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'The only thing I do is coordination': on the voluntarisation of social work in the Netherlands

'Ik coordineer alleen nog maar': Over de verplaatsing van sociaal werk naar vrijwilligers in Nederland

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ABSTRACT

Social work once started as volunteering and then turned into a paid profession. At present many countries try to outsource large parts of social work to volunteers. This article studies this process of voluntarisation in one large social work organisation in the Netherlands. It is based on interviews with social workers, managers and volunteers at this organisation. The study shows that voluntarisation need not go to the detriment of service quality, partly because volunteers do a good job and partly because paid social workers teach them how to do that. From a quality of work perspective voluntarisation causes concerns. Firstly because it forces paid social workers to put up with competitors who are willing to work for free and secondly, because voluntarisation often means that the core part of the job (contact between worker and service user) is outsourced to volunteers, while paid social workers are tasked with management responsibilities: coaching, budgeting, coordinating and making decisions. Because of this, we recommend a more critical stance toward voluntarisation than is currently in vogue.

SAMENVATTING


Maatschappelijk werk (sociaal werk) begon ooit als vrijwilligerswerk en ontwikkelde zich vervolgens tot een betaalde professie. Tegenwoordig zien we een ontwikkeling in omgekeerde richting. Steeds meer landen laten grote delen van wat vroeger betaalde hulp was over aan vrijwilligers. In dit artikel bekijken we de impact van die ontwikkeling in één grote welzijnsorganisatie in Nederland. Het artikel is gebaseerd op interviews met betaalde hulpverleners, managers en vrijwilligers bij de betreffende organisatie. Het onderzoek liet zien dat het verplaatsen van hulp naar vrijwilligers niet ten koste gaat van de kwaliteit van de dienstverlening: vrijwilligers doen het goed en betaalde hulpverleners helpen hen om het goed te doen door te coachen en cursussen te geven. Het verplaatsen van sociaal werk naar vrijwilligers heeft twee grote gevolgen voor de professie. Ten eerste: betaalde hulpverleners moeten werken in een context waarin steeds meer concurrenten hun taken gratis willen overnemen. Ten tweede: betaalde hulpverleners raken de kern van hun werk (het contact met cliënten) kwijt en houden een managementachtige functie over met veel coördinatie, budgetbewaking, en coaching. Sociaal werkers zouden het verplaatsen van hun werk naar vrijwilligers daarom kritischer moeten bekijken dan velen van hen nu doen.

KEYWORDS

Voluntarisation;
volunteering; quality of work;
welfare state developments

SLEUTELWOORDEN

Vrijwilligers; kwaliteit van dienstverlening; kwaliteit van werk; verzorgingsstaat; participatiesamenleving

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Introduction

Social work started at the end of the nineteenth, early twentieth century as volunteering. Every social work student knows the story: middle-class women with time on their hands went out to visit the poor, give household advice, monitor children or preach sobriety (e.g. Bamford, 2015; Netting et al., 2004; Waaldijk, 1996). Subsequently, social work went through a process of professionalisation: schools were installed and unpaid 'friendly visitors' turned into hired professionals. In many countries the rise of social work as a profession was strongly connected with the establishment of welfare states: trained social workers were paid to distribute welfare, to determine eligibility for social assistance, to help poor or vulnerable citizens getting housing or health care, or coping with the vicissitudes of life (Bamford, 2015). With the demise of the welfare state two developments occurred. On the one hand, social work was subjected to marketisation and privatisation; on the other hand, its tasks were shifted back to civil society or the voluntary sector (e.g. Baines, 2014; Bertotti, 2016; Cunningham & James, 2009; Ferguson & Lavelette, 2013; Hardwick, 2014; Jordan, 2011; Kallio et al., 2016; Muehlebach, 2012; Pentaraki, 2019; Weiss-Gal & Caduri, 2015). The latter development was especially prominent in the Netherlands from the twenty-first century onward (Grootegoed et al., 2017; van Bochove et al., 2016). Whereas marketisation and privatisation presumably lead to efficiency and effectiveness by using financial incentives and entrepreneurial ideas, transferring tasks to the voluntary sector supposedly enhances community spirit, in addition to saving money not spent on paid professional help. Voluntary work is usually defined as 'any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than (...) close relatives' (Williams, 2002, p. 248; Grootegoed et al., 2017, p. 9). Previous research suggests that while social workers disapprove of marketisation, they take a rosier view of the transfer of tasks to the voluntary sector (Kallio et al., 2016).

