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Published online: 05 Feb 2024.

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Exit, loyalty and focus. Dutch social workers' responses to swing-of-the-pendulum policies

Exit, aanpassing of focus. Hoe Nederlandse sociaal werkers omgaan met pendulebeleid

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ABSTRACT

Many social workers are confronted with tidal waves – cyclical or swing-of-the-pendulum policies – in the course of their career. Policies oscillate between harsh and lenient, emphasising safety and family unity, equality and tailor-made arrangements. In addition, social work organisations are being organised and reorganised in recurrent modes as well: from large-scale to small-scale, with or without team coordinators, from a generalised to a specialised division of tasks. In this article, we pose the question how social workers respond to cyclical changes in policy and management. We use a dataset of 35 interviews with Dutch social workers – trained in the early 1990s, early 2000s, and early 2010s – about their careers. We found that some social workers respond to cyclical changes in policy and management by exiting their profession or contemplating exit. Others adjusted to the policy circles and management fashions, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes because they endorsed the new policies, and sometimes because they just went along. Yet other social workers practised focus, that is: they sought refuge in the core of their profession, delivering the best possible social work, ignoring the tidal waves as far as possible. The latter response seems to be based on a strong professional identity

SAMENVATTING

Veel sociaal werkers worden gedurende hun loopbaan geconfronteerd met cyclische beleidswijzigingen of 'pendulebeleid'. Beleid gaat heen en weer tussen soepel en streng, tussen 'veiligheid voor alles' en 'gezinnen intact laten', tussen rechtsgelijkheid en maatwerk. Sociaal werkers hebben daar bovenop ook te maken met pendulebeleid in de organisaties waar ze werken: die worden gefuseerd of weer opgesplitst, managementlagen worden ingevoerd en weer afgeschaft, nu eens moet er generalistisch en dan weer specialistisch worden gewerkt. In dit artikel stellen we de vraag hoe sociaal werkers reageren op pendulebeleid en -management. We gebruiken een dataset van 35 interviews met Nederlandse sociaal werkers – opgeleid in de vroege jaren '90, rond 2000 en rond 2010 – over hun loopbaan. Er bleken drie reactiepatronen te bestaan: exit of denken over exit,

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aanpassen of loyaal blijven (soms omdat men enthousiast was over de beleidswijzingen, soms contre-coeur, maar meestal omdat men de nieuwe status gewoon accepteerde) en focus: concentratie op het eigen werk en je daarbij zo min mogelijk aantrekken van alle veranderingen. Focus lijkt te zijn gebaseerd op een sterk gevoelde beroepsidentiteit.

Introduction

Some policy changes are linear. They sprout from technological advances (e.g. rethink the boundaries between different types of care because technology enables professionals to simultaneously view the same patient or client files). They aim to solve or alleviate a particular problem in the near future (e.g. adjust the price of fossil fuels because of the unfolding climate problem). Or they present an adjustment to demographic change (adjust the retirement age because of an aging population).

Other policy changes are cyclical. They sprout from eternal problems that will never be solved entirely. Or they answer to ever changing electoral preferences: from right-wing to left-wing to right-wing again.

Some organisational changes are linear. They sprout for example from technological advances that change the contents of office jobs forever: think of typing secretaries being replaced by computers and management assistants. Or they present a response to changing societal norms: think of ever more jobs opened up for women when societal norms regarding female labour participation changed.

Other organisational changes are cyclical. They sprout from managerial questions that do not have definitive answers. Or they align with recurring management fashions picked up by managers at courses and conferences.

In this article, we look at cyclical changes in policy and management. Our aim is to find out how social workers respond to these cyclical changes, also described as tidal wave patterns. That is: we do not intend to study responses to one or another specific change, we want to see how social workers deal with the phenomenon of recurrence. Our research question is: how do social workers respond to cyclical patterns in policy and management? We draw on a dataset of 35 interviews with Dutch social workers. In the next section, we will first look at what is known about tidal wave policies in general and in social work in particular. We will then describe the Hirschman 'exit, voice and loyalty' framework that we adapt and use to categorise social workers' potential responses to tidal waves. Next we will explain our method and describe the results of our study. In the last section of our article we answer our research question. Subsequently, we will reflect on the implications of our findings for social workers, but also for policymakers and managers in their organisations.

