reflexive* account of meaningfulness-creating practices among social workers in child welfare where I use *thick descriptions* and *triangulation* as the primary research criteria. Moreover, I engage with the potential generalizability of the study (Maxwell, 1992). As I reflected on in chapter 2 on the context of Danish child welfare services, this field represents an extreme case of street-level bureaucratic work. In this chapter, I lay out how I have sought to enhance the generalizability of this study to other child welfare units – that is, the chance that the meaning-creating practices are transferable to other contexts. In the following, I first argue for the choice of local child welfare units as research sites, and then introduce the reader to the units and the participating social workers. Secondly, I describe the ethnographic fieldwork and the interviews. Thirdly, I describe the ethical considerations related to conducting observations and interviews in the context of child welfare services, and finally,

I present some overall reflections on the analytical strategy that resulted in the analyses of the three papers presented in this dissertation.

4.1 Choosing local sites of practice – a process of casing

This PhD study is motivated by an interest in understanding the high levels of turnover among social workers in child welfare services and how we may possibly lower the level of turnover. As I initiated the project, I set out to understand how the introduction of more resources in terms of allowing social workers a lower caseload and more time with the families could affect professional meaningfulness and turnover among social workers. In the Danish context, a number of municipalities had introduced changes to the organization of their child welfare units, which among other things included a reduction in the caseload. These changes provided me with a useful setting to explore the influences of such a reduction in the public service gap (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 2010) that characterizes this particular street-level bureaucratic area. Originally, my idea was to conduct a comparative case study using a most similar systems design (Lijphart, 1971; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Hence, I chose two municipalities that differed regarding caseloads, but which were otherwise similar on theoretically relevant parameters. During the fieldwork and the analytical process two insights made me redesign and change focus. The first (and retrospectively not very surprisingly) insight was that the reality was much more complex than a most similar systems design could account for and thus it seemed impossible to isolate the independent variable of interest (caseload) and contribute with valid results. Secondly, and just as importantly, the empirical reality and the similarities I identified in the two child welfare units *despite* the differences between the two child welfare units, including the differences in level of satisfaction (I elaborate below in the section on "differences between the two child welfare units"), seemed more pertinent to investigate from both a scholarly and a practice perspective than the confirmation of the hypothesis that lower caseload and spending more time with the families enhances professional meaningfulness and satisfaction and decreases turnover. This change of focus allowed me to clarify the deeper nature of meaningfulness at work and thus – as mentioned in the Introduction – establish a nuanced foundation for understanding and investigating the connections between lower caseload, the spending of time with the families and professional meaningfulness and turnover in future studies.

In the process of figuring out how to best capture these similarities and embrace the changes to the research goal and question they inferred, I adjusted how I cased the child welfare units (Soss, 2021). Hence, instead of treating the two child welfare units as a case of high and low caseload, I started

treating both of them – and more specifically the social actions making up the everyday work practices of these child welfare units – as a case of "creating meaningfulness at work through relational practices", as I discovered a core of meaningfulness at work in both child welfare units. In this respect, the variation between the two child welfare units gave me an opportunity to investigate these relational meaningfulness-creating practices in contexts that reflect the breadth of variance in child welfare units in Denmark. Apart from providing one way of triangulating the data, this variance between the two child welfare units provides a way to maximize the amount of information on the creation of meaningfulness at work. Further, the two units provide more nuances to the analyses and thus enhance the grounds for analytical and theoretical generalizations. A single study can be cased in various ways for different purposes (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Soss, 2021). As Soss (2021, p. 23) notes "each casing allows the researcher to put the study into dialogue with a different set of empirical phenomena [...] and new terms of relational, professional, and comparative analysis". Accordingly, as we will see in the three papers, I treat the child welfare units in different ways in each paper – that is, an extreme case of job satisfaction (only child welfare unit B) in paper one, an extreme case of mastering administrative work while being committed to helping vulnerable citizens in paper two, and an extreme case of gaining and maintaining access to citizens in paper three. This is also another way of triangulating (Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

4.1.2 Introducing the two child welfare units

In the following, I introduce the two municipal child protection units and their structural and organizational similarities and differences. First, I outline some general characteristics of the two municipalities. Secondly, I describe the changes within each municipality within the last 5 years prior to the fieldwork.

The child welfare units are both placed in what in a Danish context can be defined as middle-sized municipalities. The municipality of child welfare unit A has approximately 50,000 inhabitants and the municipality of child welfare unit B has approximately 70,000 inhabitants. Overall the two municipalities have relatively sound finances compared to Danish municipalities on average[6] (Houlberg et al., 2017). Looking at the child welfare area in specific both mu-

[6] The fiscal pressure – an estimate of expenditure needs relative to the tax base – was 83 in municipality A and 79 in municipality B (average for the whole country=100, the lower, the better).

nicipalities have moderate expenditure needs compared to Danish municipalities on average.[7] Both municipalities' child welfare units are organized in a similar manner: each has a reception team consisting of social workers that receive notifications on families and assess if the notification calls for further investigation by a social worker in another team. In addition to the reception teams both units have two social teams and one specialized team. In the social teams, the social workers investigate and counsel families and children with social challenges. The social teams deal with children until age 15 and all children and young people placed in care until age 18. The specialized teams investigate and counsel families with children who are physically or mentally disabled. Both units are managed by a center manager, managing the child welfare unit along with other municipal units. The management team of child welfare unit A comprises one head manager who has overall strategic and personnel management responsibility and two specialist managers with the daily responsibility for sparring with and supervising the social workers. The management team of child welfare unit B comprises a manager who has overall strategic responsibility and four team managers, one for the reception team, one for each of the two social teams and one for the specialized team. All the team managers are both responsible for specialist sparring and supervision as well as personnel management in their team.

Differences between the two child welfare units

In child welfare unit A, the social workers have between 30-38 cases each. The unit is characterized by a relatively long period of continuity, both at an organizational and management level. While the general manager covering the general child welfare service area had recently retired, the child welfare unit has had the same manager for more 15 years. At the organizational level a Youth Center had recently been introduced, which focused on supporting vulnerable adolescents' education and job opportunities (adolescents placed in out-of-home care were still attached to the child welfare unit). This reorganization was decided politically, with resistance from all levels in the child welfare unit, including social workers, managers and specialist managers who argued against the decision. It was my impression from the fieldwork that the reorganization did not take up much time and talk among the social workers as I carried out my fieldwork. However, in general, the social workers in child welfare unit A expressed experiences of high work pressure and dissatisfaction

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[7] The estimated expenditure needs per 0-22 year old for children and young people with special needs were 98 in municipality A and 95 in municipality B (average for the whole country=100, the lower, the better).

with (too much) focus on administrative work that left too little time for interpersonal work with the families and children.

In child welfare unit B, the social workers have between 21-28 cases each. This caseload is in line with a political decision taken some years before the period of my fieldwork on lowering the caseload from 40 cases to around 20-25 cases. Along with this and some data-oriented changes, the child welfare unit was participating in a “free municipality” project targeted at enhancing debureaucratization. This meant that the child welfare unit was excepted from selected legal regulations. Most importantly, the “Section 50 investigation” (see also Chapter 2) was replaced with the obligation to make a “clarification report”, which is a shorter document (than the report for the Section 50 investigation) focusing on the issues the social worker assesses to be of relevance to the family instead of those stipulated in a relatively detailed manner in the Consolidation Act on Social Services (Serviceloven, 2015). Despite these changes, prior to the period of my fieldwork, the unit had experienced serious challenges regarding both budget deficits and low satisfaction among employees, which manifested itself in both high turnover rates, a high level of employees on work-related sick leave, and bad ratings in employee satisfaction measurements. In order to respond to these challenges, the center manager had replaced the specialist managers of the child welfare unit and established the reception team. In general the social workers in this child welfare unit expressed satisfaction.

The shadowed social workers

I shadowed nine social workers from these two child welfare units, four from child welfare unit A and five from child welfare unit B. They were primarily women and all had a professional degree in social work (see also chapter 2). Among the nine shadowed social workers, two had under 3 years of experience, five had 3 to 10 years of experience and two social workers had more than 10 years of experience. Apart from shadowing nine social workers during field work, including observations of face-to-face interactions with citizens, I carried out interviews with social workers, managers, and parents. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the data generated from the two child welfare units.

Table 4.1 Overview of generated data from fieldwork activities

Type of data	Child welfare unit A	Child welfare unit B
Shadowing, during everyday practice: including internal meetings, encounters with citizens, lunch/coffee/cake breaks, transportation time, and time at the desk	4 caseworkers from the social area for 3-4 days each	5 caseworkers for 3-4 days each
Observed face-to-face interactions with parents and children	13 meetings with parents (two of them includes their child)	13 meetings with parents (four of them includes their child)
	2 meetings with children	4 meetings with children
	10 phone calls with parents	8 phone calls with parents
Interviews with caseworkers	10	13
Interviews with managers	2 specialist managers	2 specialist managers
	1 manager	1 manager
		1 center manager

4.2 Ethnographic fieldwork

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over the course of 4 months from August to December 2019. In the following sections, I describe how I entered the field and the ongoing process of consent. Furthermore, I outline how I conducted participant observations among the social workers, using the observation technique *shadowing* (Czarniawska, 2007).