In this article, we intend to find out what this development – henceforth referred to as the 'voluntarisation of social work' – means for the quality of services provided to service users and for the quality of work performed by social workers. We first wanted to establish what was known from previous studies on voluntarisation. We started our literature search with a recent review of the differences between paid and unpaid work for service users (Metz et al., 2017) and a recent article on boundary work between paid social workers and volunteers in the Netherlands (van Bochove et al., 2016). Additional articles were found by means of the snowball method. Our brief literature search provided us with a list of positive and negative effects of voluntarisation on the quality of services and the quality of work. We accepted the authors' verdict on both aspects, that is: we did not seek to define quality beforehand but went with the authors' assessment.

Subsequently, we studied one large social work organisation in the Netherlands to find out what happens when erstwhile professional social work is voluntarised. We asked social workers about the pros and cons of volunteer services. We also asked volunteers about their work, so as to assess what happens to services when they are being voluntarised. Like with the literature review we did not define quality of services or quality of work beforehand. We followed our respondents' evaluation of what happened; we quote them extensively to show how they assess the voluntarisation of their organisation's tasks.

In the last section of our article, we present our own evaluation of the move toward voluntarisation by sketching two scenarios on the future of the profession. The first outlines what will happen if we continue to embrace voluntarisation; the second advocates a (moderate) opposition to this trend. We hope that these scenarios will help the profession relate to this development.

Volunteering: pros and cons from the literature

In this article, we distinguish between the effects of voluntarisation on the quality of services and its effects on the quality of work. Most previous studies take the first perspective and then strike a rather positive note.

Ronel (2006) studied volunteers who helped troubled youth in Israel. He observes that adolescents were very impressed by the fact that volunteers were 'willing to devote their time for the good of others (...) without receiving any material reward' (p. 1141). The adolescents had been accustomed to a harsh, materialistic ethos, and help by volunteers made them realise that there was good in the world after all. Tunstill and Malin (2011) studied volunteers who assisted multi-problem families in the UK. The service users were very happy with the help of volunteers, whom they found understanding and accessible. The researchers argue that this may have been due to the fact that volunteers may operate outside professional boundaries, whereas professional social workers in this sector might feel responsible for child protection without addressing other problems.

Metz et al. (2017) did a literature review on the effects of volunteering and held focus groups with social workers, service users, policy makers and volunteers. They found that volunteers can more easily engage in meaningful relationships with service users. The relationship between service user and volunteer is deemed more equal, and feedback by volunteers is perceived as more sincere. The focus group respondents suggested that service users might feel less intimidated by volunteers, because volunteer helpers do not have to report their findings.

Researchers also found negative effects of volunteer services. Both psychiatric patients and volunteers sometimes doubt if volunteers possess enough expertise with regard to, for example, addiction (Grootegoed et al., 2017; Grootegoed & Tonkens, 2015; Machielse & Bos, 2018). Some service users are afraid that volunteers living in their neighbourhood might gossip about their problems with other residents (Trappenburg et al., 2020). The lack of professional boundaries, which Ronel deemed beneficial, might also lead to crossing lines: volunteers might become overburdened by their activities, and service users might become emotionally dependent on their volunteer (Grootegoed et al., 2017; Metz et al., 2017). Lastly, volunteers working in community centres might be inclined to stick to their own sort of people, excluding newcomers or others perceived to be different (van Bochove et al., 2014; Verloo, 2015; Wekker, 2020).

