Coherent triads and successful inter-professional collaboration: narratives of professional actors in the Swedish child welfare system

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze how and when the professional actors within the Swedish child welfare system portray successful cooperation and determine which discursive patterns are involved in the construction of this phenomenon. The empirical basis for this study is formed by 147 recorded interviews with institution-placed youths, their parents, and different occupational categories within the social services and the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care. Analytical findings with the following themes are presented: (1) coherent vision triad, (2) coherent rhetorically accepted triad, and (3) coherent exclusive triad. The personal interactive aspect of cooperation among professional actors in the care of children is important for successful collaboration. This aspect also appears to be significant for producing and reproducing joint collaboration identities. However, joint collaboration identities and the coherence triad can limit the sphere of cooperation to the entities involved in the care of youths and the juvenile or his/her parents are left out.

KEYWORDS

Triad coherence; inter-professional collaboration; interview studies; social work practise; social care; inclusion; integration

Introduction

In the 20th century, multiple collaboration projects were initiated among social services, health care, and social insurance entities in Sweden (see for example in Axelsson and Axelsson 2007; Anell and Mattisson 2009, 58–67).1 This collaboration was intended to result in shorter waiting periods and faster initiation of rehabilitation while lowering expenses. Furthermore, the collaboration was supposed to benefit the clients. Similar tendencies can be observed in the relationship between the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (abbreviated NBIC)2 and the social services in Sweden between 2004 and 2009. During this period, it was common for projects to demand improved collaboration (Fäldt et al. 2007; Hajighasemi 2008; Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009; Lundström, Sallnäs, and Vogel 2012).

One of these collaborative projects is ‘Counteract Violence and Gangs’ (abbreviated as the MVG-project), which was conducted in Sweden from 1 July 2006 to 31 December 2008. The project aimed to enhance collaboration between social services and the NBIC and to streamline actions for youths in social care and their families. The intent was that a new position, known as the coordinator (employees of NBIC), would have two responsibilities: to coordinate officials’ actions regarding youths in social care and ensure that the officials completed their commitments, and to work in part as a sort of extra, state-employed parent. An example of a commitment that the coordinator was obligated to monitor is the arrangement of school and leisure activities after a...
stay in an institution (Government Office, Ministry of Social Affairs 2006; Swedish National Board of Institutional Care 2006, 2009; Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009; Lundström, Sallnäs, and Vogel 2012; Andersson Vogel 2012; Basic 2018, 2015, 2013, 2012). The project was externally evaluated by the Department of Sociology, Lund University (Process Evaluation; Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009) and by the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University (Effect Evaluation; Lundström, Sallnäs, and Vogel 2012).

The MVG-project resulted in many inter-organizational struggles among social services, the NBIC, and project employees. It also resulted in interpersonal conflicts among involved actors: the professionals, parents, and youths. Alliances were frequently formed during interpersonal conflicts (Basic 2015, 2013, 2012). My previous analysis of this empirical material showed that when a new collaborative project is being launched and organisations are brought closer, cooperation can become a struggle, so that neither inter-organisational nor interpersonal collaboration seems to be supportive for the client. Young persons who were involved in the MVG project took part in interactions with officials who were expected to work together with the best interests of the youngsters and their parents at heart. These officials presented a negative image of their collaboration partners. The impact that this behaviour had on the treatment of the young persons is clarified by the result of the effect evaluation of the MVG project. Lundström et al. (2012, 64) concluded that the coordinators’ efforts were not beneficial for youngsters participating in the project.


Kolb and Putnam (1992, 16–17) state that changes within the organization and the pursuit of collaboration may accumulate conflicts. It is fairly natural for struggles to take place continuously in intermediate organizational relationships in which actors want to control, influence, or resist the activities of others (Schruijer 2015; Huxham and Beech 2008, 555–579; Reitan 1998). According to Schruijer (2008), collaboration and conflict go hand in hand, and the source of the conflict is usually a contradiction among organizational goals, interests, and identities. Attempts to reduce conflict between organizations do not improve cooperation because ‘conflict-reducing interventions can never in themselves stimulate collaboration’ (Schruijer 2008, 433).

Still, there are examples of successful cooperation. According to previous research, factors contributing to the success of collaboration include the following: chiefdom and functional borders have been decided in an appropriate manner; organizations are located at the same place; administrative and political management and finance are coordinated; cooperation includes all levels in the organization that are going to cooperate; mutual respect and mutual trust exist between the cooperating parties; mutual additional training of all personnel is practiced; mutually beneficial development projects are practiced; and economical stimuli or forced legislation exist (Lindberg 2009, 54–55; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). Many of the listed factors involve actors that should become ‘the same type’ (e.g. mutual education, mutual houses). The picture that is presented in the research above shows that collaboration occurs between equal actors rather than between unequal actors.