Cyclical changes and professional responses

In this section, we will first discuss recurring patterns in policy and management as portrayed in the literature. After that we will discuss the Hirschman framework which we used to analyse how social workers respond to recurring policies or management fashions.

Cyclical changes in policy

Christopher Pollitt described cyclical policy changes in his book *Time, Policy, Management. Governing with the Past* (2008). Many political or institutional arrangements have advantages and disadvantages. There are advantages to decentralisation (tailor-made services, limited distance between policy makers and citizens), but there also advantages to centralisation (efficiency, equality).

Hence, for politicians and policymakers '[t]he grass on the other side always looks greener, so, over the years, reformers wobble between alternatives which each carry advantages and disadvantages' (Pollitt, 2008, p. 53).

Swing-of-the-pendulum policies in democratic societies partly sprout from election results. Citizens vote for a left-wing government, which installs left-wing policies. If these displease the electorate, a right-wing government may undo the policies after the next election, leading to policy U-turns (Hart, 2001; Pollitt, 2008). Swing-of-the-pendulum policies can also be attributed to economic cycles. Although economists and politicians differ in their ideas on how to respond to economic highs and lows, there can be no doubt that recurring economic tides may lead to tidal waves policies (Hart, 2001; Pollitt, 2008).

With regard to social policy, tidal waves were convincingly explained by Hammond (1996). He argues that social policy often entails a choice between different types of justice and that this means that the resulting injustice is inevitable. Thus, with regard to welfare benefits, as a policy-maker you should make sure to reward deserving citizens. In order to accomplish that, you will occasionally also reward a fraudulent benefit claim. That is inevitable, but it may rightfully be perceived as an injustice in need of correction. If this perspective comes to the fore, the tide may change: a policy is adopted in which the undeserving are properly scrutinised and get rejected when they try to claim benefits. Only now you may err in the other direction and once in a while reject a perfectly legitimate claim to benefits. Hammond names this 'the iron law of social policy'. For social assistance policy, the iron law is clearly visible: policy swings from too strict to overly lenient and back again (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Trappenburg, 2020).

Swings-of-the-pendulum have also been described for other types of social policy. There is a 'penological pendulum', swinging from a harsh 'retritubitionist', punitive approach to a lenient approach that puts rehabilitation first (Goldson, 2000; Kennedy & Kelly, 1981; Shichor, 1992). According to Chapman and Field (2007), child protection practice has historically oscillated between child rescue and family preservation models. In the first type one chooses a no-risk policy: when the child's safety is at stake, it is placed in foster care and removed from its parents. In the second model one focuses on the fact that separating parents and children is traumatic for all parties and foster care is not always beneficial. Both arguments seem just, but with obvious downsides, hence the permanent swings from one end of the continuum to the other. Policy cycles have been found in Dutch social work studies too. Spiers (2014, p. 317) describes the first decades of the twenty-first century as an era in which policy fashions regarding social work seem to change constantly. Looking at history he observes that the policy ideas in the present decades resemble those advocated between 1980 and 2000, both periods being dominated by cutbacks on the one hand and high hopes for decentralisation on the other. Michielse (1989, p. 30) studied aid to the poor from the late Middle Ages onward. He points at policy waves directed on the one hand at the application of techniques for policing the poor and on the other hand aiming to improve these techniques. Stellaard (2023) studied youth policy in the Netherlands. Her research shows that new policies are directed at the unintended effects of previous policies. She calls it boomerang policy: whenever new policy initiatives are launched they produce negative effects which make the problem come back to haunt the next policymaker, who then throws a new but very similar boomerang in a vain attempt to solve it.

Cyclical changes in organisations

Changes in organisations are mostly initiated by managers, who tend to feel that reorganising their organisation is their primary task (Noordegraaf, 2008, 2015). Partly these organisational changes are initiated as a response to societal developments, policy changes or both. Grey (2003) argues that managers and organisational scientists implicitly or explicitly use a Darwinian lens to look at the world: they think that the world around organisations is changing at an ever faster pace and that organisations have to change in response if they do not want to lose the evolutionary battle and become extinct. Sometimes adapting to changing circumstances leads to linear change, as in the

examples indicated above: jobs being replaced or adapted because of technological change. However, organisational change can also be cyclical.