Opinions differ as to which type of help might offer service users more continuity. Ronel (2006) reports a rapid volunteer turnover in the Israel project. Also volunteers had a limited amount of time because of their other commitments. By contrast, Tunstill and Malin (2011) saw a considerable turnover of paid staff. Metz et al. (2017) also conclude that the use of volunteers might lead to more continuity of help.

From a quality of work perspective, one might expect that paid professionals would oppose voluntarisation of their work. Getting staff for free might go to the detriment of paid staff's working conditions, their wages first and foremost. Netting et al. (2004) recount that in the sixties and seventies, during the heyday of the women's movement, paid social workers saw voluntarisation as exploitation of women. But then the relationship between paid social workers and volunteers improved, from the 1980s onward. Surprisingly few studies found resentment or anger about voluntarisation among paid social workers in recent days. Baines (2004) describes social work organisations in Alberta (Canada). Her study shows 'that it is not uncommon for agencies to have entire departments run exclusively by volunteers and nominally supervised by a paid manager' (p. 281). This did not harm the quality of services in Alberta, as many volunteers were part time paid professionals who worked additional hours as volunteers. Social work schools taught students that it was important to volunteer. There were also real volunteers (who were not partially employed by the organisation) and this tended to have a negative impact on wages 'as workers face the daily reality that they could be replaced by someone who works for free' (Baines, 2004, p. 283). Baines's study suggests that workers accept voluntarisation, because volunteering is a route to a paid position, and because protesting might induce organisations to voluntarise even further.

Some studies show that the boundaries between voluntary work and paid professional work have become fluid. van Bochove et al. (2016) observe that many paid professionals actively welcome volunteers, downplaying possible differences between paid and unpaid staff. Moreover, paid staff liked the opportunity to become educators or coordinators of volunteers. Sundlisæter Skinner et al. (2019) studied elderly care in Norway and found that ever more tasks are performed by volunteers. They

Table 1. Effects of voluntarisation found in previous studies.

Quality of services perspective, positive effects	Meaningful relationship Holistic approach Trust; not having to report about service user
Quality of services perspective, mixed effects	Continuity of care
Quality of services perspective, negative effects	Less expertise Loss of confidentiality Emotional burden for volunteer Emotional dependency service user Volunteers stick to their own kind
Quality of work perspective, positive effects	Chance to become educators or coordinators
Quality of work perspective, negative effects	Loss of employment, decreasing wages

think that most of these tasks could be classified as complementary services rather than plain substitution of paid work, but they also observe that some volunteer tasks had previously been transferred from the voluntary sector to public services. These tasks were re-voluntarised. The authors conclude that there is no 'clear demarcation between the voluntary and public sectors' and that we, therefore, need to study how paid professionals and volunteers 'adapt and interact with each other' (p. 1008). Weiss-Gal and Caduri (2015) found that training paid staff improved their relationships with volunteers.

Studies also suggest that female-dominated professions might acquiesce more easily in the voluntarisation of their work (Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019). Andrews and Wærness (2011) studied the professionalisation and subsequent deprofessionalisation of public health nurses in Norway. Public health nurses saw a large part of their work taken over by other professional groups, but they did not perceive these groups as competitors. Instead, they welcomed them as 'collaborative partners', with whom one might realise 'the best possible service to users' (p. 54). Andrews and Waerness suggest that public health nurses also lacked the power to oppose the deprofessionalisation of their work. Although losing one's work to other professionals is not the same as losing it to volunteers, it seems plausible that similar responses may occur.

We summarised the effects of voluntarisation found in the literature in Table 1.

In our study, we used the effects mentioned in previous studies as heuristic devices that inspired our topic list.

Context and method

Dutch students may study social work at universities of applied sciences (undergraduate level; in Dutch: HBO) or at vocational colleges (in Dutch: MBO) (Verharen et al., 2020; Wouters & Hens, 2020). Registration as social worker is optional, although it is required for some professionals working with children and youngsters (Hermans et al., 2020). Many paid positions may or may not be fulfilled by (registered) social workers with formal qualifications. Some social work organisations feel that hiring qualified social workers indicates high quality services, others do not. Municipalities may choose to contract agencies that employ trained social workers, but they may also engage other organisations as they see fit, at least for adult social care (Hermans et al., 2020). It is fair to say that social work in the Netherlands is an extremely open profession (Spierts, 2014).