Hornby and Atkins ([2000] 1993) emphasize that personal relationships are an important contributing factor for collaboration. Salzer (1994, 21) wrote that the organizational identity is about how individuals in a group define themselves and their organization. Whetten and Godfrey (1998, 37) defined organizational identity as ‘the continuously renegotiated set of meanings about who we are as an organization’. Sevón (1996, 53) found that organizational identity appears through interpersonal interaction and that it cannot be found in static form.
Czarniawska (1997) wrote that the creation of organizational identity is a constantly ongoing narrative process. Organizations do not exist independent of their members, and the members construct the organization through their speech, writing, and actions. In the context in which the organizational identity is created and re-created, the morality of the participant is also produced and reproduced (Dailey and Browning 2014). Lotia and Hardy (2008, 366–389) have suggested that it is typical both when partners moralize about each other and when they do so about other people. These moralizing descriptions often contain dichotomous terms (e.g. passive/active or friends/enemies).

Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant (2005) analysed what significance identities have for inter-organizational collaboration. The conversations of the involved actors are emphasized as important to the creation and re-creation of a shared collaborative identity. An important result is that in conversations, the cooperating parties construct and reconstruct the social phenomenon of collaboration. The collaborating parties refer to themselves as collective, rather than as separate individuals, or as representatives of a profession. According to Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant (2005), collaboration identity represents the link that binds parties together in constellations of individuals who do not belong to the same profession. The design of inter-organizational collaborative identities appears to be the basis for a successful collaboration (Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005; Lotia and Hardy 2008, 379; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). Inter-organizational interactive identities are constructed and reconstructed in discursive practices through joint efforts, everyday routines, conflicts, and alliance formation. These interactions can provide a sense of belonging that is occasionally portrayed as a contrast to the other parties (Lotia and Hardy 2008, 366–389; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). Several researchers have noted the professionals’ experiences of a clearer professional identity through cooperation with neighbouring professions (Hjortsjö 2006; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). The actors in these studies argue that their professional identity is clarified because the different professional roles complement each other.

The empirical basis for this study is comprehensive (see section: Interview method and research context). The empirical material was collected by three researchers (Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009) and reviewed for this study to distinguish and analyse empirical occurrences of successful collaboration. I noted markers in the material where actors belonging to different categories appeared unanimous within the triad (i.e. as three unanimous actors belonging to three different categories) (Simmel [1950] 1964).

Many alliance constellations, which are based on the exclusion of the third actor, were observed in the study interviews (Basic 2012). Triad constellations characterized by collaborations in which I could distinguish three unanimous actors belonging to different categories are uncommon in the material (descriptions of the institutionally placed youths and their parents in accordance with the above premise were absent from interview material in this study). How the category ‘successful cooperation’ appears in the described situations of professionals is analysed in this article.

In this article, I analyse how and when professional actors within the Swedish child welfare system (including the coordinator, social secretary, unit managers in social services, and personnel from institutions such as special youth homes) portray successful collaboration. I also analyse discursive patterns involved in the construction of the phenomenon. In this study, I endeavor to describe the contributing dimensions that are necessary to achieve the phenomenon of a successful collaboration. I do this in part with help from published studies on the phenomenon of collaboration, with particular emphasis on my own empirical material. These materials include narratives from the interviewees comprising their retrospective descriptions of relationships between themselves and others (Riessman 2008; Dailey and Browning 2014). My analytical findings are presented within the following themes: (1) coherent vision triad – new idea, (2) coherent rhetorically accepted triad, and (3) coherent exclusive triad (regarding the term ‘coherent triad’, see the following section Dyads and triads in interaction).
Dyads and triads in interaction


Blumer ([1969] 1986, 62–100) states that the ‘self’ is a basic construction for individual creation and re-creation of an identity. During life, an individual plays many roles in society in the presence of different audiences; as a result, the ‘self’ forms and changes in every social situation ([1969] 1986, 9–10). Blumer ([1969] 1986, 10, 101–116) sees identity as a dynamic field rather than a static condition. The identity can be seen as the name we give ourselves, and because it is socially constructed, it can change. The identity can also be negotiated and can lie on the border between different categories; it is not clearly defined. One individual can use multiple identities at the same time (e.g. their gender identity, ethnic identity, and professional identity).

Interaction and comprehension of the social reality will construct and reconstruct relationships between actors within the couple relationship (a dyad) and among three actors (a triad). Beyond this general starting point, the concepts of dyad and triad are especially relevant components in the specific descriptions I have analysed (Simmel [1950]1964; Simmel 1902; Simmel [1908] 1955).