Managers who want to change their organisation (because they feel this is part of their job description) can use a swathe of management doctrines. Hood and Jackson (1991) assembled 99 of them. The doctrines relate to all sorts of questions that need to be answered in organisations and Hood and Jackson show that the answers are all at least plausible, which allows managers to switch from one to another whenever they see fit. For example, every organisation needs to hire staff. There is something to be said for hiring experienced hands. There is also value in hiring new recruits. You could prefer technical skills or administrative and managerial skills. You may give fixed rewards or variable rewards, you may reward according to output or according to time spent on the job. You may prefer small-scale organisations and contract out as much as possible. Or you may strive for large organisations and do everything yourself. You may use long or short hierarchies. And so on and so forth; there is no conclusive evidence for any of these doctrines, which entails that there is always a case to be made in favour of changing doctrines.

Organisational management reforms are often advanced by fashions. Brunsson (2009, p. 97) observes:

> There seem to be fairly strong fashions in the organisational world, as regards the right solution and the right problems. (…) Strong fashions guarantee that the practices of an organisation will at least sometimes appear old-fashioned and in need of reform.

Like fashion (long and short skirts, narrow and wide pants) administrative routines tend to rotate. Hood and Jackson (1991, pp. 18–19) observe: 'Genuinely new routines are far less commonly invented than it might appear. Today's ruling doctrine – whether it be privatisation, performance pay, self-management – is often no more than a resurrection of something that has had its day, or days, before'. The fashion aspect was also noted by Bruijn (2008), who points out that managers of different organisations tend to attend the same courses and conferences and subsequently copy each other's management policies, a process called mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The Hirschman framework

In our study we will look into the experiences of Dutch social workers with tidal waves, that is: recurring patterns of change in policy and management. Subsequently, we want to find out how social workers respond to tidal waves. To categorise responses we will use Hirschman's well-known typology of exit, voice, and loyalty.

Hirschman's (1970) typology originally related to consumer behaviour with regard to goods or services. If consumers were dissatisfied they could choose to ignore this sentiment (**loyalty**), express their dissatisfaction by **exit** (leave and find another provider offering better services), or **voice** their concerns (trying to improve services from within). The Hirschman triad has been adapted to classify employee responses to adverse conditions in the workplace (Dowding et al., 2000; Lee & Varon, 2020; Naus et al., 2007; Saunders, 1992). In this article we look at social workers in their role as employees, hence we will use the adjusted Hirschman framework.

With regard to employee behaviour, exit entails leaving the organisation, loyalty is defined as 'passively but optimistically waiting for conditions to improve', and voice as 'actively and constructively trying to improve conditions' (Naus et al., 2007, p. 688). Organisational researchers found a fourth category in employee behaviour. Dissatisfaction might also play out as organisational cynicism or '**neglect**': 'lax and disregardful behaviour, exemplified by lateness, absenteeism, error rates and using company time for personal business' (Naus et al., 2007.; cf. also Lee & Varon, 2020).

The Hirschman typology has been used before to categorise social workers' responses to adverse working conditions. Welander et al. (2019) did a large-scale survey among Swedish social workers to study their responses to the neoliberal changes that had taken place in the Swedish welfare state. Welander et al. (2019) decided to skip the voice-category altogether, as room for voice was extremely

limited. Instead, they adopted the concept of '**silence**, which refers to employees choosing not to voice their concerns and critique' (p. 87). Jönsson (2019) also found a lot of grudging loyalty in the form of silence and resignation among Swedish social workers: workers accepted the rules of the game, exit was not perceived as a solution because 'it is the same everywhere' (Jönsson, 2019, p. 218).

Hoijtink (2018, 2022a, 2022b) studied Dutch social workers, also using the Hirschman typology and expanding it to categorise social workers' responses to aspects of the neoliberal policy more precisely. In 2022a and 2022b he finds that over 40% of social workers either actively leave their job or silently contemplate exit. In Hoijtink (2018) he uses a subtle variation on the Hirschman typology to interpret different responses of social workers towards policies they deem undesirable. Workers did not voice critique to their superiors or to politicians in charge, but they used humour to show their doubts and they voiced critical ideas among themselves at the coffee corner. Also many of them did not exit from their job, but distanced themselves from it emotionally, perceiving it as 'just a job'. This response is categorised as a 'cognitive flight', away from the world of policymaking.