4.2.1 Entering the field and obtaining consent

It was easier than are expected to get access to the child welfare services. Prior to my fieldwork in the two municipalities, I had contacted another child welfare unit that declined my request due their lack of resources. The access to both child welfare units was provided through the managerial level, which I initially contacted by e-mail. In both cases the managers showed positive interest and invited me to a meeting where I elaborated on the project and what it would require of them, the social workers and the families if they were to participate. On this background they agreed to participate. As the managerial level in the two municipalities had allowed me to conduct fieldwork in their child welfare units, the next step was to gain access to social workers who would let me shadow them throughout a week. In municipality A, I was invited to come to an internal meeting where I could present myself, the project, and the implications for the social workers of volunteering to be observed. Afterwards, I sent an information letter summarizing the information. On this background, four social workers volunteered for participant observations, two

from each of the two social teams in the unit. We initially organized which of the volunteers I should start my observations with, and in the first week of my fieldwork there, we arranged the order of my observations of the remaining three social workers. In municipality B, the manager circulated the information letter and five social workers volunteered to participate – two from the reception team, two from one of the two social teams and one from the specialized team. I was invited to arrange the order of the observations of each of the social workers and introduce myself to them. The ordering of observations in both municipalities was primarily based on pragmatism and fitting in with participants' schedules.

During fieldwork, gaining access and obtaining content is not a one-time event but must be maintained and reconfirmed throughout the process and may develop and change over time (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). As I wanted to observe, or shadow, the social workers throughout their everyday practice, this included the hours they spent in the office, as well as in interactions with citizens – both parents and children. Hence, I continuously needed to obtain access to these interactions and consent from those citizens. First, I made it clear to the social workers that they decided whether they wanted to bring me to specific meetings during a week or not. As such they were the gatekeepers. In most instances, the social workers allowed me to participate. However, there were also a few instances where the social workers did not allow me to participate. In one case, a social worker assessed a child and her interpersonal relation with the child to be too vulnerable for her to bring yet another adult stranger to the meeting. In two other cases, two different social workers assessed that they had too much at play in interactions with a specific parent to bring me to the meeting. That is, they had not established a cooperative interrelation, they wanted to secure the parent's cooperation on a specific and difficult situation and wanted to ensure that I did not disturb the fragile interrelation. Afterwards one of the social workers regretted that I had not participated in the meeting, since in her words "it was good social work". Thus, her consent in this situation also depended on the impression she wanted to give to me. These two high-stake situations in interactions with parents would have been highly relevant to especially my interpretations in paper three on how the social workers balance between authority and helper to create cooperation and gain access to the families. However, from the social workers' descriptions of these situations, it has been possible to use them as a way to reflect upon and interpret strategies in the remaining interactions that I did observe.

In the instances where the social workers allowed me to participate in a citizen encounter, the parent and children's consent were of course crucial. Typically, the social workers called the parents in advance of a meeting to ask

if it was okay for them to bring "a researcher". They explained that I was primarily observing the social workers. If the parents agreed to let me participate in their meeting, I introduced myself, reconfirmed their consent and requested their consent to let me audio record the meetings. Finally, at the end of the meeting I presented a consent form, which they signed, gave them a document containing information about me and the project and told them that it was always okay for them to withdraw their consent. I had one information letter for parents and one for children. No one withdrew their consent.

4.2.2 Participant observations: shadowing and building research relationships

Child welfare work involves, as mentioned in the above, multiple aspects, with social workers for example fluently moving from sitting behind their desk making judgements, to internal meetings, to informal deliberations in the hallways, to walking to the coffee machine chit chatting, to lunch breaks, to interactions with citizens over e-mail, telephone, and physical meetings both in the child protection services' rooms and in citizens' own homes, or at schools (Wagenaar, 2004, p. 644). I conducted fieldwork in one child welfare unit at a time, first child welfare unit B and then unit A. I used shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) as the main strategy to conduct participant observations, which allowed me to capture how social workers fluently moved between these different aspects of their work in their daily practice. When shadowing, I generally attempted to stay as much in the background as possible. For instance, sitting behind the desk, I placed myself on a chair at an angle behind the social worker and mainly kept silent and only a few times took the opportunity to ask questions about their work. When I did so, the social workers willingly answered and explained their practice and also shared frustrations. From an interpretivist perspective this is not a problem. Whereas in a positivist perspective data are naturally occurring substances that need to be collected, in an interpretivist research approach, data are intentionally generated with the purpose of the specific study in mind (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). As Schwarts-Shea & Yanow note "from an epistemological perspective, the interpretive researcher is trying to understand things, events, and so on from the perspective of everyday actors in the situation" (2013, p. 80). Hence, these direct interactions and clarifications were pivotal in assessing the research goal of gaining a closer understanding of the relational practices that created meaningfulness during these everyday situations. During my fieldwork in both child welfare units, I simultaneously experienced another "benefit" or even necessity of asking such questions and interacting with the social work-

ers, namely in respect of building trust and relationships with the social workers, which is an important element in shadowing. I will elaborate on this in the following.

Trust building and relation building are important issues since they are pivotal to the continuous access to the field (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016) – which is for instance demonstrated in my fieldwork in the continuous process of gaining access to new meetings with citizens, as explained above. This process included gaining access to new social workers as I shifted to shadowing yet another social worker whom I sensed had talked with the previous social workers about bringing me around. Building rapport and trust is moreover core to social workers' sharing of information, experiences, and feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. I experienced that the establishment of such trust and relationships developed rather naturally and fast within a few hours or a day of shadowing each of the nine social workers. It is my impression that the social workers could relate to me. For instance, when I entered child welfare unit B the first time and walked through an office shaking hands with some of the social workers, one of them asked if I was the new social worker starting there. In both units I experienced a relaxed and rather natural atmosphere around my presence. Simultaneously, it was also clear that the social workers were continuously aware of my presence. For instance, they were curious about what I noted down in my notebook and one told me that she became more aware of what she was doing as she sat behind her desk documenting a child conversation and noticed me scribbling down on my computer. The social workers' curiosity in my work and thoughts simultaneously made it natural to continuously inform myself on their perspectives on my observations (a form of "member-checking" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013)) – not with the goal of taking over their understanding but to grasp the often complex discussions and the situations preceding my observations. Moreover, some social workers became more effective; as a manager jokingly said at an internal unit meeting "Edith has never been as effective as when Kirstine sat beside her". Simultaneously, more of the social workers stressed that it was easy to bring me along because I was "modest and nice". My perception is that in general they were aware of my presence, but as they became absorbed by their work at their desks or in meetings, they forgot my presence.

The use of the words "modest and nice" also signifies what I interpret as a sympathy towards me – a sympathy which was reciprocal. This hinges on what I found to be taxing during the fieldwork – the balancing of my role as a "silent", observing researcher and an "acquaintance" spending hour upon hour with each of the nine social workers including lunch breaks, coffee breaks, and transportation time of up till three hours a day sitting side by side in a car, bicycling, or walking next to each other. Taking a relational perspective on the

process of gaining access, the access to research participants is "*a fluid relationship between researcher and research participants characterized by integrity, trust and mutuality"* (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016, p. 541). This hinges on the relational dimension of doing fieldwork. That is, in a situation where the social workers shared endless streams of practice, knowledge, experiences and feelings with me it would be both unnatural, unethical, and unproductive if I stayed silent, and did not ask curious questions or shared nothing of who I am, at least as a researcher. I experienced this difficulty at several levels. For instance, every day while in the field I went to lunch along with the social worker whom I was shadowing. In this situation, I often found myself considering whether, how, and how much I should take part in the conversations, especially those more informal or even personal. It seemed strange to remain silent. At the same time, I also felt that everybody stopped talking and looked at me when I started talking. It was like "Oh, the researcher is talking! What is she saying?" In the many one-to-one conversations I had with the social workers while shadowing them, I naturally shared things both about my professional life, my knowledge on child welfare in general and impressions from specific citizen meetings as well as more personal things. And I more than once experienced that becoming a person and not just a researcher deepened the conversations and the information that social workers shared with me. I was aware of this issue from early on in the fieldwork, and reflected upon it both while shadowing and afterwards during the analytical process in order to support my integrity by simultaneously respecting the sympathetic interrelation in which information was shared, while keeping or reconstituting a critical distance.

While shadowing, I wrote field notes. My note-taking was directed by three observational foci: expressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; what the social workers spent their time on; and cooperation in encounters with citizens. It was rather easy to take notes in the child welfare units. Initially, I used a little pocket-sized notebook, which I used to jot down my observations throughout the day. However, I quickly experienced that the social workers wondered about my use of the notebook instead of a computer. Hence, I quickly started take notes on my computer in most situations, that is, during shadowing social workers working at their desks and at internal meetings. When shadowing citizen encounters, I decided to mirror the social workers and took notes on my computer when they used a computer or Ipad. I ended up having the notebook in my pocket, ready to use if I observed something notable as we were walking along, as well as during citizen encounters where the social worker did not bring a computer. The use of my computer allowed me to document conversations almost verbatim (I used quotation marks to

mark which statements were verbatim quotes, and which were my summarizing of what was said). The notes from conversations were supplemented by notes on physical setting, practices and behaviors (e.g., laying an arm on a shoulder), and non-verbal communication (e.g., facial expressions and body language). At the end of the day, I checked field notes and expanded on the jottings taken both on the computer and in my notebook. Furthermore, I added an overview of the day. In a separate document, I noted down my own responses and reflections on different situations and experiences (Emerson et al., 2011), including questions I wanted to follow up on or initial analytical reflections.

4.3 Interviews with social workers and managers

I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with social workers and seven interviews with managers at different levels. The interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were all conducted at the end of or after the fieldwork in each of the child welfare units. This allowed me to ask questions about specific observations I had made and reflections I had had during the shadowing.