Conflicts and integration

Simmel ([1908]1955) understood social interaction as a relationship, a type of interpersonal interaction that can indicate and adopt different social forms. For example, conflicts and relationships between members in dyads and triads are characterized by particular forms of interaction that become visible in the analysis of relationships between individuals and groups.

Simmel (1902, 40-46, [1950] 1964, 135–136) believed that interaction among actors in the triad often caused an alliance to develop between two actors as an antipole against the third person, and that one of the actors could therefore easily be excluded from the group. According to Simmel, relationships in a triad are unstable and easily changeable, and constellations of alliances can shift during the interaction. The creation of alliances commonly emerges in combat situations when actors within these combat situations act strategically.

According to Simmel ([1908] 1955), conflicts are conditional to relationships. Simmel writes that conflicts in interpersonal interactions are an expression of unity and have an integrating function between actors. Unity is created in exchanges between conflict and agreement, between disputation and the quest for harmony and peace. Fighting parties can focus on a point of interest during conflicts, but points of interest within a single conflict may also shift.

Dyadic relationships are characterized by intimacy between two parties, duties and responsibilities in relation to each other, and intensity in the relationship. This constellation is often very vulnerable, intense, and volatile, and frequently causes conflict (Simmel [1950] 1964, 122–125). The entrance of a third party into a dyadic relationship can make space for other forms of interaction. According to Simmel, three individuals or three groups of individuals (and as many possible relationships between these groups) result in a situation in which one actor in the triad ends up outside of the context, and an alliance between two members can be created as an antipole to the third member (Simmel [1950] 1964, 135–136, 145–169; Simmel 1902, 40–46; Simmel [1908] 1955).

What does Simmel write about consensus in triads? I can name two dimensions that partly answer the question. The first dimension is conflict-of-interest points, whose existence enables dispute between arguing actors, in the same way that loss or lack of focus regarding a disputed item reduces conflict (Simmel [1908] 1955). A wide range of conflict-of-interest points are discovered in empirical material and analysed in Basic (2012). Possible conflicts of interest include but are not limited to which documents are used, disagreement regarding the work methods of an individual actor or group, which concept is used, which actor adopts what role(s), disagreements
regarding planning for a juvenile, conflicts of communication, abuse of or by institutions, and disagreement regarding placement. Loss of conflict-of-interest points may create ‘triad stillness’ among the involved actors (Basic 2012, 113–114, 129).

The second dimension has its attachment in the third actor’s behaviour in the triad. Simmel ([1950] 1964, 145–169) observes multiple all-embracing strategies that the third actor can envision using in the interaction. One such strategy is to mediate while adopting a non-partisan position (the Non-Partisan and the Mediator). This tactic means that as a non-partisan mediator, the actor tries through verbal contributions to subdue conflicts that have existed in previous interactions. The appearance of these actors and the loss of or lack of focus on conflict-of-interest points characterizes the collaboration in the triad between different categories, and thus the ‘successful cooperation’ that can be seen in the study’s empirical material. Some examples of actors that belong to different categories and also appear unanimous in the triad are presented in the analysis. This situation can involve different constellations, such as coordinator – social secretary – institutional personnel, coordinator – social secretary – juvenile, or a coordinator – social secretary – family.

**Interview method and research context**

This study has been conducted through qualitative interviews with 147 actors in youth care. As noted, the empirical material was collected by three researchers (Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009). The interview group consisted of juveniles and their parents, social service representatives, institutional staff, coordinators, and a supervisor. The various groups interviewed and number of participants in each were as follows:

- **Juveniles**: n = 41 (between 15 and 20 years old)
- **Parents**: n = 10
- **Social services staff members**: n = 37 (28 social secretaries and nine unit managers)
- **Institutional staff members**: n = 26 (National Board of Institutional Care; 12 treatment assistants, 6 investigation assistants, 6 department managers, one family therapist, and one former substitute)
- **MVG-project employees (managers and coordinators)**: n = 31 (National Board of Institutional Care; 28 coordinators and 3 project managers)
- **HVB staff members (Swedish residential care; HVB = home for care and housing)**: n = 2

Most of the interviews were conducted individually, although some were completed in a group setting. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, anonymity, and that participation is voluntary. Names of people and places involved in the research, as well as other information that could identify the interviewees, have been changed for the present study and other presentations related to this study. The researchers emphasized that the interest of the study was general experiences and social phenomenon, and there is no intention to document personal data.

A dictation microphone was used at all interviews (the recorder is also used at some meetings that were taped). The collected material was not directly transcribed but was transcribed a few days or a few weeks later. To reduce the negative effect of the time lag, field notes were written during the interviews (field notes are analysed in Basic 2018). The field notes described the social context in which the interviews took place, the observations and reactions that researchers experienced as essential during the interview, and the interview content (in a short summary text). The field work and interviews were conducted from April 2007 to October 2008, and the interviews were between 20 and 120 minutes long (Basic 2012, 39–50, 229–251).