Hoijtink (2018) describes yet another manifestation of cognitive flight. Social workers also flee from policies by concentrating on their clients, on the target group for whom they chose to work. Interestingly, Hoijtink finds this response pattern after having described the world of policymaking as follows:

> Becoming politically immune means learning not to lose balance in a turbulent environment in which everything can be changed overnight (…) when some guy in a business suit undoes everything that was done before, because everything has to be different once more. (Hoijtink, 2018, p. 176)

Hoijtink studied social workers' responses to one specific policy, but this description seems to indicate that the cognitive flight response that consisted of concentrating on one's clients might be a response to recurring patterns and tidal waves too. We propose to relabel this response pattern as 'focus'. Following Hoijtink's idea to understand it as some kind of flight we will define it as: seeking refuge in the heart of the profession and one's professional identity.

With regard to tidal waves policies and organisational changes we expect to encounter the following responses:

- *Exit*: leaving the profession (as in the usual interpretation of Hirschman's category with regard to employees) or contemplating it (as in the adjusted version of the Hirschman typology, introduced by social work researchers).
- *Loyalty*: going along with the tidal waves, adjusting to the new ideas. Studies based on the Hirschman framework usually start from dissatisfaction and then categorise responses. We start more open: we want to know how social workers respond to tidal waves, bearing in mind that these need not necessarily be perceived as negative. Thus, social workers might adjust and go along with the waves they encounter because they see the merits of the newly announced policy wave or because they feel that they have no other option.
- *Focus*: ignoring the recurring waves of policy and management as much as possible and seeking refuge in the core of the profession.

This means we have eliminated silence as a separate response pattern. Previous research found a lot of silence among social workers confronted with unpalatable policies, but silence could mean different things: it could mean silently contemplating exit, grudging loyalty because of a lack of exit options, or ignoring the policies and concentrating on one's clients.

Method

We draw on a dataset consisting of 35 semi-structured qualitative interviews with social workers, held in 2021. The interviews were held with different generations of social workers, who finished

training in the early 90s, finished training in the early zeros or finished training in the early 10s and were working in various functions and working fields. The interviews were held by the five members of the research team. Respondents were asked to describe their career, to portray their working week when they first started and (for the more experienced social workers) to compare it to their present working week. They were subsequently asked to reflect on clients and their problems, whether these had changed over the years. Lastly, we talked about policy and organisational management and the way this had affected their work.

All respondents volunteered to be interviewed (replying to a call on the website of their professional association, linkedin announcement or announcement in their professional journal). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and offered the possibility to contact the researchers if they had any questions. All participants agreed that the results of the study were to be made public in a journal article. Before the start of the interviews the respondents were asked for their consent, which was then audiotaped.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Our subsequent method can best be described as abduction (Clark et al., 2016/2021, pp. 22–23). We started by open-coding the interviews as a research team. The open codes were discussed among the researchers to find patterns. The most striking finding was the fact that many respondents described tidal waves of policies and/or management. We consulted the literature on tidal wave patterns discussed above. We then systematically coded all references to tidal wave patterns, distinguishing between tidal waves in policy, management and red tape.

Subsequently we decided to find out how social workers responded to tidal waves. Again, following an abductive approach, after discussing our findings we consulted the literature on the Hirschman typology discussed above. We decided to code social workers' responses using a coding scheme consisting of exit, loyalty and focus. We also looked for other response patterns mentioned

Table 1. Tidal waves and responses.

	Waves in policy	Waves in management	Waves in red tape	Exit	Loyalty	Focus
1		×		×	×	
2		×			×	
3	×	×		×		×
4			×	×	×	
5	×				×	×
6	×					×
7					×	×
8				×	×	×
9					×	×
10					×	×
11						×
12		×		×		
13	×			×		
14	×		×	×		
15						×
16	×		×		×	×
17	×					
18					×	
19	×					×
20						×
21					×	
22	×					×
23					×	
24		×		×		×
25		×		×		
26	×					
27					×	×
28					×	
29	×				×	
30	×				×	

in the Hirschman literature (voice and neglect), but we did not find them in our interview transcripts. Table 1 enlists the patterns and the responses found in 30 interviews. Five interviews (mostly those with recent graduates) did not touch on any of the topics addressed in this paper, so these were not included in the table.