I interviewed all nine shadowed social workers. In addition, in order to include different perspectives on my research question, I also prioritized including social workers with different years of experience, and from different offices and different floors in the child welfare units. I recruited social workers for additional interviews as I met them at the coffee machine or at lunch, often as they showed interest in the project, I knocked at some doors, and finally I recruited some by email. The interviews with social workers focused on four themes: 1) the content of their work and their identity as social workers 2) their ideal role and their role in practice, 3) their interactions with children and their parents, and 4) the organization and management of the local unit. I asked questions openly guided by an interview guide.[8] As I was particularly interested in what the social workers spent their time on in their everyday practice and the satisfaction and dissatisfaction they attached to this practice, I probed and followed their reflections on such issues. The interviews with managers were primarily conducted as background interviews and I focused on three themes: the development in the child welfare unit in recent years, the influence of structures and political currents, as well the managers' ambitions and ideals for the child welfare unit.[9] This deepened my understanding of the two units and the strategic basis for and intention of some of the specific practices that I had observed.

[8] See appendix A1.
[9] See appendix A2.

4.4 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in a setting where vulnerable children and their parents share intimate and private details on their lives. This called for particular ethical considerations. During the research process, I have been concerned with two ethical issues: consent and confidentiality. As described in the section on “entering the field and obtaining consent”, I took several steps to ensure and reconfirm the consent from parents and children as I shadowed social workers during these encounters. In terms of confidentiality, I ensured that I never jotted down the full names of children and parents and preferably only used the initial letter of a name. In the three papers, all names of both social workers and parents are pseudonyms, and I have left out the names of the municipalities due to these ethical considerations. Moreover, all data are stored according to the guidelines set by the Danish Data Protection Agency.

At points, however, the confidentiality was challenged. In one situation during my fieldwork, a social worker and I heard a parent threatening to do serious harm to their partner. As the social worker reported the threats to the police, I was contacted by the police. In this situation my role changed from researcher to a witness in juridical terms and I was forced to hand over the audio recording the parent had consented to let me take and to witness against him in court. Apart from the confidentiality issues this clearly pertains to, it also signifies a general emotional challenge to the researcher connected with conducting fieldwork in an environment filled with heartbreaking stories, which may also have influenced my processing and interpretation of the data. I may have had an implicit motivation to contribute with results that could somehow develop the child welfare services (as a reaction to a feeling that the results of this research might only have a minimal positive impact on families served by child welfare services).

4.5 Analytical process

In this section, I briefly describe the initial analytical strategy that led to the choice of the analytical foci of the three papers. Initially, I did an open reading of the field notes and interviews with social workers (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) to discover elements within the everyday work that the social workers associated with dissatisfaction and satisfaction. The initial reading of the material resulted in a number of subthemes, including citizen contact, bureaucracy/administrative work, colleague interactions, organization, management, resources, and the social workers’ personae (identity and role). Reading through the data on these themes and making displays summarizing components that induced meaningfulness and meaninglessness, I noticed a tense relationship between the social workers and the different aspects of their work,

which all simultaneously induced satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the social workers. In line with my commitment to provide trustworthiness, I grabbled with these conflictual findings (Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p. 133f) in order to comprehend their consequences for my understanding of the creation of meaningfulness at work. As three of the subthemes captured the social workers' everyday work practices, I decided to analyze these themes in-depth, while the remaining themes have more implicitly played into each of the three analyses, as I will discuss in chapter 6.

In this chapter I have attempted to transparently present the origin of this dissertation: the research process, how I generated data, and the analytical choices I made. In order to provide trustworthiness, I have aimed at providing reflections throughout the research process on my positionality and interaction with the field, and on the interpretations and analytical findings. Triangulation and critically engaging with findings that did not "fit" were central to this work. Judging whether I have reached these goals is not up to me to decide. In order to enhance the possibilities for generalizing the results, I aimed at choosing local research sights that reflect the breadth of variance in child welfare units in Denmark. In chapter 5 when summarizing the findings, I will critically reflect upon the generalizability of the findings and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 5: Central findings

In this chapter, I unfold the central findings of the dissertation and explain how they contribute to answering the research question that guides the dissertation: *How is meaningfulness at work created in everyday relational practices among social workers in child welfare services?*

As I mentioned in the introduction to the summary (chapter 1), this dissertation sheds light on three core practices – each constituted by a number of ”sub-practices” – that are conducive to creating meaningfulness at work among social workers in Danish child welfare services. The first core practice, which is addressed in Paper 1, encapsulates “professional solidarity” as a prerequisite for creating work satisfaction among social workers in a Danish child welfare unit. The second core practice, which is the focus of paper 2, addresses the often highly contested administrative part of street-level bureaucratic work in a child welfare unit. It concerns the way administrative work constitutes meaningful functions in the everyday work practice of the social workers. The third core practice, which is addressed in paper 3, encapsulates how social workers in Danish child welfare units balance their regulatory role with the role of the helper to gain and retain access to children and their families.

5.1 Practice one: Professional solidarity

During my fieldwork, I identified an example of particularly high work satisfaction in one of the municipalities, municipality B. In paper 1, in collaboration with Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson, I sought to understand the practices that created work satisfaction in municipality B. I saw some of the tendencies in municipality A as well, however, the satisfaction was more blurred and even contested here and hence the micro-dynamics of job satisfaction were not as distinct as in municipality B, for which reason we chose to investigate the practices of job satisfaction in municipality B.

We identify four collective ”sub-practices” contributing to professional solidarity in paper 1. First, a collective practice of caring for co-workers. Second, a collective practice of recognition. Third, a collective practice of closeness with the families, and fourth, a collective practice of a positive identification with the local child welfare agency. These four practices all contributed to a professional solidarity. When present, this professional solidarity ensures the social functioning of the child welfare unit and contributes to creating a stability and a feeling of having each other’s backs that the social workers rely on in their everyday work – which we recall is characterized by the potential

challenges of dehumanization, lack of control, and the need for prioritization (as I have outlined in chapter 3).

The collective practice of caring for co-workers encapsulates different ways in which the social workers use different ways of caring for each other to handle the emotional pressure, the uncertainty, and the lack of control with both the life situations of the children and young persons they engage with and the pace of their work. This practice took place across different settings and situations, both formal and informal, and across different constellations of social workers and managers. It included social workers following up on co-workers on a day-to-day basis, when they for instance experienced emotionally demanding interactions with a child or parent. Moreover, the social workers, and their managers, were observed to ensure that colleagues were shielded from new cases if they were already highly busy or showed signs of being distressed. Moreover, the collective practice of caring for each other was expressed in the use of humor, including gallows humor. Both the social workers and their managers at several levels described the importance of humor in the everyday work practice as a way to handle and let go of emotionally demanding situations, both situations where they experienced anger and frustrations from children, young persons and parents, as well as concrete experiences with the neglect of children and their ways of handling their situations. In sum, the collective practice of caring created a relational interdependence among the social worker in the child welfare unit that supported the individual social worker in their daily work.

The second **collective practice of professional recognition** encapsulates a way of handling the issues related to the multiple professional and bureaucratic values, the multiple accountability relations and the resulting need for prioritization that have to be taken into account in the social workers' discretionary practice. This practice was especially evident in cases of disagreement between social workers and management on how to assess specific cases in terms of which intervention to choose. As such, it is a way to handle and come to terms with divergent prioritization of bureaucratic and professional norms and considerations. Furthermore, the practice of professional recognition was manifested in professional deliberations with professionally satisfying discussions and feedback on how to approach children and parents as well how to assess and judge the information at hand. This practice was connected with sharing the same professional background. It was important because it supported a collective knowledge base, which did not need to be negotiated and thus reduced some of the potential complexity and value conflicts. Thus, both the ongoing professional recognition in everyday deliberations and appreciation and underpinning of a shared professional background

is pivotal to creating professional solidarity as a prerequisite for a work environment where the social workers feel safe to share their doubts, concerns and disagreements in a positive expectation of being met in a professional respectful and satisfying way.

The third collective practice of **closeness with the families** encapsulates the accommodation of this key professional norm in social work into the bureaucratic organization of the child welfare unit as a way to enhance the quality of the service provided to the families. Hence, this collective practice bolsters one of the key occupational professional norms of the social workers and thus creates a closer connection between the everyday work practice of the social workers and the overall goal of their work (and thus supports meaningfulness at work). However, this practice also carries the risk of increasing the emotionally challenging aspects of the work, and thus can undermine the professional solidarity if the dimensions of caring and professional recognition are missing.

The fourth **collective practice of positive identification with the local child welfare unit** encapsulates the social workers' strong positive identification with their specific unit. It was manifested through a narrative practice in the child welfare unit that created a strong "we" that viewed the unit as a "first mover" and aimed at becoming the best child welfare unit in the country. The narrative practice connected the everyday practice in the unit with a high service level. For instance, one of the social workers highlighted how the values of "decency" and "timeliness" in interactions with clients are not just her own professional goals but a collective point of reference for the group including both social workers and the managerial levels. This "we" underpinned a strong sense of community in the unit. This shows that the creation of community is essential for a professional solidarity that underpins the social workers in their daily work practice.

5.2 Practice two: Meaningful administrative work in street-level bureaucracy

This practice pertains to the meaningfulness related to a specific, severely criticized task of the everyday work in a child welfare unit, namely administrative work that stems from bureaucratic rules and regulations and which in the public debate is often equated with meaningless work. In the scholarly literature, administrative work, in the form of red tape – also defined as unnecessary rules and procedures – is related to meaninglessness and alienation of frontline workers, while studies of green tape – effective organizational rules – relate some administrative work to higher job satisfaction. During the fieldwork, I noticed that there were both negative and positive views about the part of the

social workers' work taking place at their desks while doing administrative work, and in the analytical process I identified an inherent tension between the social workers and the administrative work task. In this tension the negative elements were much more explicated than the positive. On that background, I decided to investigate the social workers' administrative practice more closely in order to capture the functions of administrative work and accordingly understand the way administrative work may create meaningfulness at work. With the theoretical approach of relational practices as my key analytical lens, I identified three such functions, which were situated in three accountability relations: relations to peers (and first-line managers), relations to citizens, and relations to higher managerial and political levels.