As social work is such an open profession it is relatively easy to substitute parts of it by unpaid voluntary work (apart from youth care there are no tasks specifically assigned to social workers by law). Government policy has advocated voluntarisation for several years, more especially so since 2015, when many welfare state tasks were decentralised to the local level. Policy makers assumed that local authorities might offer tailor-made services to their citizens, hopefully substituting expensive professional aid for free advice offered by volunteers, or friendly encounters with neighbours at a community centre. Volunteering is also taken to be beneficial for the people being helped by volunteers, for the volunteers themselves and for society at large (Grootegoed et al., 2017).

Government policy regarding volunteering builds on a pre-existing culture. Volunteering is customary in the Netherlands. Recent studies show that almost half of the population volunteers in one way or another (Grootegoed et al., 2017). Time spent on volunteering varies from a few hours per year to over 20 h per week. Most volunteering chores are done by people between 35 and 55 years of age, but these activities include helping out at the children's school or sports club (de Wit & van Niekerk, 2020). The very active volunteers are much more often over 55 (de Wit & van Niekerk, 2020), especially in the care and welfare sector, where many volunteers are between 65 and 74 years old (de Klerk et al., 2014). Men and women volunteer almost equally, but volunteering in care and welfare is more often done by women (65% of care and welfare volunteers are women). 17% of the active volunteers (volunteering once per week or more) has a paid job (de Wit & van Niekerk, 2020).

Dutch Delight (we will use this pseudonym) is a large social work organisation somewhere in the Netherlands. Dutch Delight provides many different services in one municipality consisting of various smaller villages, totalling over 1,00,000 inhabitants. We first wanted to assess the amount of voluntarisation taking place at Dutch Delight. To establish that we studied annual reports from 2006 till 2020.

Subsequently, we held semi-structured interviews with nine volunteers, nine paid employees at Dutch Delight, one manager and one ex-manager (who left the organisation in 2019). We will refer to them as V1–9, SW 1–9 and M1 and 2. We strove to include paid employees who had worked at Dutch Delight for two years or more, so they could reflect on voluntarisation and working with volunteers: three respondents had worked at Dutch Delight for more than ten years, four had been there between five and ten years, three others between two and five years and the last one for 18 months. The volunteers were recruited via the paid employees, who were asked to suggest names of volunteers who would enjoy an interview about their activities for Dutch Delight. We spoke with volunteers who delivered a wide variety of services (community centre activities, individual help to service users with financial or housing problems, assistance to service users with a psychiatric background). Interviews took place in the spring of 2020, some at the office of Dutch Delight, many online because of the Covid restrictions. We asked all respondents about the pros and cons of voluntarisation, probing for their experiences with various activities and types of help. All respondents gave informed consent.

Voluntarisation is a process that started several years ago and is still going on. Hence we could not study its effects by observations. We had to rely on documents and on respondents' memory (cf. Bryman, 2016, pp. 494–495). Semi-structured interviews were a suitable method to find out how people thought and felt about the voluntarisation at Dutch Delight. A semi-structured interview follows a topic list, but flexibly, depending on what respondents remember and what they want to say (Adhabi & Blash Anozie, 2017). Also semi-structured interviews follow the topics suggested by the literature but allow for additional insights.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded with the software program Nvivo. We coded the interviews broadly first, sorting interview fragments related to the quality of work and to the quality of services. We distinguished between positive and negative assessments by the respondents. With regard to the quality of services we subsequently used subcodes derived from Table 1. With regard to the quality of work we encountered effects of voluntarisation not covered in the literature. Hence the first part of the results section, devoted to the quality of work, largely follows our respondents' stories. The second part – devoted to the quality of services – follows the table more closely although we also found additional insights into the effects on the quality of services based on the stories of our respondents.