All of these were inductive findings, as the topic list for our interviews had not been designed with the concept of tidal waves in mind. The same held for the Hirschman typology, which we also decided to use after reading the interviews. We coded the responses found in the interviews whenever respondents mentioned them, which means that we found multiple patterns in the interviews that did not always mean the same thing. For example: if we found 'exit' in an interview, this could mean: respondent's own exit or future exit from the profession, but it could also refer to their mentioning colleagues who could not take it anymore and had left social work. Loyalty likewise could refer to respondents' own present attitude, but it could also refer to their account of their professional group at large. Narrowing the responses to more detailed patterns would have resulted in too many different categories, thus preventing us from seeing patterns at all (cf. e.g. Elliott, 2018). For this exploratory study, we felt that it was most important to acquire more insight into the tidal wave patterns that professionals experience and the nature of the different responses.

Before we discuss our results, one more explanatory note is in order. Ours was a qualitative study. Qualitative researchers differ in the way they present their results, some of them resorting to art and poetry to characterise their research subjects' point of view, others reporting on patterns in respondents' answers without making any attempt to specify the number of times these patterns were found, yet others aiming to be as precise as possible (Clark et al., 2016/2021, p. 597). Methodology literature recommends to explain and justify the way one presents qualitative findings (Clark et al., 2016/2021, p. 597; Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). For our purposes we chose the latter approach. It is noteworthy that many respondents spontaneously mentioned waves of policy and management thrust upon them and it seems worthwhile to know how many mentioned what kind of waves. Likewise it seems worthwhile to know what response patterns were found and which one was found most. To give the reader the chance to decide for themselves whether this is a lot or a little, we quantify our findings as much as possible (cf. Maxwell, 2010). In addition we will present lots of quotes from many respondents that will give the reader insight into the experience of waves and response patterns.

Results

In the first part of this section we will discuss what respondents told us about tidal waves, further explaining the first three columns of Table 1. In the second part, we will discuss what was said about responses to tidal waves, elaborating on the last three columns of Table 1.

Tidal waves

Seventeen respondents spontaneously described tidal waves thrust upon them. Most of these waves (*n* = 12) concerned policy cycles, thus had been initiated by politicians and policy makers. Several descriptions pertained to the policy cycle described by Hammond (1996): oscillations between harshness and latitude. Respondent 5 observed:

> Over the years I have learned that there are sort of eight-year cycles, in which we start by thinking that prevention is fantastic and great. And then four years later it's all turned back, there's a blow. The next four years, it's all teared down. And then they discover that this has been really bad. That the neighbourhood lacks social cohesion. (…) And presto, we get another improvement. That takes years. I have seen several phases of building up, and several phases of tearing down.

Respondent 29 did not have much experience herself, but she had learned the same lesson from a colleague who

used to work in another municipality, and they did away with all of youth care a couple of years ago. Apparently they regret that now. There's some kind of youth gang now, or so they say. [My colleague] noticed that we pay up to 40 000 euro for juvenile delinquents and we might have prevented that with say 5000 euro per year.

Others had lived through several rounds of decentralisation and centralisation as described by Pollitt (2008). Respondent 17 recounted:

Social work, it's been tidal waves, isn't it? Like: from small-scale to big-scale and from big-scale to small-scale again. At first, in [my municipality], we worked from one central point. And now we have to move into the villages. I suspect we will move back to one central point within the next five years. It happened where I worked before in [big city]. First you were in one of the districts. Then they moved us to one central office and you worked from there. And after the latest cutbacks everybody went back to the districts. Things come and go.

Respondent 22 gave a similar summary, starting with the effects of the most recent wave of decentralisation:

You see that people can't claim a certain right because their municipality doesn't do that type of social care. Whereas if they lived in another municipality they might claim this benefit. That's hard to see sometimes. So I wonder, will we see another tidal wave toward something else? I remember how I started working at social services and there were colleagues who'd been around for some time. And they said: there are tidal waves. We've been through this before. Back in those days, I thought: yeah, so what? But it's true. Once you get older, you can see that it changes, but it often changes back to something that we've seen before.

Other respondents had witnessed cycles of generalist versus specialised care, helping the police prevent crime versus helping them catch juvenile delinquents and abolishing public mental health care versus subsequently reintroducing it, under a different name. As respondent 30 stated succinctly: 'It's all old wine, new bottles'.

Six of the tidal wave descriptions related to developments initiated by the management of the organisations that employed the social workers. Respondents had lived through various reorganisations that often led to the disappearance or reintroduction of managers and coordinators. Respondent 2 told us:

What's been difficult is that we have had so many changes, one after another. Mergers especially. (…) And then they told us: you will be self-directed teams from now on. So no managers, no coordinators. And this right after a merger, employees from four different organisations. (… .) You can imagine what that's been like. So, as of this year they have reintroduced coordinators.