Before the interviews, an interview guide was designed in which different topics that the interviewer wanted to address during the interview were noted. The guide’s contents were usually reviewed prior to each interview, and the interviewer attempted to address all of the topics of
interest during the conversation. In other words, these were casual, semi-structured interviews, during which a number of relevant topics were discussed (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; [1997] 1998, 113–129). The interviews were conducted in a conversational style in which the importance of storytelling, openness, and follow-up questions guided the interview rather than a question-answer model. By conducting these interviews, researchers in this study created variations in the empirical material, which was required to differentiate and, in the next stage, analyse how and when the professional actors within the Swedish child welfare system portray successful cooperation.

**Active interview and variation in the empirical material**

Silverman (2015) argued that during an interview, the participants convey and use the everyday knowledge of the social context. The researchers in the present study had this argument in mind, and the interviewers sought to give interviewees space to bring up related topics that they themselves found relevant (Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009). Our goal was that the interview itself unfolded in a conversation-oriented style in which we as interviewers took on the role of interlocutors rather than interrogators. Holstein and Gubrium (1995; [1997] 1998, 113–129) called this type of interview, in which the interviewer appears in the role of interlocutor, an ‘active interview’. In practical terms, this means that the interviewers took the role of interested listeners who wanted to know more about youth care, the project, and the coordinators. One such way to conduct interviews is partly as a conversation and partly as the interviewee’s presentation and the production and reproduction of identities (Rapley 2001). In this interaction, one interviewee presents himself or herself as knowledgeable about the social context – youth care – and the interviewer is presented as an interested actor who wants to know more about the context.

During this study, the researchers actively participated in the informal discussions by briefly saying ‘mm’, ‘yes’, or sometimes providing additional comments. This method of conducting the interview created a relaxed atmosphere that promoted conversation (Rapley 2001, 312–314). To illustrate how the interaction generates statements, empirical examples of the interviewer’s speech are also shown.

**Quotes and categorization of the empirical material**

The analysis section of this article contains direct quotes from the interviews to facilitate the reader’s understanding of what is analysed and to provide analytical fuel for the study’s reasoning. Potter ([1996] 2007, 8–9, 233–234) brought attention to the advantage of accurate transcription: that the analysis is made visible to the reader when the availability of the interviewees’ speech increases. An important point here is that this approach opens doors for additional interpretation of the material and the study’s results (see for example interview with Sandra in the section *Coherent rhetorically accepted triad* where the transcription characters used in quote shows Sandras powerful rhetorical description concerning collaboration).4

The above approach provided good opportunities to comment on and document the details of the printed material in the empirical analysis. By reading and commenting in the printed material, a categorization of empirical material was completed (see concerning ‘data analysis’ in Silverman 2015; ‘thematic analysis’ in Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Empirical sequences presented in this study were categorized in the material as ‘vision triad – new idea’, ‘rhetorically accepted triad’, and ‘exclusive triad’. By coding statements, I identified markers for successful cooperation in the material. The choice of empirical examples was guided by the study’s purpose and the ability of the examples to clarify the analytical points. Each analysed theme is based on descriptions of single statements. These were carefully analysed with the help of previous research on collaboration and theory on interpersonal interaction. The following analysis has been carried out even with help of government and authority document (Government Office, Ministry of Social
The empirical material of the study is analysed in the following sections: (1) Coherent vision triad – new idea, (2) Coherent rhetorically accepted triad, and (3) Coherent exclusive triad.

**Coherent vision triad – new idea**

During an individual interview with the social secretary Anna the coherent triad is formed between the coordinator, social secretary, and institutional personnel by Anna’s description concerning the vision of a collaborative project (‘new idea’). Anna welcomes the coordinator to ‘go in and look at’ what active practitioners do in youth services because she is aware that there are gaps in these services. Through ‘routines’, Anna developed a description of collaboration between social services and institutions. The error that arises during work with juveniles is distributed between social services and institutions. According to Anna, social services does not always clearly state missions to the involved institutions, and the institutions do not describe what is being done during the juvenile’s time in the institution. By pointing out these errors, the social secretary also highlights the flaws in cooperation that she believes exist within the youth welfare system, and the coordinator’s presence therefore is welcomed. Below is what emerged during the interview when I asked Anna a question about the idea with the project:

Goran ((researcher)): Do you have, spontaneously, a few thoughts on the MVG-project, the idea with this and …
Anna ((social secretary)): Well the thing … Idea with the MVG-project, I think that it is a good idea. (3) Placements and what is going to happen after the placements is an important question I feel (.) and it is … It is good that there is someone else, a third party that goes in and watches. We, social services and institutions have built up certain routines about this but (.) sometimes there is good … Some are better with it and some are worse with it, regarding the social services and the institution, eh, from the outside perspective, we might not be clear with the assignments to them and (.) not really always good at knowing what we are supposed to ask when we follow up (.) and the institution is naturally in its treatment maybe not always (.) or describe what they do /…/ So I think it has been a big change, I think that they have gotten better because we have consciously been looking, but I like that it is a third party involved. You get more … And you learn … And then new ideas arise. (individual interview)

Anna appears to think that the project could improve institutional relationships (‘that it is a good idea’). Implicitly, it seems as though the coordinators can help influence social services to set clearer standards regarding institutional treatment. This can be seen as a shared collaborative vision (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi 2013).

The vision’s external framework was produced by the government and project management. The government wrote in the assignment to the NBIC: ‘The forms of cooperation between NBIC and the social services shall improve. Exchange of experiences and knowledge between social services and NBIC shall result in the efforts for juveniles and their families and network to become more effective’ (Government Office, Ministry of Social Affairs 2006). The cooperation agreement between the municipalities and the NBIC states that the ‘treatment plan is regulated by a written agreement between the juvenile and parents, social services, and the special youth home’ (Swedish National Board of Institutional Care 2009, Supplement II: 2). The vision exemplifies collaboration in the triad is presumed to consist of the social services, youth homes, and the youth and parents as a united entity. Observe that this is different from Anna’s coherent vision triad. In my opinion,
it is also simplistic to regard young people and parents as a unified party. Basic (2012) provides clear examples in which juveniles and parents crystallize into two parties in a conflict.

In any case, the vision’s external framework was produced when the project management described the role of the coordinator and mentioned (among other things) that the coordinator should: (a) be a ‘support for the juvenile’; (b) be ‘a link between the juvenile, social services, and the institution’; c) ‘ensure that the youth home and social services, together with the juvenile and her/his parents and the remaining network, agree on placements as early as possible’; d) focus in particular ‘on the transfer between NBIC institutional care and other forms of care’; e) ‘participate in meetings in which the time after the NBIC placement is discussed’; f) ‘track the efforts that have been made’; and g) ‘show a genuine interest for the juvenile and his/her family, and assure them that the needs of juveniles shall not be placed behind those of the adults’ (Swedish National Board of Institutional Care 2006, 1–3).

The coordinator role is portrayed as complex in this document, but Anna appeared to mostly be inspired by the expectation that coordinators shall ‘have special focus on the transfer between NBIC institutional care and other forms of care’. Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (2013) mean that the vision’s external framework must be performed by members in the interaction to create a collaborative success. Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant (2005) and Lotia and Hardy (2008, 379) state that the shared vision shall be structured and restructured during interaction among the participants (see also Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). Anna relates one such interaction (‘You get more … And you learn … And then new ideas arise’).

Anna’s wording ‘and then new ideas arise’ can be considered a vision of collaboration that is mutually structured and restructured during the interaction among the coordinator, social secretary, and institutional personnel (Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005; Lotia and Hardy 2008, 379; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010). Willumsen (2007, 192–197) points out the importance of young people’s and parents’ participation for successful collaboration. The importance of these actors is toned down in Anna’s description, however: Parents are not mentioned, and juveniles are referred to as ‘placements’.

According to Lipsky (1980, 50–60), interaction in the organizational context is eased if the individual is transformed into a manageable linguistic category for the organization. Through categorizations in the language that is used within the organization, Anna transforms the category ‘youth’ into the category ‘placements’. Replacement of the individual identity (‘youth’) with the bureaucratic identity (‘placements’) creates the spectre of youth exclusion in relation to the idea of interaction and the interactive collaborative triad (Simmel [1950] 1964, 122–125, 174–177).

**Coherent rhetorically accepted triad**

During a group interview involving several coordinators (in October 2008), successful cooperation is structured by Sandra, a coordinator, regarding a concurrent triad consisting of a coordinator, social secretary, and juvenile. In this interview, Sandra was the only coordinator who expressed a belief that there was successful cooperation; the other coordinators’ attention was mainly focused on problems and barriers to collaboration. Through her rhetorical appearance, Sandra created and re-created the collaboration between organizational identities. I asked the following question: ‘Can you tell us a little about your collaboration with social services?’