Voluntarisation at Dutch Delight

The quality of work perspective

Social work in the Netherlands is an ever changing world: organisations merge, acquire new tasks and new staff, lose other tasks and have to conform to ever changing legislation. Therefore

simply doing the maths (how many paid staff did Dutch Delight employ over the years) does not provide a good indicator of the amount of voluntarisation taking place. The number of paid employees grew from 28 in 2011 to 43 in 2015 to 53 in 2019, which might look like a downright increase. However, the number of volunteers grew in the same period from 871 (in 2011) to 1181 (in 2015) to 1386 in (2019). Perhaps the most noteworthy change concerns the difference between paid social workers with a vocational college education and paid social workers with a university of applied sciences background. In 2011 vocational college was the majority's background (69%), in 2019 they made up 29% of paid staff at Dutch Delight (Annual reports Dutch Delight).

One of the managers explained:

We used to have real executive work. Everyone engaged in contact with service users. Right now, almost all paid jobs involve coordination. They all manage volunteers, coach them, instruct them. And the contact with service users is left to volunteers. That's why we now recruit social workers with a university of applied sciences background. They don't teach students how to manage volunteers at vocational college. (M2)

SW1 worried about this development.

We have vocational college interns here. And then I think: where will you ever find a paid job if there are so many volunteers taking up your tasks? (...) I would really like for you to find paid employment in social work, but how is that even realistic? (SW1)

SW7 does not see much difference between social workers and volunteers. She observed that some volunteers really hope to get a paid job by volunteering.

In my parenting support group I've got two volunteers who are really good and I think they might manage to find paid employment, but that's often what drives them, that they would like to do paid work. (SW7)

SW4 applauds volunteering, but she also recalls the last economic crisis.

When I first started here in 2013, unemployment was high. And then you see people becoming irritated when so many things have to be done by volunteers while others are unemployed. In a way we were lucky because we could get so many volunteers, because of all those people without jobs, but there was resentment, and I fear we're heading there again ... (SW4)

Volunteers also observed this tension. V6 explains:

Some volunteers like to do responsible work, but that should be limited in my view. (...) Because people go to school (...) to study social work and then some volunteer turns up, to basically do the same thing. That seems odd. (V6)

From a quality of work perspective, the contents of one's job are important too. V4 used to work as a nurse. She observed that as a volunteer in social work she now gets the nice parts of the job. As a paid nurse she had to leave those parts to hospital volunteers.

I can do these nice things here, pay attention to people. People just really like to have a chat but paid workers don't have the time for that. (V4)

All paid staff respondents noticed that they were tasked with coordination, administration and training and coaching volunteers. The story of SW8, in charge of community services, was typical.

In my community centre, almost everything is done by volunteers. The only thing I do is coordination. Like, if somebody's ill, they first try to find a replacement themselves, but if they can't find one, they call me. (...) And I am accountable. (...) When there's money involved. If they want to buy something, organise something extra. You can't do more with volunteers than we currently do at Dutch Delight, I really wouldn't know how. I do want to keep my job, haha. (SW8)

Despite SW8's reservations Dutch Delight also tries to transfer coordination tasks to volunteers. The same goes for training and coaching volunteers. The organisation sometimes engages vulnerable volunteers to help others, for example (recovering) psychiatric patients people with a learning

Table 2. Effects of voluntarisation on the quality of work at Dutch Delight.

Quality of work perspective	Loss of employment at executive level – Paid work involves coordination, administration and coaching volunteers
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disability, or immigrants whose Dutch is poorly. These volunteers need assistance in volunteering. SW5 recalls how she accompanied these volunteers to their volunteer work.

Seven years ago (...) I could assist twenty people, help them find their way in their volunteering services. I got hours to do so. But then I noticed, this takes up too much time. And then we started the project with volunteer coaches. (SW5)

SW5 was tasked with meta-coaching the volunteer coaches. She herself still coaches the most seriously afflicted vulnerable volunteers.