The first function, identified in paper 2, was that administrative work serves to qualify social work through the function of **gaining, judging, and maintaining knowledge** about the cases. This was primarily situated in the accountability relation with peers and to some degree first-line managers, but also in the accountability relation to children and their parents. Through gaining, judging, and maintaining knowledge in administrative practice, the social workers were able to follow and adjust to the dynamic lives of families while simultaneously accommodating bureaucratic and occupational professional values of fairness, responsiveness and lawfulness as well as values of explicating and documenting decisions and making room for mobilizing their professional knowledge. Hence, this function is one way to handle the complexity and multiple values that characterize street-level bureaucratic work and the function encompasses an integration of organizational goals and professional norms and values.

The second function, which I describe in paper 2, is that of enhancing responsiveness by **representing citizens' voices** in administrative documents. This function of administrative work was situated in the accountability relation with children and their parents. This function of administrative work covers the legal obligations of protecting children's rights, which were articulated in many of the interviews with the social workers. However, the observations further revealed how the administrative practice as it unfolded in the everyday negotiated and mediated the state-centered obligations of documentation with citizen-oriented considerations. While sitting at their desks, the social workers continuously "interact" with the children or parents whose cases they are writing in order to represent their voice, for instance by using their specific wording in the formulation of the documents or trying to take their feelings into account when they for instance describe the specific challenges of a child and their considerations about parents' competences to take care of their child. Hence, the "representing citizen function" creates mean-

ingfulness by counterbalancing the formal tone often associated with documents from public organizations, the power over citizens' future it encapsulates, and the potential distance or even conflict it may orchestrate in future interactions and in this way the function integrates bureaucratic and professional values and supports a connection between the administrative task and the overall purpose of helping children in need of special support. In sum, it counteracts the challenge of dehumanization inherent to street-level bureaucratic work.

The third function, which I identified in paper 2, was that of protecting caseworkers and their organizations from the risk of conflicts with children and most often their parents, from critique from higher authorities, and from critical media coverage. As such, this function is situated in the accountability relation with both citizens and especially with higher authorities. Through this relational practice, the function of administrative work primarily becomes a way of handling the lack of control characterizing street-level work in a child welfare unit. Hence, the types of relations that characterize everyday practice in public sector bureaucracies, in which administrative work manifests itself with meaning through three different functions, seem to be pivotal in the creation of meaningful administrative practice.

5.3 Practice three: Balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper

In this section, I present the third practice of creating meaningfulness at work, which is the focus of paper 3. Both during the fieldwork and in the initial steps of my analytical process, the interrelation with children and their parents showed itself to be pivotal to the social workers and to their experiences of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The cooperation with children and with their parents, was a source of many considerations and deliberations on the best strategy to use to gain or retain access to a family. Likewise, the obtaining of cooperation and access to the families were a source of satisfaction and proudness when they succeeded – as well as frustrations when did not succeed. The handling of the regulatory role and the role of the helper was key to these considerations and deliberations, just as I would expect based on the theoretical observations of the paradox inherent in doing interpersonal work and helping citizens within a bureaucratic organization with the simultaneous obligation to control these citizens, as I explained in chapter 3. I used symbolic interactionism as the specific relational lens to investigate and identify the social workers' practices of balancing this potential paradox. This theoretical approach allowed me to take the actions of citizens into account and illustrated

how the specific acts of balancing continually responded to the actions of citizens.

The first strategy was one of **“combining the regulatory role with the empathetic advisor”**. This strategy captures how the social workers seek to create an interpersonal relation in their role as a representative of the authorities. They do so by continuously shifting between addressing, elucidating and creating transparency about their regulatory obligations and professional assessment on the one hand, while on the other hand simultaneously showing interest in the parents’ lives and situations, listening to their concerns and showing empathy. In the interactions, the parents often ask for clarifications about the social workers’ role and the authority and power inherent to their role. Hence, the explication of the regulatory role within this strategy manifests itself as much through the expectations of the parents in order to ease their concerns regarding the social workers’ potential power to remove their children as it is manifested as the social workers’ intention to “show their muscles”. Hence, starting from this strategy, the social workers seek to integrate what may constitute two conflicting dimensions of their role in a street-level bureaucracy into an interpersonal authority relation. The three additional balancing strategies, which I will outline in the following, all builds on this interpersonal authority relation

The second strategy, named **“walking with the citizen”** encapsulates how the social workers accommodate and negotiate with the parents’ perceptions and understanding of their family’s situations and challenges and needs of their child in order to ensure the parents’ cooperation and acceptance of a potential intervention. The point of the strategy is that the social worker, while challenging and seeking to qualify the perspective of parent, to a relatively large extent seeks to follow the parent’s interpretation of their life situation and wishes for intervention. By “walking with the citizen” the social workers using this strategy seek to take the information uncertainty into account, since it ensures the collaboration of parents and consequently further access to and knowledge about the situation in the family, the character of the special needs of the child, as well as the capabilities of the parents. As such, this balancing strategy should not be mixed up with the coping mechanism “walking towards the clients” (Tummers et al., 2015), since it has a temporal element that recognizes the prolonged character of the interaction with parents and families, including that the balancing strategy may change over time, for instance by using the following two strategies.

The third balancing strategy, which I explicate in paper 3, is that of **“showing oneself as a helper”**. This strategy concerns how the social workers show that they care about the parents and their children, both in words and action. Throughout my observations, I observed social workers who

spent time on visiting the families in their homes along with spending hours on the phone talking with and listening to the parents' concerns, frustrations and sometimes also joy. This close interaction with the families is directed at more purposes. It represents a way to increase the probability of the parents approving the intervention the social worker assesses is most advantageous for the child in question. Further, it is a way to handle the lack of control with citizens' lives, given that the continuous interaction and closeness with the families underpin the social workers' opportunity for dynamically adapting interventions and support to situations in the families. Hence, this strategy shows that the elements of help and control characterizing street-level bureaucracies may not only provide paradoxes but may also be closely integrated, and even interlaced.

The fourth strategy, addressed in paper 3, is to **"split the position of strict authority and friendly advisor between two persons"**. While the regulatory and helper role were integrated in the three strategies outlined above, the two roles are clearly separated in this strategy. This strategy is motivated by circumstances where the development and progress in the welfare of a child are not satisfying, and the parents are reluctant to accommodate the advice of the social workers. In such cases, both social workers and managers argue that it may be necessary to explicitly demonstrate the authority face, for instance by stating that "that this simply does not work anymore", to quote one of the social workers. In order to play a more strict or even enforcing regulatory role without compromising the close interrelation a social worker may have built up with a family, or to recover it, one of the municipalities split the roles so that another person, typically a manager, played the hard regulatory role. They also framed this as "playing good cop, bad cop". As such, this strategy is used when the previously described strategies become insufficient or ineffectual in keeping voluntary access to the families (cooperation) and in securing sufficient support for the children in need.

5.4 The wider prospects for meaningfulness at work beyond social workers in child welfare

In this dissertation, I have investigated the creation of meaningfulness at work as a relational practice referring to the collective. In this way, I have sought to look beyond the preferences of individual social workers and instead pay attention to their everyday work practices. This has provided me the opportunity to qualify our knowledge on specific work tasks and specific interactions. Based in the existing knowledge on street-level bureaucracy and the multiple accountability relations and the different work tasks, including both lawfulness, documentation and decision-making processes as well as interpersonal

work in the face-to-face encounters with citizens, the findings of this dissertation provide a fine-grained conceptual framework for encapsulating how meaningfulness is created in both the work task of administrative work and in the interaction with citizens, despite the pressures and alienating forces that potentially undermine the creation of meaningfulness, not just at work in general, but in relation to specific arenas of the everyday work. Across all the identified meaning-creating practices, the collective aspect is evident in the creation of meaningfulness at work, as are the recognition of the social workers' occupational professional competences, and the organizational factor of the availability of time. I will discuss these issues in the next chapter. First, however, I will reflect on the limitations of the study and the generalizability of the findings.

First, the fieldwork includes observations of nine social workers who volunteered for participating and being shadowed. Even though they include more and less experienced social workers and I have interviewed a broad range of social workers to include more perspectives, there is still a chance that some perspectives on the creation of meaningfulness at work in child welfare services are left out – for instance perspectives of those social workers that were more silent and seemed more professionally insecure. Second, it may have qualified the study if I had done the observations over a longer period of time with longer periods away from the field than I scheduled when arranging the fieldwork process, which would have given more time to reflect on the observations and read more theory before entering the field again. Third, as I highlighted in Chapter 3 on the Theoretical Framework, while by definition street-level bureaucracies share some basic characteristics, a great variation exists in the contexts of individual street-level bureaucracies, even between two street-level agencies that perform the same public task. Even though this study builds on a two-sited ethnographic study in two child welfare units covering some of the width in Danish child welfare services, the study still has its limitations in terms of the generalizability of the findings, as it depends on similarities and differences between the studied context and other contexts. In this section, I will reflect on this issue by discussing the empirical and theoretical relevance of the meaningfulness-creating practices for other contexts – both across national contexts and across street-level bureaucratic fields.