Sandra: I have one person where it went really well and I have been there a very, very long time because she wanted to, so I have been there since April ((2008)) and I’m still there. During this time “her” ((clears her throat)) social secretary has been on the sick list so that his or aaah social secretary’s head of unit has been included for a couple of months and on the last meeting there was a new social secretary present and IT IS GOING very well. I was there during that time. /…/ Because of the continuity. It has been working WELL, but it was two social welfare secretaries that switched and also, one head of
It has been good, as I have said, I have been present the whole "time". And now it is time to finish. And we have used the agreement that we have revised PLENTY of times, and I have said to the social secretary ((laughs)) if you are still going to use it then "you" have to do it yourself. So it is about planning, you have to prepare so that something does not go missing. /.../ It actually works great both in terms of collaboration and "agreement". (3) And it is going well for the girl, as well. (group interview)

The description above shows three satisfied members. Sandra is content that the collaboration is working with the help of the coordinator’s working tools, the ‘writing agreements’. The social secretary is content because the coordinator helps when a crack appears in the coverage provided by social services. The juvenile is also content, according to Sandra (‘it is going well for the girl, as well’).

Examples of actors outside of the triad are parents and personnel within institutions. Even Sandra’s colleagues, the other coordinators present during the interview, are outside the triad, because during the interview they mostly talked about problems and barriers to collaboration (Simmel [1950] 1964, 122–125, 174–177).

Sandra describes a successful cooperation by example, speaking in a louder voice. Does this create a reinforced picture that intends to persuade the audience to adopt Sandra’s perspective? The powerful description appeared to have a connection with the previously described problems and barriers to collaboration. The establishment of a successful cooperative effort appeared to demand that the argument be strengthened.

Goffman ([1959] 1990) stated that interactions between individuals are characterized by both the conscious and the unconscious management of impressions. He means that individuals define different situations and that those definitions govern what action is considered appropriate. Furthermore, individuals try to manage the perceptions that other individuals form about them. Therefore, individuals present themselves in different contexts when they meet various other individuals. Every definition of a situation tells us what we should do; it provides a moral character. The definition of a given situation is also dependent on the behaviour of the participant and the audience. Sandra’s action during the interview can be interpreted as a presentation and a quest to persuade the audience (remaining coordinators and interviewer). Sandra’s rhetoric, both her words and her tone, demonstrates a description of successful cooperation.

Sacks (1992, 205–222) analyses how categories are used in conversation and how conversation generates categories. Through categorization, the individual creates meaning in what s/he sees and does. The process enables conversation (or, more precisely, the individual’s capacity to pursue, develop, and complete a conversation). What is known about a category depends on the social context of the individual. In other words, the content of a category is culture-dependent. A set of categories consists not only of the individual but also of rules for how it should be applied. Through categorizations, participants in a conversation monitor the moral implications of what is said. The point that Sacks raises is in line with Goffman ([1959] 1990): individuals do not speak simply to transmit information to each other; rather, how individuals formulate their speech also depends on how it is received by an audience (or the listener). Potter ([1996] 2007, 107–108, 121, 166) emphasizes that rhetoric can defend a particular description against alternative interpretations. During her presentation, Sandra chose a particular version in which the ‘right’ morality was visible and conveyed a rhetorically ‘right’ reality in the interview above (Dailey and Browning 2014). Successful cooperation between coordinators, social secretaries, and juveniles during the interview is a rhetorically acceptable constellation.

Particularly powerful narratives create a more colourful image because the metaphorical character imbibes such representations with more intensity than a ‘paler’ version, according to Potter ([1996] 2007). In other words, the rhetorical production can be presented with varying degrees of intensity. According to Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993, 29–38), the purpose of rhetoric is to convince those who are not convinced and preserve the conviction of those already convinced.
Sandra’s statements above may be considered particularly powerful. In her description, the category ‘collaboration’ is related to such expressions as ‘very, very long time’, ‘IT IS GOING very good,’ and ‘It has been working WELL’. Sandra’s emphasis and tone of voice when she describes the collaboration are used to create a colourful picture that aims to convince the audience. A successful use of agreement appears to be an example of successful collaboration. When Sandra uses agreement in her description, it is being connected with such expressions as ‘revised PLENTY of times,’ and ‘It actually works great both in terms of collaboration and “agreement”.

Sandra appeared to try to convince the audience, and the colourful image that she presented seemed to be associated with the previously discussed lack of collaboration. To produce a new reality that is in contrast with the conflictual reality usually described in the project (Basic 2012) requires its own special tools. In this case, the tool is a stronger argument that is created by the strong image.

Sandra’s powerful description and her reinforcements of arguments were made with the aim of persuading the audience of the existence of successful collaboration. Sandra appeared to express the struggle for collaboration, a struggle that seems to be needed to construct an interaction between organizational identities (Blumer 1969; Salzer 1994; Sevón 1996, 53; Whetten and Godfrey 1998, 37; Czarniawska 1997). Several researchers have emphasized how important it is that collaboration partners be interested in collaboration and willing to collaborate. In that regard, Sandra has provided a rhetorical example of such a desire.