From a quality of work perspective, we may now specify the loss of employment: this seems to take place mostly at the level of vocational college social workers. In addition, we may conclude that voluntarisation has changed the contents of social work, from direct contact with service users to a manager-like position. While the first aspect is rated negative by most respondents, the second aspect is not evaluated as either positive or negative: that is just the way it is (Table 2).

The quality of services perspective

Almost all positive effects of volunteering found in the literature were also found at Dutch Delight. Our respondents lauded the relationship between service users and volunteers. They attributed the good relationship to a lack of pressure (volunteers like to help out and go the extra mile, while paid professionals have a limited amount of time), and to the fact that volunteers and service users were consciously matched. V9 had worked as a paid professional and as a volunteer. She explained:

When I was paid, they paid me for a number of hours. So that's what I did. Whereas now, as a volunteer, (...) I do it because I like it, because I want to contribute. [Our coordinator assigns the cases and she matches us]. I am good with shy, insecure teenage girls. The sassy ones with challenging behaviour: not so much. Whereas, when I was paid, they have a waiting list, so you just get whoever comes next. (V9)

The holistic character of volunteer services was recognised too. V2 volunteers in a newcomer family. She describes how they can text her for help with a form that they don't comprehend, and she will come to the rescue as soon as she can. One form turned out to be a letter from the soccer club, inviting the family's son to come and play. They were too late to register, whereupon V2 phoned as long as it took to get the boy enrolled in soccer practice. She thinks paid social workers would not do that; they would stick to their role.

V8 helps service users perform administrative and financial tasks. He too thinks volunteers have more latitude.

You can mean more to people, because after all, you're just a volunteer. So you can discuss stuff, saying like, 'you know, I'm just an amateur myself, just doing my best', and then you have more room to talk freely, whereas if you say something as an employee, it's supposed to be all true as soon as it comes out of your mouth. (V8)

With regard to continuity we found the same mixed picture as in previous studies. Age seems to be the determining factor here. Retired volunteers bring continuity, whereas younger volunteers are mostly looking for paid employment, which may take them away from their volunteering activities. The same goes for younger paid employees, whose ambition sometimes induces them to leave Dutch Delight. M1 tried to quantify the state of affairs:

We lose ten paid employees per year and at least 100 volunteers. Maybe even more. In the last couple of months 45 volunteers quit. So that might be about 200 per year. (M1)

V1 experiences more continuity among elderly volunteers.

Paid employees have a job, they want to develop themselves, so they leave. And volunteers are done with ambition, they are happy to see one another. (...) If there's a nice atmosphere, they are really happy. (V1)

According to SW8, who mostly works with elderly volunteers at a community centre, organising continuity is very easy.

I send one text message, saying 'Pete's ill, who can replace him tomorrow?' In five minutes I'll have four text messages back. [All positive]. I have been working here for six or seven years. Two volunteers died, two left. All the rest are still here. (SW8)

With regard to the negative effects of voluntarisation found in the literature, it was striking how much effort Dutch Delight made to prevent these. Volunteers were offered extensive training courses on how to handle difficult clients. They learned to keep a professional distance to prevent overinvolvement. And many of them learned that they had to empower service users, not overindulge them or take over their lives. They seemed to become proto-social workers.

V3 works at an information centre where she has to assist service users who struggle with all sorts of problems: emotional but also legal and financial. She explains:

You have to know so many things. The laws keep changing and you have to keep abreast, what's the current rule, what do people have to take into account, so you have to educate yourself. (V3)

SW6 offers courses in rules and regulations for volunteers like V3. In addition, V3 also has to learn how to empower people.

Some [service users] have to fill in the same form every month. And they keep coming here, so we can do it for them. So you make them sit down at the computer and teach them to do it themselves. (...) And then some of them come back: 'Look, I did it myself!' I think that's quite an accomplishment. (V3)

V6 was offered peer-to-peer training.

Like a day or half a day, and then we discuss cases and we learn from each other. How we solved things, or how we should not do it. You learn a lot that way. (V6)

SW3 explains what she teaches her volunteers.