As child welfare services are decentralized, they are characterized by relatively great variation across intranational localities, which may restrict the potential for generalizations across local units (Jewell, 2007). As I have identified the meaningfulness-creating practices on the basis of two child welfare units covering a broad width of variation in organizational and regulatory context, I argue that the identified practices capture some basic mechanisms of

meaningfulness at work that are generalizable across Danish child welfare services. Beyond the Danish context, the literature emphasizes that national contexts and welfare policies are reflected in the practice of street-level bureaucracies and frontline workers' behavior, which has been shown to create differences between national contexts (Jewell, 2007; M. Ø. Møller, 2019). Thus, one should be reluctant to generalize beyond the Danish context since the regulatory setting and type of child welfare system may influence the meaningfulness-creating practices. Taking these considerations into account, it may be reasonable to expect the meaningfulness-creating practices to be empirically relevant across the Scandinavian countries, which are based on similar types of welfare state regime (M. Ø. Møller & Stensöta, 2019) and whose child welfare systems are based on the same basic ideas (Hestbæk et al., 2023). However, the knowledge on the influence of national contexts remains limited (M. Ø. Møller, 2019) and there are two relevant questions to ask when reflecting on the generalizability of the meaningfulness-creating practices identified in this study beyond the Scandinavian countries. First, are the organizational and regulatory differences between the Danish contexts and the context we want to generalize to other contexts so large that it becomes impossible to create those practices in other contexts? Second, are social workers in other countries so different from the Danish social workers – e.g. in relation to their professional norms – that they create meaningfulness at work out of other practices? I am not able to provide any final answers to these questions. If the first question is the primary issue in, or cause of, the differences between national contexts, one must assume that the meaningfulness-creating practices identified in this study remain relevant in these contexts, since it would still be these practices the managerial levels and political stakeholders should use as a point of reference if they wanted to make organizational or regulatory changes that supported the development of meaningfulness at work. If the second question is the main issue, the answer depends on the normative and professional values of social workers in different countries. For instance, as regards the practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper, there is a focus on cooperation, involvement, and empowerment of citizens in Danish child welfare services, which may influence what is created as meaningful. On the other hand, there is strong theoretical basis for expecting the practice of professional solidarity to be relevant beyond the Scandinavian countries as I will argue in the following.

Looking beyond the field of child welfare services, we may take into consideration that social workers in child welfare are defined by Lipsky as the ultimate street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). That is, they are working in a high-stake area of the welfare state granted considerable discretion in an en-

vironment of particularly high complexity, uncertainty, and emotional demands. One may expect the collective practice of professional solidarity to be especially important in this specific area, granted the social workers' authority to separate children from their parents in a context where the public debate is tainted by critical media coverage of the child welfare services. However, the characterization of the social workers in child welfare as the ultimate street-level bureaucrats also implies that we may expect this case to more clearly activate the basic mechanisms of what characterizes meaningfulness in street-level bureaucratic contexts more broadly, which positively supports the potential for theoretical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Recalling Durkheim's emphasis on the interdependency of members of a group (Durkheim, 1997 [1933]) as well as the psychological emphasis on relatedness as a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2012), there is a well-founded theoretical basis for expecting the practice of professional solidarity to be relevant to other types of street-level bureaucracies as well – notably, by replacing the professionally motivated prioritization of "closeness with the families" (an ideal of the child welfare units) with core professional ideals of other types of street-level bureaucracies. As regards the relational practices that create meaningful administrative work, this administrative work task is not unique to social workers. However, the generalizability may be expected to depend on the nature of citizen interactions, i.e. whether they are episodic, prolonged, or even close and frequent. For instance, the importance of representing citizens in documentation practice may be specific to fields where highly sensitive and personal information on citizens is documented and not as important in regulatory types of street-level bureaucracies. As regards the relational practice of balancing between the regulatory role and the helper role, this may be especially relevant for types of frontline workers that are granted the authority to use power against the will of citizens but who also benefit from the cooperation of citizens, for instance some areas of police work (see e.g. Johansen, 2023).

Ultimately, the judging of the generalizability of the findings of this study must be left to the practitioners in child welfare units and street-level bureaucracies more broadly, as well as to researchers carrying out future studies. Overall, I hope that the findings of this dissertation may inspire, guide and qualify reflections in future work on the development and strengthening of meaningful work practices in child welfare services and beyond.

Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusion

This PhD dissertation on relational practices creating meaningfulness at work among social workers in Danish child welfare units began with an observation of a tension. To the social workers, all parts of work in the child welfare units were associated with both satisfaction and frustration. Even though the street-level bureaucracy literature inspiring this dissertation has excellently identified and theorized the multiple dilemmas and paradoxes of *street-level bureaucratic* work, it has not sufficiently captured and explained the tension. This is because the literature has mainly dealt with the frustrations and unhealthy ways of coping with the paradoxical nature of street-level bureaucracies that induce meaninglessness, dissatisfaction, and stress. I set out to investigate the relational practices that create meaningfulness at work among social workers in two Danish child welfare units. I studied these practices through the lens of a relational theoretical approach, drawing on ethnographic field work in two child welfare units. Overall, the in-depth study contributed with the finding of three practices, which add nuances and complexity to our understanding of what constitutes meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare. I will close this summary by outlining what I perceive as the main contributions of these findings and discuss the overall implications for research and practice. I focus on three themes with separate contributions: handling the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work in ways that create meaningfulness at work; recognition of the collective in the research on meaningfulness and alienation within public administration; and contextual factors underpinning the realization of meaningfulness at work. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research.

6.1 Handling the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work in ways that create meaningfulness at work – another way of coping?

The first subject to be discussed is healthy ways of dealing with the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work. It is evident in the scholarly literature as well as in accounts from frontline practice that the nature of street-level bureaucratic work makes it pertinent for frontline workers to handle or deal with high complexity and often conflictual demands (Dubois, 2010; Hupe et al., 2016; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003;

Zacka, 2017). In the literature, a highly influential way of approaching this necessity has been through the concept of coping. The identification of coping mechanisms has contributed with an important focus on, and conceptual framework for, identifying reductive behavior in street-level bureaucracies. However, as I argued in Chapter three on the Theoretical Framework, these coping mechanisms are not meaningfulness-creating ways of dealing with the pressures and alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy – apart from being illegitimate from a democratic perspective, they are unhealthy to the individual frontline workers. Over the years there have been calls for more knowledge on healthy ways of handling the alienating forces of street-level bureaucracies both for the individual frontline worker and in a democratic perspective (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010; Schott et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017).

Building on a flourishing literature anticipating social dynamics and collective practices as key ways of handling or alleviating aspects of the pressures on frontline workers (see e.g. A. M. Møller, 2021; Raaphorst, 2018; Zacka, 2017), and pertinent to my interest in meaningfulness-creating practices, I set out to develop a theoretical understanding of the role of collective and relational dynamics on the creation of meaningfulness at work among social workers. Drawing on relational theoretical approaches, I developed a theoretical understanding of how meaningfulness at work was created through relational practices in three different but closely intertwined work arenas: the collegial arena in the backstage of the street-level bureaucracy; at the desk doing administrative work; and in face-to-face encounters with citizens.

The empirical analyses of the three papers highlighted how the prioritization of closeness and cooperation with families were key to the relational practices creating meaningfulness at work among social workers in child welfare units. However, the analyses also show how in each of the three relational practices that created meaningfulness at work, the interpersonal work directly oriented towards citizens was intertwined with the regulatory obligations and bureaucratic-oriented obligations toward the rule of law. Indeed, in these meaningfulness-creating practices, the paradoxical coexistence of on the one hand delivering service by people to people and on the other hand delivering these services through a bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010, p. 71) were naturally interlaced. Let me explain; in the collective practice of the ”we”, both a high level of service to the families and flawless casework processes were highlighted as central elements in this professional ”we”. Administrative work had the function of representation of children and parents, securing the rule of law, and qualifying the judgmental processes. And the regulatory role was closely connected with the role of the helper in the balancing strategies that created cooperation and access to parents and children in need of special support.

So, should we conceptualize these meaningfulness-creating practices as another way of coping? In general the concept of coping has negative connotations (Bartels, 2013). In the original work of Lipsky, coping had negative consequences for citizens, for instance through routinizing or stereotyping (Lipsky, 2010). Others have highlighted types of coping that may be positive for individual citizens (see e.g. Dubois, 2010; Tummers et al., 2015), but which are reductive and pathological in a democratic perspective (Zacka, 2017). Lipsky himself in the second edition of his book emphasizes that coping need not have negative consequences. However, the concept of coping basically evokes a state of day-to-day survival or faring that, in my understanding, does not capture the fact that most of the time frontline workers actually work the system and prefer to "serve the public" (Brehm & Gates, 1997, p. 196). In the words of Pors and Schou (2021, p. 167) "Frontline [workers] are the real policymakers, as Lipsky argued, not because they "cream" or use rough categories to cope, but because they struggle to translate standardized policy demands and everyday moral frictions to appropriate and case-based service delivery". That is, they persistently struggle to comply with the system. Recently, a *collective* form of coping has been suggested as a way to develop the concept of coping beyond its focus on individual frontline workers (Møller, 2021, p. 482). This collective form of coping captures problematic ways of dealing with the street-level bureaucratic dilemmas but in its outset it represents a productive way of dealing with the pressures of street-level bureaucratic work. As such, I argue that the concept of "collective coping" does not do justice to fundamentally nonpathological ways of dealing with the alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work. Hence, we may need another concept to capture the meaningfulness-creating practices I have identified here, as well as other practices and mechanisms that encapsulate healthy modes of dealing with the alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work. Another alternative concept already existing in the literature is that of *networking* (Hupe & van der Krogt, 2013). This mode of dealing with the alienating forces is however limited in its scope since it only captures a specific practice, and for instance does not capture practices taking place during interactions with citizens. I suggest that we develop a concept of *mastering* the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy in addition to the concept of coping. In this way, we will enhance our possibilities, both theoretically and empirically, of identifying practices and mechanisms that capture how frontline workers actually succeed in balancing and bridging the complexities and challenges of street-level bureaucratic work in ways that are healthy for both themselves and citizens in general, and that are in accordance with their democratic obligations.