Respondents 1, 12 and 25 had similar stories:

In 2015 (…) all managers were thrown out. (…) Recently our organisation created a new function, named directors, which basically means that now they want managers close to the teams again. (respondent 1)

Others had witnessed a cycle starting with managers knowledgeable in the field followed by managers who knew next to nothing about the actual work, to be replaced again by more informed ones.

Three stories (respondents 4, 14 and 16) described cycles with regard to red tape, that cannot be categorised as either policy or management, because they are usually a combination of the two. Respondent 14 told us:

When I started as a social worker we had to produce an annual report once a year (..) And then came a time when we had to work out every half hour what we were doing for which particular project. That was hell. At present you have to work out what you do with your participants per hour and before that we had another [low registration phase]. A tidal wave, really.

Surfing the waves

As explained above we found three response patterns with regard to tidal waves. Social workers leave their profession (exit), they adapt to every new wave that is coming their way (loyalty), or they choose focus: seek refuge in the core of their profession.

Exit

Nine respondents referred to exit strategies in one way or another. Five of them had left themselves (one of them later returned) or considered leaving. Respondent 1 had sought a job as a private coach, to do real social work as she perceived it. Respondent 12 had become a teacher, but she missed social work and was thinking about how to find her way back. Respondent 13, also currently working as a coach, explained:

> I still like the contents of the job, but as it is now, (…) I don't know if I would have chosen it. It is way too much politics. Local politics: there are aldermen who serve a short period and there are civil servants hatching all manner of plans behind their back … We have ideas about how to shape our profession and the municipality doesn't see them or doesn't want to see them.

Respondent 25 wanted to leave after a heated conflict with the municipality:

> Around Christmas I had a homeless boy in a wheelchair who needed shelter. They did not want to house him in the night shelter, offloaded him to another municipality (…) It made me really angry. I feel I am not taken seriously. (…) I am considering a career switch to teaching.

Other respondents did not talk about leaving themselves, but had witnessed fellow workers leave the profession.

Loyalty

Sixteen respondents described responses that could be classified as loyalty or adapting to changing winds. Some of them surfed the waves because they endorsed the changing policies. Like respondent 23, who had to deal with increasing registration duties:

> You have to do quite a lot of registration. But I do see the value of that. (…) Our community workers (…) find it hard, the registration system. They are not used to it. But I am more into all the protocols, standardised ways of working. It gets easier over time. And I think some numbers are really useful too.

Respondent 28 had adopted a more businesslike style of working:

> In the past we could have countless conversations with people (…). It's much more businesslike and much more regulated now. I find this a good development, because there's no point in having conversations with clients for years on end.

When respondent 4 started working in youth care social workers brought the children along in their own private homes to celebrate Christmas or weddings. In hindsight she feels that this was unprofessional. Subsequently, social workers were very much supposed to keep their distance and now workers seem to have adopted a workable balance:

> At first they turn everything around and then they find a middle ground. At first everything was really personal, way beyond current boundaries. But after that we weren't allowed anything. (…) You were not supposed to be emotionally involved. Like an ice queen, really. And now we've turned back somewhat. (…) We're even allowed to share some personal information.

Various others went along because they did not see another way to cope. Respondent 1 told us:

> I really regret not being able to do social work as I used to. (…) In the past I could really help people, say those with learning disabilities or parents who had to come to terms with having a child with disabilities. (…) It's more managing than social work these days.

Respondent 7 had to deliver generalist care. She agreed, but grudgingly:

> When I started, I just did work with children. [And then they made us do everything.] Including debt counselling. Not quite my cup of tea … but you had to offer generalist care, so I had to do everything. And I managed, but I don't know if I really agreed to it. (…) You know, why not let me do what I do best, and let my colleague do what she does best, instead of taking over each other's jobs.

We tried to code whether loyalty generally meant going along happily or grudgingly. In four cases it was obviously the latter, but in most other cases social workers went along matter-of-factly: not particularly positive or negative, but just stating that this was what it was.

Focus

We found focus in fifteen interviews. Respondents sought for the core of their profession and focused on the things that stayed the same. Respondent 27 explained:

> An intake is an intake. Thinking about goals is thinking about goals. That hasn't changed. The problems people face are universal and eternal.