**Coherent exclusive triad**

Interaction between organizational identities is a dynamic process, and the coherence of the triad in the relationship can depict the exclusion of key players in youth care services, such as juveniles.

The ability to concretize is an important rhetorical tool in the conversation (Potter 1996, 2007, 162–173). A treatment assistant, Philip, embodies a coordinator’s collaboration with social secretaries, institutional staff, and the family, with the help of two examples. Successful collaboration requires that the borders between involved categories be erased (Hjortsjö 2006, 189–196; Bolin 2011).

Goran ((researcher)): Do you have any ((deep inhale)) information on how the social services are experiencing the coordinators? (. ) Or how the cooperation between them is?

Philip: EH (. ) I think that, Gert as the social secretary’s name is, think it is good. He gets, he gets support from Tobias (coordinator) and even helps with contact with the family and us, eh, in different ways. I’d like to think that. (. ) then we have had Tobias here … On family nights and such … When we’ve invited all families, we also invited him aaand he got really excited … We did some barbequing as well, he was a part of the team, and it was really good.

Goran: Yeah, yeah ((laughter)).

Philip: So he was out and barbequing also … (individual interview)

According to Potter (2007 1997, 162–173), concretizations are important as rhetorical tools to make a description convincing. Examples can be used rhetorically to illustrate and summarize a selected portion of an opinion in relation to something that is vague, general, or abstract, according to Holsanova and Wästerfors (2004, 38), who write:

> The functions of examples are numerous. They specify things but restrict them at the same time. They may serve as objectifications of an argument, providing a rhetorically powerful quality of ‘out-there-ness’. They may also be used to mobilize associations, display attitudes, or indicate ‘types’ of persons or items. Some examples are ‘virtual’; they exemplify what could happen, or what never happened.

In Philip’s description above, two examples of successful collaboration can be deduced. The first is collaboration in the relationship among the coordinator, social secretary, and family. The social
secretary above received ‘support’ from the coordinator, Tobias, who was also in contact with the ‘family’. The second example of successful collaboration can be seen in the relationship among the coordinator, institutional staff, and family: Tobias also helps the institutional staff and gets invited to a barbeque with institutional staff and family.

Previous research on collaboration shows that professionals treat the word ‘collaboration’ essentially as interaction between professionals (Kolb and Putnam 1992; Reitan 1998; Huxham and Beech 2008; Schruier 2015, 2008; Basic 2018, 2015, 2013, 2012; Frost 2005; Leathard 2003; Littlechild and Smith 2012; Reeves et al. 2010).

In both empirical examples of successful collaboration above, there is a missing key player that should have a starring role: the juvenile. The entire concept of so-called ‘juvenile care services’ exists for these actors, and I find it interesting that young people do not appear more often in the described examples of successful collaboration. As mentioned previously, cooperation between the various categories of professions seems to be facilitated if there is a personal relationship between the involved actors. According to Basic (2012), a social secretary creates a personal relationship between several coordinators using the phone, ‘many meetings’, and car sharing, all of which appear to facilitate cooperation. The same can be said about Philip’s description, in which his institution has invited the coordinator Tobias to a barbeque. When successful collaboration is reproduced by persons in authority, sometimes the importance of actors acts as a signal to accept each other; this phenomenon can be personal in appearance (Hornby and Atkins [2000] 1993; Bolin 2011). Hjortsjö (2006, 189–196) says that boundaries between professions can be broken down when there are tasks that everyone can perform, regardless of profession. Grilling, car sharing, or talking on the phone are tasks that most can carry out. The personal interactive aspect of collaboration is constructed as important by some officials, and that aspect appears to be important for producing and reproducing the interaction between organizational identities. The production of inter-organizational collaboration identities is a dynamic process (Blumer [1969] 1986; Salzer 1994, 21; Sevón 1996, 53; Whetten and Godfrey 1998, 37; Czarniawska 1997). Conflicts are common in interpersonal interactions (Simmel [1908] 1955), and triad consensus often results in the exclusion of one or more parties (Simmel [1950] 1964, 122–125, 174–177). If collaboration between social secretaries and institutional staff is poor, the social secretary may experience triad coherence in the relationship among the coordinator, institutional staff, and family as an association united against the social secretary, which can negatively affect the collaboration.

**Coherent triads and successful inter-professional collaboration**

Previous research on collaboration shows that conflicts are common between authorities and organizations that are expected to collaborate with each other and include cooperating actors. In this study, I analysed the dimension that contributes to the phenomenon of successful collaboration. The aim of the study was to analyse how and when professional actors within the Swedish child welfare system portray successful cooperation and which discursive patterns are involved in the construction of this phenomenon. The empirical basis for this study is 147 recorded interviews with institution-placed youths, their parents, and different occupational categories within the social services and the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care.