6.2 Recognition of the collective aspect of meaningfulness at work

The second subject to be discussed is how we understand meaningful work, and also the opposite and related terms meaningless work and alienating work in street-level bureaucratic contexts. In light of the focus of existing research on individual frontline workers' preferences and more static conceptualizations of certain parameters such as societal meaningfulness, client meaningfulness or work-life balance, this study demonstrates the importance of nuanced and practice-based conceptualizations that take into account the complexity of street-level bureaucracies and the myriad interactions that frontline workers act in on a daily basis. As emphasized throughout the present summary, a flourishing literature has highlighted the importance of social dynamics and collaborative and collective processes for discretion, deliberation and decision-making (see e.g. Goldman & Foldy, 2015; A. M. Møller, 2021; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020). The analyses of this dissertation, substantiate my argument that such social, collective and relational dynamics are also essential for the creation of meaningfulness in frontline workers' everyday work practice. Hence, I have introduced this collective perspective to our understanding of an arena that we might otherwise intuitively conceive of as an individual matter alone. And importantly, based on this collective perspective, we might gain a closer understanding of the influence of social and collective dynamics on retention and turnover. In addition, through recognizing the collective perspective in the literature on street-level bureaucracy, scholars of street-level bureaucracy research may be able to bridge to the part of the literature on leadership and organizational culture that emphasizes the importance of establishing conditions supportive of collective practices and deliberations – and hence such recognition of the collective contributes to an (even more) fruitful dialogue with this literature (I will elaborate on this below in the section on contextual factors underpinning the realization of meaningfulness at work).

By studying *practices*, I have been able to enlighten the diverse aspects and complex structures of street-level bureaucratic work in the micro-interactions that constitute this work. From this perspective, *work* is a mixture of lawfulness, documentation and decision-making processes, deliberation processes with colleagues as well as interpersonal work in the face-to-face encounters with citizens located in the various accountability relations that frontline workers act within (Wagenaar, 2004). Investigating street-level bureaucratic work as such practices allowed me to detect meaningful-creating practices, as we have seen, not only in social workers' interpersonal work with citizens, or the collegial work backstage in the offices of the child welfare units,

but also in the much contested administrative practice primarily taking place at the social workers' desks. The implications are twofold. The creation of meaningfulness at work is situationally embedded in the complex web of accountability relations characterizing street-level bureaucracies. The creation of meaningfulness at work is also collective.

This brings me back to my core argument that we need to recognize the collective aspect of meaningfulness at work in order to understand not just how meaningfulness is created in street-level bureaucracies but also to understand how alienation is created. That is, my argument is that meaningfulness at work emerges from collective activities where the frontline workers together produce meaningful everyday work, which spills over to the individual. The insights from this study may contribute to further development of the theory on policy alienation. The conceptualization of policy alienation builds on the "subjective work alienation concept" that foregrounds the static parameters of powerlessness and meaninglessness (Tummers, 2013, p. 45). First, the insights of this study echo the findings of Tucker and her colleagues (2022) who highlight the advantages of viewing policy alienation as processual. Second, on the background of the insights from this study that explains the importance of collective practices, one may ask if the existing theory on policy alienation underestimates the dimension of social isolation, which is included in other conceptualizations of alienation (see for instance Seeman, 1959). As mentioned in chapter 3 on the theoretical underpinnings of this study, the psychological perspective, which the policy alienation framework builds upon, highlights the importance of relatedness as a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2012), which corresponds to the collective aspect identified in my study, and thus strengthens my argument from a psychological point of view as well. Hence, variance-based studies on policy alienation may need to recognize the relational aspect – relatedness – in line with autonomy and competence and add this dimension to future studies measuring policy alienation.

6.3 Contextual factors underpinning the realization of meaningfulness at work

Across the three papers, the issue of *time* needs to be addressed in a discussion of how to support the realization of relational practices that create meaningfulness at work. It takes time to care, to professionally recognize each other, to prioritize closeness with the families, to create a shared ”we” – that is, to ensure the development of professional solidarity within a child welfare unit. It takes time to gain, judge, and maintain knowledge, to represent citizens in the documenting practice, and to fulfill the rule of law. And it takes time to interact with citizens in ways that balance and integrate the regulatory role

with the role of the helper in ways that support cooperation and access to citizens. Turning back to the introduction, I outlined that the Danish labor union of the social workers has appealed for "*time for social work*". This dissertation contributes to qualifying what social workers may need time for in their everyday practice. Moreover, this dissertation's focus on the collective aspect of meaningful street-level bureaucratic work points to the importance of prioritizing time for "organizational slack" (Salge, 2011) – time that is uncommitted to specific work tasks and allows time for practicing professional solidarity, for collective deliberative processes (A. M. Møller, 2021), and collective decision-making processes (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020) while drinking coffee or having lunch as well as in more formal organized fora of supervision and deliberation. In addition, the organizational culture (Schein, 2010), with its focus on the integration of potentially conflicting demands to create meaning for employees (p. 18), may be important to take into account in supporting the creation of meaningfulness at work in the everyday practices of social workers. However, the dissertation does not contribute to cutting the Gordian knot related to the scarcity of resources in the public services, and the fact that in practice the demand for public services often exceeds the supply (Brodkin, 1997; Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 2010).

Nevertheless, the dissertation does contribute to a debate going on in practice as well as in the scholarly literature that taps into two key questions: how should we prioritize the time frontline workers spend with citizens versus the time spent on administrative tasks – often referred to as "unnecessary bureaucracy" in the public debate? And closely related to this question, how much autonomy and level of discretion should frontline workers as *professionals,* and their child welfare units as a collective, be granted?

Implicit in the first question is the idea that street-level bureaucratic work involves two core elements often described as competing with each other – administrative work and interpersonal work. The results of the papers underpinning this dissertation show that it is possible to prioritize the interpersonal dimension in the everyday practice of child welfare work (the practice of prioritizing time with the families, identified in paper 1). Further, the findings show that the administrative and interpersonal practice is closely intertwined in the everyday functions of administrative work, in particular in the function of knowledge and the function of representation of citizens (see paper 2). Hence, to provide an answer to, or at least reframe, the first question, we might benefit from approaching the question of time with the citizens versus administrative work in less dual terms. These work tasks are to a large extent closely intertwined in child welfare work as well as street-level bureaucratic work more broadly – and the recognition of such less dual perspectives on interpersonal work versus administrative work may strengthen both future

studies and developments in practice. Regarding the second question, frontline workers' professional autonomy has been under pressure for decades (van der Veen, 2013). The results of this dissertation highlight the importance of recognizing the social workers' professional knowledge and competences in the relational practices that create meaningfulness in their work, including administrative work. In this vein, the social workers' professionally based interpersonal competences that allow them to work with and advise the families seem pivotal to recognize. This finding is in line with previous research that emphasizes the occupational professional dimension as core to frontline workers' preferences, values, and knowledge base in their everyday practice (see e.g. Andersen & Jakobsen, 2017; Cecchini & Harrits, 2022; Evans, 2011, 2016; Harrits, 2019; A. M. Møller, 2019; Perry, 2018).

So, in highlighting the importance of the collective as well as recognizing the occupational professional dimension of street-level bureaucratic work for meaningfulness-creating relational practices, what do the results of this dissertation, imply for the management and regulation of public services? I will highlight two factors that I argue could support the realization of the mechanisms that create meaningfulness at work via prioritization, recognition of professional knowledge, and discretion. These are 1) relational leadership, and 2) a discussion of a clearer distinction between managerialism and bureaucracy than the one that exists today, both within research and in practice. Thus, the two factors are located at respectively the local managerial level, and the macro level of societal narratives on bureaucracy manifested in policy arrangements.

First, in line with the arguments of the previous sections emphasizing the recognition of the collective and relational practices, I will highlight the promising perspectives of recognizing leadership as a relational construct (Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2020; A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023). In their conceptualization of street-level leadership, Møller & Grøn (2023) emphasize that it is "*relational, centered on building strong communities* and taps into *professional norms and knowledge*" (italics in the original A. M. Møller & Grøn, 2023, p. 14). Such an approach to leadership aligns well with the relational practices that create meaningfulness identified in this study, and it seems well-suited to supporting the realization of meaningfulness-creating practices. The point is that by taking such an approach to leadership, managers in street-level bureaucracies intentionally would seek to collectivize the pressures and dilemmas characterizing street-level bureaucratic work not only among manager and employee but also among employees. Adding to this perspective, this study contributes with theoretical concepts that capture the content of what relational practices of strong communities may look like.

Second, whether viewed as a relational construct or not, leaders also navigate within a broader institutional context of rules and regulations set by the bureaucratic organization as well as higher managerial levels, including the politicians' aspirations for monitoring street-level bureaucratic practice. These rules and regulations, and the administrative work and categorization practice they produce, are often popularly referred to as "bureaucracy" in the public debate and are in the public as well as in the scholarly literature associated with a rather negative narrative (du Gay, 2000; A. M. Møller et al., 2022; Oberfield, 2014; Zacka, 2017). The conceptualization of bureaucracy underpinning these negative connotations may though cover a conflation of bureaucracy and managerialism. To the extent that administrative work primarily functions as a way for managers and outside authorities to monitor the efficiency of street-level bureaucracies it can be defined as managerialism (Ward, 2011). In contrast, a recent reconceptualization of Weber's bureaucracy highlights knowledge as part of the bureaucratic ethos (A. M. Møller et al., 2022), where administrative work as well as interpersonal work are practiced in light of the frontline workers' specialized knowledge and expertise in combination with the values and goals of their specific street-level work task, in this case child welfare work. Hence, a more clear distinction between administrative work stemming from rules and regulations based on a managerial need for monitoring the local child welfare units and administrative work stemming from underpinning core bureaucratic values – respect, responsiveness, efficiency, fairness, transparency and the rule of law – may help the political level to take the meaning-creating practices into account in their decision-making processes. Such a clear distinction is however difficult to achieve, and it is a task for future research to capture such a distinction both theoretically and empirically.