Respondent 7 likewise told us:

> The task of social work … I think you contribute to, how to say that, that everybody can participate. That people are not forgotten. That everybody gets their chance to participate in society … That's our task, to do that as much as possible. I think that stays the same.

Respondent 6 had a more elaborate explanation of focus:

> R6: The municipality is unstable. We get new aldermen every four years. That's annoying.
>
> Interviewer: what kind of consequences does that have for your work?
>
> R6: Well, we just do our job and let them deal with the policy among themselves. We just soldier on. The contents of my work don't change. I still do the same things. Maybe with different people. Or in different places. (…) But the content doesn't change. So it doesn't bother me. That's the benefit of experience. You have been through a centralisation before, but also through a wave of decentralisation. Our present alderman wants district teams and district offices. (…) So I think, fine, here we go again. That's the second time round, haha. I don't mind. (…) I think, if you're clear about your own job, about your task in your organisation, things do not have to change that much.

Respondent 5 had an intriguing vision, which at first sounded like adapting and surfing the waves but on closer look was another elaborate explanation of focus. She stuck with the tidal waves metaphor and said:

> I think continuity is really important. You know that there will be a lot of money in one period and very little in the next. So you have to teach social workers what they can do themselves. To depend less on the money, the build-up or break-downs. (…) You can teach yourself: it is what it is. Do what you can. (…) I think it's good to just steer through all of it. The wind won't always blow you forward. As my colleague once said to me, if the wind changes you have to adapt the sails.

Conclusion, limitations and implications

Our research question was: 'how do social workers respond to cyclical patterns in policy and management?' We conclude that some social workers loyally adjust and go with the flow (if not always wholeheartedly), some leave the profession or think about exit and others practise focus by seeking refuge in the core of their profession.

We are aware of the limitations of this study. Our method of recruiting respondents may have had an effect on the results. We asked social workers who would like to be interviewed about their work to volunteer for an interview. They may have been more positive about their work and the conditions they work in than social workers in general. Therefore we may have found relatively fewer thoughts about exit. Recent other publications (e.g. Anderson Elffers Felix, 2020; Hoijtink, 2022a; Omlo et al., 2023), show that (over) 40% of Dutch social workers quit or want to quit, which is a higher rate than we found in our study.

Like many other qualitative studies this one also was small-scale. Both the tidal wave patterns and the responses were found inductively; it would be good to search for tidal wave patterns and responses in a larger study and in a more systematic way with a deductive set-up.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is important to reflect on the implications of our findings for social workers and for the coordinators, politicians and policy makers who manage their organisations. First, it is important to acknowledge the existence of tidal waves. Tidal waves in policy and management are like many other phenomena in society: once you

know that they exist, you can understand them better and think about possible ways to cope with them.

Second, the Hirschman typology is very useful to think about possible responses to tidal waves. At present Dutch social workers are often encouraged to learn or to re-learn how to practise voice. Researchers argue that politicising social work got little attention in recent years and should be revived (de Brabander et al., 2021; van der Tier & van Lieshout, 2020). For social workers it might be worthwhile to understand and practise focus as a possible alternative when voice is unattainable or counterproductive. Professionals choosing focus concentrate on their work, ignoring the fuzz around them as much as possible, to avoid becoming cynical and to help their clients to the best of their abilities. Both voice and focus are responses that social workers might discuss, learn and practise together. Both responses require working experience and a strong sense of professional identity. To accomplish the latter good socialisation into the profession, membership of the professional association and attending group meetings with other social workers might be particularly helpful (Le Sage, 2020; Webb, 2017). For social work researchers and social work educators it is important to understand how focus and professional identity are linked and to work out how to practise focus at school or university, or in post-academic training.

The third and possibly most important lesson from this study is for policymakers and managers. They should read Hammond (1996), Pollitt (2008) and Hood and Jackson (1991) and get acquainted or re-acquainted with the phenomenon of swings-of-the-pendulum. Knowing how much of policy and management consists of oscillation causing recurring patterns and tidal waves should breed modesty in any politician, policymaker or manager who wants to take his sector or organisation along in a 'necessary transition'. The present is not perfect, but perfection in social policy is unattainable. Many professionals can cope with the present and help their clients cope if they do not have to surf endless tidal waves in search of a better future.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

Funding

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