A shared vision appears to be important for successful collaboration. This aspect is usually reproduced by the professional actors as morally accepted. The personal interactive aspect of collaboration between professional actors in youth care services (e.g. phone calls, ‘many meetings’, car sharing, and barbeques) also appears to be important, particularly for producing and reproducing joint collaboration identities. The production of joint collaboration identities and triad coherence in analytical triads often result in the exclusion of key actors in youth care: the young people themselves and their parents.
Successful cooperation seems to depend on the professional actors’ social and moral production for which rhetoric is widely used. In the empirical material, the professional actors tended to portray themselves as competent, suggesting that the consistency of the triad maintained a certain normative and moral order in the situation. Inter-organizational collaboration identities are created and re-created alongside the professional’s work identity. Construction and reconstruction of successful identities for collaboration is an ongoing, narrative process. Success points of interest and the right morality, created and re-created during interactions, emerge from a myriad of everyday interactions. It seems that the professionals’ work-related identities are constructed and reconstructed through both interactions with others and making distinctions from the other side by exclusion of parties outside the triad. In other words, aside from juveniles and their parents, other actors in the human services organization are at risk of dropping out of successful collaborations.

In the empirical example of successful collaboration described and analysed in this article, professional actors do not emphasize the youth and his or her parents’ perspectives, even if these are presented as important in rhetoric presented to youth care organizations (especially the youths who fell into a discursive shadow when reading the interviews, Basic, Thelander, and Åkerström 2009; Basic 2012). Several researchers emphasized a structural unwillingness to cooperate with other organizations as well as with actors outside of these organizations. This structural opposition within organizations is highly visible regarding youth care, wherein the client is outside of the organization’s control. In youth care organizations, the youth is considered a consumer of the service and as a production tool when s/he is expected to participate in treatment, and finally, as a crude product of the business when treatment is being administered. Furthermore, youth care organizations use an obscure knowledge base and have ambiguous purposes (Reitan 1998), providing large areas for professional opposition, which usually obstruct collaboration between organizations.

Social work is one of the perspectives in social sciences emphasising the importance of visions and successful collaboration and inclusion of less powerful individuals and groups of individuals in a community. The young people (and their parents) in context of this study receive confirmation of their identities by participating in the community, and successful interaction between actors in juvenile care is a requirement for successful involvement and integration. One of the key dimensions of future research in social work is to analyse the relationships between less powerful individuals and groups in need of help from various professional actors in the social work context, whose role in the course of their professional activities is to assist these individuals and groups.

An interesting question raised during the conduct of this work is who is responsible for creating successful collaboration. In situations where actors A, B, and C are expected to cooperate and achieve a beneficial goal for the client, there must be one or more responsible parties. Is there a single actor who should be accountable for ensuring that all actors are satisfied and that the end result of the situation is beneficial for the client? Are there more actors (or even all involved in the situation) that should share the responsibility? Different scenarios appear to require different strategies. Finally, tailored strategies are required to cope with professional territorialism, which does not necessarily promote the development of collaborative identities.

Notes

1. Some portions of this text were published earlier in Swedish in the book Successful Collaboration: Described and Observed Experiences of Youth Care (Basic 2015) and in English in the article, ‘Observed Successful Collaboration in Social Work Practice: Coherent Triads in Swedish Juvenile Care’ (Basic 2018).
2. In Sweden, more than half of special youth homes are privately run (Swedish residential care); the rest are operated by the municipalities or by the National Board of Institutional care (abbreviated NBIC). The institutions operated by the NBIC differ from the rest because they are the only ones with far-reaching disciplinary powers. This power makes these institutions very special and a last resort in the Swedish system.
3. The role is similar to the ‘case manager’ in social and psychiatric care (Watts and Priebe 2002).
4. The transcription characters used, inspired by Jefferson (1985), are as follows:
?
Questioningly
.
Concluding
, Continuous
...
Unfinished (broken) speech / sentence
/.../
Some phrasing excluded to shorten
(.)
Short silence (up to approximately 2 seconds)
(3)
Long silence (approximately 3 seconds or longer)
US
Reproduction or emphasis on what is said (part of the word, or the whole word)
“us”
Louder than surrounding
(()
Explanatory note; for example, ‘((coordinator))’ means that the operator in question is the coordinator, and ‘((laughs))’ means that that speech is accompanied by laughter
‘never’
Informant who quotes someone else or himself.

5. During the project, the document ‘written agreement’ was more of a living document in which the parties agreed on more long-term planning for the youth’s future, recorded details, signed the document, and updated it over time. Documents gave rise to several conflicts analyzed in Basic (2012).

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