I tell them to leave their values at home. There are service users who smoke one pack a day and have two dogs. But if you tell them to quit smoking and get rid of the dogs, you won't get any further. The best you can do is just calculate the costs of things and then leave the families to decide for themselves. Don't judge. (SW3)

SW5 teaches her coaches who assist vulnerable volunteers another crucial social work lesson.

Don't take over from your vulnerable volunteer. Let them do it themselves. And that's difficult because the type of person who wants to be coach really likes to help. But they have to learn to sit on their hands, step aside and make people see for themselves. (SW5)

To prevent possible breaches of trust volunteers dealing with individual service users have to sign a confidentiality form (SW2). Sometimes coordinators are asked not to match service users with volunteers living close by, to respect their privacy (SW3).

We asked our respondents if and why they still need paid professionals at Dutch Delight. Occasionally they referred to service users with very complex problems like depression and suicidal thoughts (SW6, SW2).

More often respondents thought paid staff could provide legal or organisational authority. V1 thinks that her community centre needs someone with authority.

A paid employee is in charge. Not that he would be bossing around, but they have an air of authority, and there are lots of volunteers who don't dare to make decisions. (V1)

V5 also needs authority on occasion.

Table 3. Effects of voluntarisation on the quality of services at Dutch Delight.

Quality of services perspective	Meaningful relationship + Holistic approach + Continuity of care +/-; elderly volunteers offer continuity Possible risks for service users and volunteers countered by confidentiality forms and by courses /training for volunteers Paid social workers enforce rules and make decisions
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There were residents at the community centre who started trading liquor. I am against that. A glass of beer or wine, fine by me. But you should not leave the community centre roaring drunk. So that was difficult for me, because who am I to say that, you see what I mean? (V5)

V8 helps out with financial and administrative problems. Sometimes he has to say that what the service user wants is not possible.

Interviewer: But do you do that often?

V8: No, I would rather leave that to [the paid employees]. (...) They can decide: you're not entitled to this, so you won't get it.

As in previous studies, we also found that opening up to newcomers was a task that paid social workers took on themselves. SW9 described one of the community centres:

This used to be the residents' living room. Not for outsiders, well, unless they wanted them. But now it's been opened up, so all sorts of strangers enter into what they feel is their living room (...) that's taken a toll on them. (SW9)

Our findings regarding the quality of services are summarised in [Table 3](#). On the whole voluntarisation at Dutch Delight seems to be regarded as a positive development. Risks are adequately countered or prevented and paid professionals keep order when necessary.

Whither social work?

The quality of services at Dutch Delight did not suffer from the ongoing voluntarisation. Positive effects found in previous studies – more equal relationships with service users, a holistic approach unhindered by guidelines or protocols (Metz et al., 2017; Ronel, 2006) – were also found at Dutch Delight. Negative effects found in previous studies – overburdening volunteers, emotional dependence of service users (Grootegoed et al., 2017; Metz et al., 2017), loss of confidentiality (Trappenburg et al., 2020) – were prevented by training, coaching and confidentiality forms. Working with elderly volunteers seemed to offer more continuity of help than working with younger, paid social workers. It should be noted that we rely on the evaluation of services by social workers and volunteers, we did not interview service users about the quality of help. Some of the studies in our literature search did and this might be an important line of inquiry to follow up on.

As for the quality of work: most executive jobs at Dutch Delight have been replaced by volunteering while the remaining jobs have turned into manager-like positions that involve budgeting, staffing, coordination and coaching. Although the literature search suggested that some social workers might appreciate the new coaching and planning parts of their job (van Bochove et al., 2016) while workers at Dutch Delight simply accepted these new aspects without complaints, it seems fair to say that voluntarisation deteriorates the quality of work, because of the job loss. The quality of work perspective was less prominent in previous studies, so it would be interesting to see if our results can be found in other organisations and other countries.