6.4. Concluding remarks and future research

With this study on meaningfulness-creating relational practices among social workers in child welfare, I have contributed to a neglected part of the discussion about fulfilling and healthy ways of working in street-level bureaucracies. One implication for future research is to focus more on the role of both the multiple values characterizing street-level bureaucratic work and the various policies, rules, and regulations in the myriad interactions that the frontline workers are working within. For instance, though the term "administrative work" is more specific than "bureaucratic work", it still covers a range of administrative tasks generated by multiple rules and regulations, and it would be interesting to investigate and compare the functional role of more specific

administrative tasks generated by specific rules in various interactions in order to see if some rules are created as meaningful more easily than others. Likewise, in recognition of the differences characterizing citizens, it potentially follows that some strategies are more productive in interactions with some citizens compared to others. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate strategies in interactions with specific types of parents as well as children, for instance more or less cooperative parents or with more or less resources. This calls for further research taking a relational perspective on meaningfulness at work (or meaninglessness and alienation for that matter) as an alternative to studies that focus on more static parameters of meaningfulness, which still account for the primary source of knowledge on this issue.

Implicit in this study is a view on social workers as *willing and capable* in mastering the complexity, ambiguity and often conflictual demands characterizing street-level bureaucratic work in relational and collective practices. I have shown that such collective capability of handling the dilemmas and alienating forces of street-level bureaucracy creates meaningfulness at work. Another important implication of the meaningfulness-creating practices may then be that these practices support the frontline workers in navigating in a broad spectrum of moral dispositions, which enables them to master their responsibilities as frontline workers with a strong sense of duty toward the citizens they serve, organizational goals and the broader society they are part of (Pors & Schou, 2021, p. 167; Zacka, 2017). However, this is a hypothesis for future research to investigate, both whether the practices support such broad moral reflections, and to what extent and which contextual factors may underpin them. For instance, for the practice of balancing the regulatory role and the role of the helper to be morally responsible from a democratic perspective it presupposes that the social workers have the time to use the relevant and often time consuming strategies systematically in all citizen encounters – or at least reflect and deliberate on the use of them in specific cases.

The ambition of this study was to develop a more nuanced and flexible understanding of meaningfulness in the everyday work taking place in Danish child welfare services. Hence, this dissertation contributes with an understanding of meaningfulness-creating practices that deals with the high complexity and dilemmas and enable the social workers to master the alienating forces that characterize the child welfare services – a field that employ "the ultimate street-level bureaucrats" of our welfare state. Mastering the alienating forces of street-level bureaucratic work is no easy task as the high stress rates and turnover rates among social workers indicate. Future research could investigate the influence of the relational meaningfulness-creating practices on turnover and related factors. Likewise, I suggest future research investigates the influence of the meaningfulness-creating practices on citizens' trust

in their social worker and whether the identified practices contribute to strengthening the life conditions of children and families in need of support. I have proposed several empirically grounded concepts, which I hope will provide enlightening insights for both scholars and practitioners on the creation of meaningfulness in the multifaceted everyday practice of social workers in child welfare. Hopefully, this focus on purposeful and "healthy" practices, often overlooked in our – scholars, practitioners, and the public – critical approach to the welfare state and its functioning, will contribute with further perspectives to the reflections and conversations on child welfare work already going on.

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Appendix A. Interview guides

Appendix A1. Interview guide for social workers

Theme	**Interview questions**
Introduction	Please introduce yourself. - Name, age? - Overall experience, how long have your worked for the municipality? - Number of cases
Your work	What does your job as a social worker for the municipality entail? - How much time do you spend at the office and how much time do you spend with your families during an average week? - How much of your time at the office is spent delving into your cases? How much time do you spend on registration and filling out forms? Or is it about equal? How would you describe yourself as a social worker? What part of your job do you enjoy the most?
Being a social worker, role	What does it mean to be a social worker at the children and family department? (role) What skills are important to being a social worker at the department? - What would you say to someone thinking of applying to a position at the department? In your opinion, what does carrying out work in a professional manner as a social worker entail? What is important to you as a social worker to be able to say that you are doing a good job? - What ideals do you have for your work as a social worker now? Have those ideals changed since you graduated? - In your opinion, what is your function as a social worker today? (role) Who do you give voice to? (the municipality/parents/children) - Is what you do while working consistent with what you want to do? (meaningfulness/gap)
Interacting with children and young people Trust	Please try to describe your interactions with citizens. Do you feel that you are more out of touch or more in touch with citizens than previously? What are the barriers? - How often do you see the citizens in your cases? - Do you feel well-prepared when you have meetings with them? Do you have a good sense of the family's situation? Have you always had that?

	What is important to you when having meetings with the families? What is less important? - How do you usually act when interacting with children/young people and their families? What is your role with regard to the childen/young people? What do you think they think? - Is it consistent with the role you would like to have? What do you think the families think about you? - Do you think they feel like they can rely on you? - Do you ever experience disappointing the families? If you think of your case log, are there any cases that involved coercion or cases where you had difficulty getting a family to cooperate? In your experience, do the families trust you? - Do you trust them? - Is trust something you think about?
Organizational factors/management Supervision of your work	Have things in the department improved or become worse? What expectations does the organization and your immediate supervisor have for you as a social worker? What are society's expectations of you? In your experience, how is the fulfillment of those expectations being monitored? What are the most important organizational/external factors that enable you to do your work well? - What are the biggest obstacles? Have you ever taken stress-induced sick leave? Do you find that you have a lot of sick days? Do you find that your colleagues are thriving in their jobs? Do you see yourself working for the municipality in 1, 5, 10 years?
Conclusion	We need to wrap up: is there anything apart from what we've already talked about that you want be to take out of this interview and my observations of this department? Do you have any questions for me? Thanks for participating!

Appendix A2. Interview guide for managers

Theme	Interview questions
Experience and meaning horizon, motivation Your work (narrative)	Age, job position, experience – why did you apply for the (team) leader position in xxx municipality? - What does your job as team leader entail? Describe an average day/week - What is important to you as team leader with regard to social workers?
Organizational and political context Time	Describe the municipality's child and family department? What characterizes the department? What organizational changes are being implemented in the municipality? Who were the initiators? What was the objective/ambition behind the changes? What are the ambitions of the child and family department? Who is behind setting those ambitions? (politicians, management, advisors, collaboration partners, citizens) What political and organizational trends have affected the approach taken by the child and family department? - In your opinion, how does this impact the work done by the social workers? What is their attention directed at? - In your opinion, how does this impact the approach to citizens?
Ideals, norms, and values of the work conducted by the social workers. Their work in practice	What do you expect of the social workers on your team? What are they responsible for? What are the qualifications required to be a social worker in the child and family area? How do you ensure that social workers meet the obligations and expectations set for them? Many people have voiced the opinion that the documentation requirement suffocates the social workers' work with citizens – what is the municipality's view of the matter? Do you find that there is concordance between the family department's ambitions and what you experience in practice? - How are you going to achieve that/What barriers are in your way?
Citizens and the children and family department	What are the overall wishes, norms, and values you have for when citizens interact with the municipality's children and family department? - Do you feel that you live up to those wishes, norms, and values? How do you balance maintaining a good relationship with the citizen and the in-depth investigative written documentation? - What do you do to ensure that balance?

Conclusion– what should be emphasized	If you were to highlight something that I should take with me from my time conducting field work in the municipality – especially given my interest in any barriers between professional ideals, practice, and lack of confidence from citizens – what would that be? Do you have any questions for me? Thank you!

English summary

Working in child welfare services – with the objective purpose of supporting vulnerable children and their families – is meaningful. However, as described in both the media, the public debate, among the social workers working in child welfare services, the social workers' labor union, and in the scholarly literature, this objective meaningfulness is threatened by the multiple pressures characterizing the everyday work in child welfare services.

In this dissertation, I show three relational practices that create meaningfulness in the everyday work among social workers in child welfare services. Meaningfulness-creating practices that contribute to enabling social workers to "*master*" – not cope with or survive – the pressures that characterize their work. To identify these practices, I move beyond the existing in the literature's focus on individual social workers' perceptions of meaningfulness. Instead, I focus on and understand meaningfulness in the everyday work of social workers as relationally created – that is, in the interface between lawfulness, documentation and decision-making processes, deliberation processes with colleagues as well as the interpersonal work in the face-to-face encounters with citizens located in the various accountability relations that social workers act within. Hence, understanding social and collective dynamics is essential answering the research question guiding this dissertation: how is meaningfulness at work created in everyday relational practices among social workers in child welfare services?

To provide interesting and informative answers to this question, I needed data that provided in-depth information on the everyday practices and social and collective dynamics in child welfare services. Hence, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in two Danish child welfare units over a period of 4 months from August to December 2019. I observed – or shadowed – nine social workers through their daily work routines and interviewed 23 social workers and seven of their managers. Theoretically – to provide interesting and informative knowledge on the creation of meaningfulness at work in child welfare services – I drew on the literature on street-level bureaucracy combined with a sociological relational theoretical approach. The literature on street-level bureaucracy provides an excellent basis for understanding the pressures – i.e., the multiple dilemmas and paradoxes – threatening to alienate social workers from their work. Due to this literature's main focus on how frontline workers cope with, or survive, these pressures, it does not sufficiently inform us on how frontline workers handle these alienating forces in ways that are positive both from the perspective of the individual frontline worker and from a democratic

perspective. The sociological relational theoretical approach focuses on interactions and hence allows in-depth investigations of the everyday practices of child welfare services, one type of street-level bureaucracy, and thus provides a basis for gaining new insights on this matter. On this background, I identified three core practices, all constituted by a number of ”sub-practices” that contribute to creating meaningfulness among social workers in child welfare:

First, we have the core practice of creating professional solidarity (paper 1). This core practice is based on an analysis of one of the participating child welfare units, where job satisfaction was high. The core practice of professional solidarity belongs to the collegial arena and shows how the social workers seek to have each other's backs through four collective sub-practices that all contribute to the establishment of professional solidarity. These are, 1) a collective practice of caring for each other, 2) a collective practice of professional recognition, 3) a collective practice of the social workers pursuing closeness with the families, and 4) a collective practice of positive identification with the child welfare agency.