This article was based on a small-scale qualitative case study of one large organisation in one country. Dutch Delight has voluntarised more than many other organisations, and the Netherlands may have gone further along this path than other countries. This is a limitation of our study and it warrants caution. Still, voluntarisation seems to be a prominent development, with promising as well

as threatening aspects for social work. Based on our findings we will briefly sketch two possible scenarios as food for thought for the profession: (1) proceed and transform and (2) preserve and improve.

If we proceed on the path taken in the Netherlands, social work might find its way back to its roots in the nineteenth, early twentieth century. Social work has always been somewhat ambivalent about its status as a paid profession (Bamford, 2015; Spierts, 2014); turning back to its charitable origins might be the right way forward, although obviously not in its entirety. One would hope that the condescending practices of some friendly visitors (lady Bountiful figures in many social work history books (Bamford, 2015)) can be avoided. Also the middle-class women who volunteered in the past depended on husbands and fathers to pay for their living. These days are gone forever. If we proceed on the road to ever more voluntarisation we should find a way to ensure volunteers some financial independence by, for example, introducing a basic income. What is left of paid social work in this scenario will be different from the more recent past. Schools of social work should prepare their students for a future as managers and educators of volunteers; students should be taught to teach and to lead. Students who want to help other people (an often-heard reason to choose social work) should be forewarned that helping others is something that citizens do for free; one should refrain from choosing it as a career. The proceed-and-transform scenario need not be a catastrophe. With the demographic ageing of Europe ever more pensioners will look for ways to make themselves useful, and helping others might be a wonderful way to give meaning to their lives. Volunteering might also give meaning to the lives of vulnerable people for whom paid employment is too demanding: people with chronic diseases, psychiatric conditions or learning disabilities.

In the second scenario, we might try to preserve the profession as it was formed by its founding mothers after the early days of charitable help (Waalwijk, 1996). Helping vulnerable citizens became a paid occupation in the course of the twentieth century; and it seems quite reasonable to hold on to that. Social work is not an obsolete occupation like typesetter or switchboard operator. Vulnerable people needing help will always be there. Furthermore, everybody needs to make a living, and if butchers, bakers, candle stick makers as well as lawyers, doctors, and accountants get paid for their services without having to face free competition on a daily basis, there does not seem to be a good reason why female-dominated professions like social work should have to put up with large-scale voluntarisation. Also, it would be a pity to transform the profession of social work into a management-like occupation, focusing on rules, budgets and organisation. Preserving the profession might have the added advantage of saving vocational college jobs.

If we were to choose this scenario, social work might take the chance to learn from the move toward voluntarisation. If matching volunteer helper and service user is a recipe for a good relationship, should we not use this in professional work as well? Obviously one would have to guarantee that all service users would get help in the end, but starting with matching might work better than stating that every worker should help every service user without any personal preferences. If volunteers accomplish good results by talking to service users whilst doing something else (drinking coffee, tending the garden, doing the dishes), might this not be a method to reintroduce in professional social work, possibly instead of the goal-oriented approach that is currently popular? And if continuity works wonders, this might be a reason to treasure and reward professionals who stay put instead of moving up and away. Organisations might think of career paths that would further continuity.

Choosing preserve-and-improve would not mean the end of volunteering as we know it. Volunteers provide valuable services to service users of all sorts and there will never be enough social workers around to replace all of these services by paid professional help. Nor would choosing the second scenario put social workers and volunteers at loggerheads. This article has shown that some volunteers themselves would rather do paid employment and that others deplore the replacement of paid jobs by volunteer positions. Volunteers and social workers might join forces in a fight for quality of work alongside quality of services.

That said, social workers should develop criteria to distinguish between helpful volunteering and excess voluntarisation. These criteria may be quantitative ('entire department run by volunteers with one paid manager' seems a clear case of excess) or qualitative: volunteers who effectively take over social workers' jobs would be another form of excess. Splitting the job in two and attributing the contact with service users wholly to volunteers does not seem the right way forward in the second scenario. The contact between social worker and service user is the heart of the profession. Preserve-and-improve should start with the preservation of the professional soul.

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