Second, we have the core practice of creating meaningful administrative work (paper 2). With the identification of this practice, I demonstrate how administrative work is created as meaningful in the everyday practice of the social workers through three functions (i.e. a sub-practice): 1) gaining, judging, and maintaining knowledge, 2) representing citizens' voices in administrative documents, and 3) protection from the insecurity of street-level bureaucratic work.

Third, we have the core practice of balancing the regulatory role with the role of the helper (paper 3). The conceptualization of this practice helps us understand how social workers create access to citizens – vulnerable children and their families – an access that is essential to fulfilling the purpose of supporting these citizens – and accordingly this practice also creates meaningfulness at work in the everyday practice of the social workers. This meaning-creating practice is constituted by four strategies that the social workers use in interactions with parents: 1) combining the regulatory role with the role of the empathic advisor, 2) walking with the citizen, 3) showing oneself as a helper, and 4) splitting the position of strict authority and helper between two persons. These strategies are closely intervened and has a temporal dimension, since they are used in a manner that considers the prolonged character of interactions in this type of street-level bureaucratic work.

Overall, the dissertation shows how, in each of the three core relational practices that created meaningfulness at work, the interpersonal work directly oriented towards citizens was intertwined with regulatory obligations and bureaucratically oriented obligations toward the rule of law. Indeed, in the

meaningfulness-creating practices, these work tasks – often presented as paradoxical – were naturally interlaced. On this background, I suggest we consider a less dualized conceptualization of these aspects of child welfare work, and of street-level bureaucratic work more broadly. Furthermore, this insight leads me to discuss if the meaningfulness-creating practices are another way of coping – and I suggest that we need to develop an alternative concept to encapsulate practices and mechanisms that enable social workers to balance and bridge the complexities of their work in ways that are healthy for both themselves and citizens in general, and that are in accordance with their democratic obligations. Finally, on the background of these findings, I show that collective and relational dynamics are essential for the creation of meaningfulness in frontline workers' everyday work – which we might otherwise intuitively conceive of as an individual matter alone.

Dansk resumé

Arbejdet som socialrådgiver i en børne- og ungeforvaltning, med det overordnede formål at støtte sårbare børn og deres familier, er i sig selv meningsfuldt. Denne meningsfuldhed trues i følge både medier, Dansk Socialrådgiverforening samt den videnskabelige litteratur af det store – og voksende – pres, der kendetegner socialrådgiveres daglige arbejde i en børne- og ungeforvaltning.

I denne afhandling viser jeg tre relationelle praksisser, der skaber meningsfuldhed i det daglige arbejde blandt socialrådgivere i børne- og ungeforvaltningen. Disse meningsfuldhedsskabende praksisser giver mulighed for at "mestre" – og ikke blot at cope med eller overleve – det pres, der omgiver og karakteriserer socialrådgiveres arbejde. Ved at undersøge disse praksisser bevæger jeg mig væk fra forvaltningslitteraturens fokus på individuelle socialrådgiveres opfattelser af meningsfuldhed og fokuserer derimod på at *forstå* meningsfuldhed i socialrådgiveres daglige arbejde som noget, der er relationelt skabt; det vil sige, at meningsfuldheden skabes i samspillet mellem lovkrav, dokumentation og beslutningsprocesser, løbende sparring mellem kollegaer samt i ansigt-til-ansigt-møder med borgere i de forskellige ansvarsrelationer, som socialrådgivere handler inden for. Fokus er således på at forstå de sociale og kollektive dynamikker, hvilket guider forskningsspørgsmålet i denne afhandling:

> *Hvordan skabes meningsfuldhed i hverdagens relationelle praksisser blandt socialrådgivere i børne- og unge forvaltninger?*

For at give en række indsigtsfulde svar på dette spørgsmål anvender jeg data fra et etnografisk feltarbejde i to danske børne- og ungeforvaltninger over en periode på 4 måneder fra august til december 2019. Jeg har observeret – eller skygget – ni socialrådgivere i deres daglige arbejdsrutiner og interviewet 23 socialrådgivere og syv af deres ledere. Teoretisk kombinerer jeg *street-level bureaucracy*-litteraturen med en *relationel sociologisk* teoretisk tilgang for at forstå det pres – dvs. de mange dilemmaer, udfordringer og paradokser – der er med til at presse socialrådgivere i deres daglige arbejde. Netop fordi *Street-level bureaucracy*-litteraturen primært fokuserer på, hvordan frontlinjemedarbejdere coper med eller overlever de forskellige pres, der karakteriserer deres daglige arbejde, bidrager teorien ikke i tilstrækkelig grad med velbegrundet, indsigtsrig viden om, hvordan frontlinjemedarbejdere *mestrer* dette krydspres. Med mestring mener jeg, hvordan frontlinjemedarbejderen, i dette tilfælde socialrådgivere – lykkedes med at tilgodese hensyn til såvel den enkelte borger og samfundet generelt – og som er befordrende for socialrådgiverens trivsel. Med den relationelle teoretiske tilgang lægger jeg vægt på de

mange interaktioner, der udspiller sig i den daglige praksis i en børn- og unge forvaltning. En sådan tilgang giver en analytisk mulighed for at undersøge, hvordan meningsfuldhed løbende skabes i disse mange interaktioner. På denne baggrund identificerer jeg tre overordnede praksisser, som er dannet af flere "underpraksisser", der tilsammen bidrager til at skabe meningsfuldhed blandt socialrådgiverne:

Den første praksis, der bidrager til at skabe meningsfuldhed i socialrådgivernes daglige arbejde, benævner jeg ”professionel solidaritet” (artikel 1). Professionel solidaritet vedrører adfærd, hvormed socialrådgivere støtter hinanden og skabes således mellem kollegaer. Professionel solidaritet er funderet på fire kollektive praksisser. Disse er: 1) en kollektiv praksis med at tage sig af hinanden, 2) en kollektiv praksis med faglig anerkendelse, 3) en kollektiv praksis med, at socialrådgivere søger nærhed med familierne og 4) en kollektiv praksis med positiv identifikation med børne- og unge forvaltningen.

Den anden praksis, der bidrager til at skabe meningsfuldhed, benævner jeg meningsfuldt administrativt arbejde (artikel 2). Med begrebsliggørelsen af denne praksis om meningsfuldt administrativt arbejde viser jeg, hvordan administrativt arbejde skabes som meningsfuldt i socialrådgivernes daglige praksis gennem tre funktioner: 1) at opnå, vurdere og opretholde viden, 2) at repræsentere borgernes stemme i administrative dokumenter og 3) beskyttelse mod usikkerheden som socialrådgiver.

Den tredje praksis, der bidrager til at skabe meningsfuldhed, vedrører balancen mellem myndighedsrollen og rollen som ”hjælper” (artikel 3). Begrebsliggørelsen af denne praksis sigter mod at forstå, hvordan socialrådgivere skaber adgang til borgere – sårbare børn og deres familier – en adgang som er afgørende for at opfylde det overordnede formål om at støtte disse borgere – og dermed også for at skabe meningsfuldhed i socialrådgivernes daglige arbejde. Denne meningsfuldhedsskabende praksis består af fire strategier, som socialrådgiverne bruger i møder med forældre: 1) at kombinere autoritetsrollen med rollen som empatisk rådgiver, 2) at gå med borgeren, 3) at vise sig som en ”hjælper” og 4) at opdele positionen som streng myndighedsperson og hjælper på to personer.

Samlet set viser afhandlingen, hvordan de tre relationelle praksisser, der skaber meningsfuldhed i socialrådgivernes arbejde, involverer samspillet mellem det relationelle arbejde, der direkte rettes mod borgere, men også de myndighedsrettede forpligtelser og bureaukratiske-orienterede forpligtelser og lovkrav. Faktisk er disse forpligtigelser, som ofte præsenteres som modstridende i litteraturen, naturligt sammenflettede i de meningsfuldhedsskabende praksisser. På baggrund af dette foreslår jeg, at vi overvejer en mindre todelt begrebsliggørelse af myndighed og administrativt arbejde versus arbejde di-

rekte rettet mod borgeren. Jeg diskuterer desuden, om de tre meningsfuldhedsskabende praksisser kan defineres som coping-mekanismer – og jeg foreslår, at vi skal udvikle et alternativt begreb til at indfange praksisser og mekanismer, der giver socialrådgivere, og frontlinjemedarbejdere generelt, mulighed for at balancere kompleksiteten og paradokserne i deres arbejde på måder, der er mere gunstige både for dem selv og for borgere generelt, og som er i overensstemmelse med socialrådgivernes demokratiske forpligtelser. Endelig viser jeg på baggrund af afhandlingens resultater, at kollektive og relationelle dynamikker er essentielle for at skabe meningsfuldhed i socialrådgivere, og frontlinemedarbejdere generelt, hverdagspraksis – en meningsfuldhed som vi måske ellers intuitivt ville betragte som et individuelt anliggende.